

Allegra's Seduction



Monica M. Martin

Immortality's Caress: Book 1

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Immortality's Caress - Book 1: Allegra's Seduction

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Dedication:

To John~

Thank you for your selflessness, your respect, your confidence in me, and for your unerring friendship.

My Thanks:

Thank God for my vivid imagination and good fortune.

I'd like to thank Stefani and Martine for giving me the opportunity to work with eXtasy Books.

Stefani: Thank you for editing this work.

My readers: Thank you for supporting me. Enjoy. M

xx

Prologue

Venice, 1592

A loud crashing noise wrenched Allegra from her peaceful slumber. She sat up in bed, her heart racing wildly. A mournful wailing followed. Her blood pounded rapidly, fear bubbling up inside her.

"Allegra! Awaken, Allegra," a serene, soothing voice beckoned.

Allegra pushed the curls from her eyes and timidly peered about her. Nothing. *'Tis only the wind!* She slumped against the pillows and sighed in relief.

The terrace doors rattled violently.

"No! 'Tis not a dream, you're perfectly lucid," she whispered, eyes fixed on the trembling doors. They burst open, crashing against the pale stucco walls. She recoiled, pulling the bedcovers up to her chin.

A man stood on the threshold, his sable cloak whipping about his imposing form. The moonlight cast its blue glow over his long, dark curls, his face obscured by shadow. "I seek your company. Permit me entrance to your chamber," he uttered. His voice was like a lover's caress; soft, silky and mysteriously

seductive.

Allegra shook her head. "N—no!" She scrambled from the bed and backed away. *If he had a mind to, he could march straight inside!*

As though reading her thoughts, he said, "Sweet Allegra, I must obtain your permission to enter your chamber." He raised his right hand and motioned to her. "Come to me."

She turned and hurried toward the opposite doorway.

"Don't forsake me!" His anguished words halted her flight.

No! Don't listen to him, Allegra! Helpless, she turned and looked at him. The bright glint in his yellow eyes pierced hers, sending a shudder right through her. "Come," he repeated. She moved toward him, vaguely aware of picking up her feet. Before she realized it, she was standing before him.

This can't be real! Fear curled through her limbs and making them weak. *'Tis only a dream! It cannot be anything else!*

"Oh, Allegra, 'tis a very vivid dream." No man had ever spoken her name so intimately. How did he know it?

"What do you want from me?"

"Your surrender...fair damsel."

Icy fingers clutched at her shoulders, crushing her against his steely form. He smelled of fine musk cologne and something else she couldn't quite distinguish. His frosty breath fanned her cheek and then her ear. "Don't run," his words whispered at her

ear. "Don't fight me, you'll never win." His lips moved over the column of her neck, his tongue flicking over the pulsing jugular vein. "You should realize you're powerless to hide from me, sweet Allegra." His teeth grazed her flesh.

"P—please don't hurt me. Please." She felt like a coward for uttering the words.

He drew back and looked into her eyes. Gone was the yellow-gold spark, his gaze now obsidian. "You're my captive, not my dinner."

His face was exquisitely beautiful in the slanting moonlight and shadow. Each superbly sculpted angle was perfect in detail. She touched his determined jawline with trembling fingers. "I...I know you." She tried to remember where she'd seen him. "I can't remember..."

His thick lashes lowered slightly and golden fire leapt from his eyes, as they turned yellow again. "I'm only in your dreams."

Allegra nodded hesitantly, stroking his velvet doublet. "Yes. You're my paramour when I..." Her words faded away. "Is this another dream?"

"Yes, we already concluded that," he replied. "Everything is real in the dream."

"Oh." His words served to confuse her more.

"Have I frightened you terribly?" His eyes scanned her face.

"I...I don't understand..."

"Don't be distressed."

"Oh." She didn't know what to say.

"Are you going to invite me inside your

residence?"

"Oh! I—I don't know —"

"You can trust me."

"I... Indeed." She motioned inside. "Yes. Please come in."

"You don't appear very eager."

"Please, you're welcome. Anytime." She forced a smile.

He buried his hands in her hair, pulling her head back. Tears misted her eyes, and she felt them roll down her cheeks. He lowered his head, kissing her tears away. His lips moved down over her throat, his teeth scraping her skin.

"Don't!" she protested, instinctively knowing what he was about to do.

"Relax and take pleasure in it, my sweet." His tone was gentle. His sharp teeth slowly sank into her neck and excruciating pain exploded through her. She tried to scream, but he cupped his hand over her mouth, muting the sound.

Oh, God! Help me! This creature is going to kill me! I'm going to die! I don't want to die! I don't! No!

Shhhh. Hush, he telepathically relayed. He raised his head a little, his tongue sweeping over the bite. *Hush now*. He passed his hand down over her eyes and then scooped her up and carried her to the four-poster bed, gently placing her down.

His lips lightly brushed over hers, and then over her eyelids and cheeks. He drew back. Allegra forced her eyes open, peering up at the male leaning over her. "Why are you warm now?" The answer came to

her right after the words left her mouth. He simply gave her a nod. A semblance of a smile touched his lips when his gaze strayed over her face. He found her freckle-covered nose and heart-shaped face amusing, no doubt. Many said she looked odd.

"Most women tell you this because they're jealous of your beauty. I adore the freckles on your nose, and your face is exquisite." He picked up a fat curl, wrapping it around his index finger. "And what's not to like about your raven locks?" His mind-reading abilities startled her.

"What...who are you?" A hand went to her throbbing neck.

"I am Gabriele."

His gaze tugged at her. Allegra felt lightheaded and alarmingly excited. She fought the urge to touch his beautifully chiseled face. "W—what do you *want* from me, Gabriele?"

"*Everything*. I want everything." His pale fingers traced her lips, which trembled beneath the warmth of his touch. His mouth lowered gradually. "Right now I want to lay with you and take pleasure between your thighs."

"*Ooh*." Allegra felt the air constrict in her throat. Arrows of fire darted to her center and moisture pooled at her sex.

His mouth gently brushed over hers and she responded instantaneously. He growled in response, burying his fingers in her hair. Hot pleasure stabbed at her insides and she shuddered. She went to place her arms around him, and they melted right through

him. She opened her eyes to find herself alone.

Allegra sat up, her breathing labored. She wiped the sweat from her brow with the cuff of her nightrail.

God, what's troubling me? She touched her aching throat and gasped when her fingers made contact with a wet, sticky substance. *Blood!* She brought her fingers to her nose and inhaled. *Yes, 'tis blood, but this can't be, I must be going mad!*

Allegra cast another glance about her, sensing a presence.

"Gabriele. Gabriele." She laughed. "At least your imaginary man has a decent name, Allegra."

"Ah!" Unseen fingers moved up her thinly clad thighs. Something wrenched her down the bed, pushing her gown up about her waist and spreading her thighs wide. Hot breath scorched her mons and a tongue sinuously stroked between her satiny folds. Slowly over her taut clit it rolled, back and forth, up and down, dipping deeply, persistently stroking. Heat curled through Allegra, searing every nerve ending in her body. Fear turned to rapture and she thrust up against his unseen mouth, crying out in unadulterated bliss.

His hot mouth loved her throbbing flesh thoroughly and relentlessly.

Yes, that's it...let go, he telepathically relayed.

A shattering orgasm overcame her and she arched up to meet her tormentor's savage mouth, the bed sheets crumpling in her tightly clenched fingers as moans tore from her lips.

As Allegra lay there struggling to catch her breath,

she stared at the embellished ceiling, the soft moonlight reflecting off its pale surface. "Show yourself, damn you!"

Nothing.

She sighed. "Have it your way, then." She climbed from the bed, the cold floor making her cringe when she set her feet down. She moved to the side-table and poured herself a brandy, hastily drinking it down.

"Does it frighten you?" he asked, his sudden question and nearness causing her to jump.

"I don't know what you mean."

"I have complete control over you, my sweet," he murmured near her ear. "Does it frighten you?"

"No, not at all. I like to play games, *Gabriele*," she uttered, feigning indifference. She licked her lips, tasting the brandy residue on them. "And I usually win..." She set the empty glass down on the table.

"I don't doubt that for one moment," he returned.

He pulled her gown over her head; with a soft whisper, it landed on the floor. His hands caressed her aching breasts. He pinched both nipples hard, a soft chuckle leaving him when they puckered tightly. "You like that?"

"Mmm." She nodded, biting her lip to stifle another moan.

"You're mouth-wateringly irresistible. I enjoy your company more than the others..."

He rolled her nipples between thumb and forefinger. They throbbed unbearably and she moaned continuously, helpless to do anything else.

"Do you realize who's in control now?" His words sounded hoarse. His hand moved down to stroke the moistness between her thighs. "Do you?"

"I allow you to be, for now," Allegra dared.

"You play with your equal, my sweet." He pushed her forward, penetrating her from behind. His cry of gratification mingled with hers. "Christ, you're heavenly!"

"You brute!" His outstanding dimensions surprised her, to say the least.

He gripped her hips, pushing his hot erection into her to the hilt. "Tell me you don't want this and I'll stop," he growled against her ear.

Allegra caught her breath and hastily pondered his words. She felt like a virgin all over again, not that she acted much like one. Did she want him to stop? *No, of course not!*

"Answer me," he raggedly demanded.

"No. N—no, don't stop." The force of his thrusts propelled her forward. Allegra gripped the edge of the table for support. One of his hands moved to fondle her clit. She looked down and saw nothing but her manipulated flesh. Past caring, she closed her eyes, enjoying the sensations thrumming through her body.

"Oh, God, you're lovely." He slowed his movements. "I want to make love to all of you." he whispered into her neck. He gradually withdrew; her mouth watered when he filled her again. "I could do this forever."

She bit her lip, suppressing a loud cry. *I could do*

this forever, too! She'd never been so aware of herself, of her body, until *now*. Her flesh stretched as his length slid smoothly and deeply, probing the innermost reaches of her recesses, filling her completely.

His muscle throbbing and hers contracting sharply around its thickness, they both cried out, fiery rapture consuming them.

Her took her in his arms and carried her to bed for the second time.

"Show yourself," Allegra demanded, unnerved by the fact she'd had sex with an invisible man. *I must be going mad!*

He moved over her, kissing her lips, his tongue sliding into her mouth and meshing with hers. He made her insides melt, her sex throb and her hunger blinding. He tore his mouth from hers, moving over her cheek and down to her throat. Then, to her relief, he materialized. He let out a harsh growl and bit into her flesh. He sucked hard, drinking with the vigor of a half-starved animal.

"Arrrgh! Ah!" She clawed at his face until he sapped her strength.

* * * *

"Pardon me?" Marcus paced the chamber like a caged animal. He pulled hair from his neatly manicured goatee in frustration. "*Repeat* your words, I pray you, Gabriele!"

"I said I have the right to select a human to

compete...and want *Dona Allegra*," Gabriele replied, undressing. He bent and removed his leather boots and Venetian breeches. The blue veins in his sinewy, well-developed frame stood out in bold relief against the whiteness of his skin. How he longed for some color.

He straightened and saw that Marcus's gaze lingered longer than it should have. "The other two are ideal, but *Dona Allegra* isn't," Marcus stated, composing himself.

"Allegra is to be a contender. She may make the perfect bride, and you and Claudia chose the other two."

"No!" Marcus retorted.

"Why isn't she appropriate?"

"Because she isn't! Do you understand?" Marcus's deep-blue eyes flashed in irritation and he threw his hands up in the air.

Gabriele slipped into the washtub without another word.

"So now the proud crusader has turned mute!"

Gabriele sighed. "I want *Dona Allegra* to join the other two. There is nothing else to say."

"And now you've taken to raising your voice at me! Where is the respect a maker deserves, forgetful one?" Marcus asked.

"'Tis my right to choose one female to enter this challenge, Marcus, all the others have." Gabriele gave Claudia a meaningful look, conveying how he felt. "I *deserve* this entitlement. After all, we only get one chance to choose a bride."

Claudia stretched languorously on the velvet-covered seat, her long, slender legs uncurling. Her ice-blue eyes moved over Marcus appreciatively. "Husband, Gabriele is over four hundred and thirty years old and an elder, perhaps *we* should allow him this one small act of kindness? Hmmm?"

Marcus scowled. "So he can make a fool out of me by following *her* lead? Is that what you want, Claudia?"

Claudia frowned. "Gabriele has never been weak and you know it. You're jealous, my love," she added, her tone a purr.

Gabriele loathed the way Marcus and Claudia argued about him as though he wasn't in the room. He wished he *were* invisible. Fact was, he wasn't around these two.

He sank further in the tub and closed his eyes, shutting out their voices.

Suddenly, there *she* was, his sweet Allegra. Oh, how he loved to shadow her, watch her every move, hear her thoughts and smell her frangipani scent... A vision of her at one of the many balls she had attended came to him. Her sparkling amethyst eyes looked up at the fawning noble, beguiling him. She tilted her pretty face and her freckle-covered nose crinkled. She laughed, the sound quite intoxicating. The noble wasn't as fortunate as he, though. She didn't even allow him to steal a kiss.

Gabriele wanted her *again*. He could smell her passion, hear her cries and *feel* her all around his cock! He groaned inwardly. *You have ensnared me in your*

delicate web, my sweet.

"If you believe this, then you know me not at all!" Marcus shrieked at Claudia, pulling Gabriele from his erotic reverie.

"I do *believe* this. You're seriously jealous," Claudia asserted.

Marcus scowled at Gabriele.

Claudia rose and made her way over to him, knelt, took the musk-scented soap and began to lather his body.

"He can do that."

She looked directly at Marcus, smiling tauntingly. "You won't mind if Gabriele pleasures me."

"Do whatever you want, you always do." Marcus lowered his pale head, a low growl emitting from him.

Leaning in, she pressed her silk-covered breasts against Gabriele's face. "Kiss me."

Gabriele caught a puckered nipple between his lips and his teeth and bit into it. She cried out, her nails sinking into the flesh of his upper arms. He drank.

Gabriele knew their Queen's actions made it abundantly clear that Marcus must concede defeat gracefully...or she would trounce him in the face of her wrath.

"I'm tired of sharing your affections. You'll allow Gabriele to choose this human female, or I'll banish you off to the eastern desert!" Claudia threatened Marcus.

"Have your way, then!" Marcus retorted. He came and knelt before Gabriele. Claudia rose and sauntered

away, her lotus-scented perfume wafting about her. "You desperately want *Dona Allegra* to participate, do you?"

Gabriele raised his head, his tongue sweeping over his lips, collecting runaway droplets of blood from them. "Yes."

Marcus ran an index finger over Gabriele's torso, following a small streak of crimson that tracked down it. He bent his head and licked the smear away. "Is this what you want?" he repeated, raising his head, his sapphire eyes sharp.

Gabriele nodded. "She draws my attention. I want to experience her...see if she's *The One* for me." He made no mention of the intimacy he and Allegra shared. Marcus already felt threatened by Allegra, so it would suit no purpose to mention it.

Simon, Gabriele's personal guardian, directed a maidservant bearing a bucket of warmed water toward Gabriele and then stepped back into the shadows, blending into the darkness.

Marcus grasped the bucket from the quivering woman. "Get out!" he ordered, and then proceeded to pour the water over Gabriele's head. Gabriele spluttered and coughed. The terrified maid scooted across the parquet floor and out the doors in a trice, forgetting to close them in her haste. Marcus dumped the wooden pail on the floor. *Thud!*

"Let's not forget she's an intellectual, a rather strong-willed creature, at that!" Marcus held up his hands when Gabriele made to speak. "She likes to be the dominant one, treats her lovers like sheep! When

one rebels, she walks away without a backward glance." Marcus paused and studied Gabriele a moment. "You may speak."

"Lady Allegra treats her lovers like sheep because she's never had a male who's challenged her from the beginning of the relationship...and one who has chosen her." Gabriele passed his fingers through his dripping curls, pushing them off his forehead. "A carefully selected toady could never awaken her in the appropriate manner..."

"Enough!" Marcus held his hand up. "We'll invite her to join us, but don't complain to me when she fails to live up to your *vastly exaggerated* view of her. She *fails*, she dies, no exceptions."

Gabriele inclined his head. "As you will."

"Don't patronize me!" Marcus waved his hand with gusto. "Remember, there are only three, once you have made your choice, you can't go back... 'tis forever. There's no such thing as divorce. That's one sleight of hand the *kindred* can't perform!"

Gabriele bowed his head respectfully. "Thank you, Marcus."

Chapter One

One Month Later The Summons

Sophia and Eloise entered Allegra's opulent sun-filled parlor, wreathed in bright silk and satin-brocade, encrusted with beading, lace, and embroidery, their garb rivaling the ivory, plum, gold, and cedar décor.

"Good morning, Allegra," Sophia called in greeting.

"A good morning to you both," Allegra returned, waving Sophia and Eloise over to sit with her on the floral-covered settee.

Eloise gave a small wave in reply, but remained silent, her painted mouth curling up at the corners.

"Did the servants deposit your trunks downstairs with mine?" Allegra asked. Both women nodded, and she smiled.

Allegra was excited, and she hadn't felt that in a long time. The idea of going on vacation appealed to her immensely. She had arrived back in Venice six months ago and hadn't had time to breathe since then. Lord Michael, her jilted lover, had followed her

from Oxford, and since her mourning period was long over, proposed marriage, and hadn't stopped hounding her since arriving over week ago. He promised not to pursue her. His word meant naught as he deliberately *contradicted* it. She sincerely needed the break.

"This should be fun," she said, to no one in particular.

"We're *all* invited to stay with the enigmatic *Don* and *Dona* Lamberti now," Eloise replied, her copper brows rising. "There will be one *soirée* after another." Her green eyes widened. "And maybe more..."

"Yes, indeed," Allegra answered, stifling a giggle.

Eloise was a twenty-four-year-old Frenchwoman. She was especially paranoid, enjoyed dreaming up the mysterious and mystical and was quirky to boot. The latter was what Allegra liked about her most.

"I've heard tell they have wonderful *soirées* there, *chère*."

Sophia frowned. "Eloise, for you there may not be one *soirée* after another," she said. "They'll grow tired of your eccentricities long before week's end."

"*Che sarà sarà*," Eloise said, her good cheer obviously rankling Sophia. "I will endeavor to have a wondrous time."

"Some creatures are too *dim* to comprehend the simplicities of life," Sophia retorted.

"Then please, 'tolerant one', enlighten this poor simpleton," Eloise returned.

Allegra watched the exchange with mounting exasperation. "Come." She motioned to them. "Please

sit. Both of you." Her words fell on deaf ears. She sighed, her mind drifting away.

Allegra met Eloise in London several months after the death of her husband, and the pair had been inseparable ever since. Eloise lightened her despair and she eased Eloise's loneliness. Allegra was overjoyed when Eloise accompanied her to Venice, liking her vibrant company.

Sophia, Allegra's childhood friend, didn't care overly much for the chirpy redhead...point of fact, she loathed her. Allegra suspected the dark beauty was jealous of her newfound friendship with Eloise. Together, Sophia and Eloise could be quite insufferable. Nevertheless, Allegra loved them both equally.

"And what if the words *that* sage spoke come true?" Sophia asked, trying to scare Eloise.

Eloise feigned a horrified look, eyes wide, her palms pressed against her cheeks. "*Mon Dieu!* Then we're destined to expire!" She shook her head. "I'm not that impressionable, Sophia."

The three frequently visited so-called mystical sages, witches and soothsayers in good fun. Just last month, an old shaman claimed that all three would enter the house of Cain's immortal spawn...

"*Blood-drinkers...nightwalkers...vampires!*" she had ranted, her black eyes filled with fear. She was obviously a deranged madwoman. They laughingly paid her and went on their way. Lately though, Allegra questioned her very sanity, regarding the matter of spirits and satanic creatures...

Sophia looked at her. "What do you believe, Allegra?" she asked.

"Err, well..." Allegra thought about it, wondering whether to tell them about her dreams or not.

"Well, Allegra?" Sophia asked.

Eloise waved her fingers at Sophia. "She's away with the fairies, the goblins and all the other night creatures...ooooooooow!"

"You'll expire immediately if you screech at me again," Sophia retorted.

Allegra's mind drifted away, returning to her erotic nightly visitor.

His cool lips suckled her aching breast, becoming warm once his teeth sank into her flesh and he drank, his tongue whirling over her taut nipple, laving at her crimson nectar. Liquid fire coursed through her body, every nerve ending alive. Wanting more of his addictive touch she arched against him, her hands firmly embedded in his luxuriant curls, while helpless utterances of rapture spilled fourth from her mouth in her delirium. He raised his dark head, his obsidian eyes pulling at hers. "Soon," he uttered smoothly, melodically, the tenor drugging her senses.

"Very soon," he added, and then disappeared.

Are you real? Did I dream you up? Allegra wondered.

"Allegra, what's wrong with you?" Eloise asked, interrupting Allegra's erotic musings. "Are you ever going to answer me?" Allegra blinked the cobwebs away. "I'm rather thirsty, *mon ami*."

"Forgive me, Eloise." Allegra composed herself and then motioned to the maidservant. "Jeanette.

What kind of beverage would you both like to drink? Tea, coffee or chocolate?"

Sophia sat opposite Allegra. "Wine for me," she answered, smoothing her voluminous sable and burgundy overskirt.

"I'll have the same as you, *chère*," Eloise uttered, sitting to Allegra's right.

The servant poured a glass of wine for Sophia and two beakers of brandy, handing them to Eloise and Allegra. "Will that be all, madame?" She looked pointedly at Allegra.

Eloise held her hand up. "Wait a moment." She drank her brandy and placed the empty glass on the elaborate serving table. "More, please," she uttered, tapping her chopines on the polished parquet flooring. Allegra shook her head. Eloise grinned impishly at her. "What a joy 'tis to have you joining us, Allegra."

Allegra grinned. "To be blatantly honest, I was a little surprised when I received an invitation."

Eloise nodded in understanding.

Allegra wasn't at all shocked when *Don* Marcus and *Dona* Claudia invited Sophia and Eloise to spend an entire week at their exclusive summer home on the mainland. After all, the pair had fawned over the two women this past season, so naturally they would do such a thing. She, on the other hand, didn't expect an invite to their select gathering. They had scarcely begun to associate with her, and she had the distinct impression Lord Marcus disliked her immensely. Not that he was ever impolite to her, far from it.

Nevertheless, she'd go because it behooved her to.

The Rivera del Brenta boasted some of the most exclusive villas on its lush banks. Allegra's favorite was at Malcontenta...the Villa Foscari. Only Venice's privileged elite resided on the Rivera del Brenta and being wealthy didn't give one the right, since one had to trace one's lineage back at least several hundred years. *Don* and *Dona* Lamberti were no exception, they owned a two-story villa designed by Andrea Palladio—a favored architect of the enormously wealthy aristocrats.

It was rumored that *Don* Marcus was fond of tall, dark and handsome men, and that *Dona* Claudia liked the company of women almost as much as dear Eloise.

Allegra glanced at Eloise. She poured laudanum from a small silver vessel into her brandy with unsteady hands.

"*Dona* Claudia acquired this for my pain." Drops seeped down her fingers and sprinkled the all-embracing lace ruff that fanned out about her coppery head and down over her bosom.

Allegra shook her head, openly frowning. *I wish she'd enlist a physician's aid.*

"I can't rid myself of this headache," Eloise added, tweezing her small nose between thumb and forefinger as blood began to trickle from it.

"You should see a doctor, dear." Allegra leaned in and wiped the lone trickle of blood away with a silk handkerchief, then settled back against the lounge seat. "Really, you should."

"*Mon Dieu*, I'll not conceive of it! I would prefer to die by my own hand than by those of an incompetent physician." Eloise's slender fingers played with the ivory pearls at her low-cut décolletage. "'Tis nothing, *mon amie*," she asserted.

Allegra eyed her broodingly. *One day you'll tell me, perchance.*

Eloise smoothed the folds in her flamboyant gown. Emerald, sable and white definitely suited her, setting off her catlike eyes and complementing her curls and pale skin. Although she was neither pretty nor beautiful, Allegra considered her enthralling all the same. Eloise always attracted a large number of men and woman. She had a certain something; Allegra called it charisma, for lack of a better word.

"Do you like it?" Eloise asked, intruding on Allegra's musings.

Allegra blinked several times. "Pardon?"

"My gown, do you like it?"

"'Tis very flattering. Did you create it?"

Eloise nodded. "And I have orders for twelve more just like it," she gushed excitedly.

Sophia rolled her eyes toward the high ceiling. "After all, you're the finest tailor in all of Venice. A woman as a tailor, who has heard of such a thing!" Laughter followed her words.

Eloise merely shrugged. Allegra caught the glint of anger in her eyes and knew she was far from unaffected. *Must you be so insufferable, Sophia?*

"'Tis one of your more, hmm...interesting designs," Sophia added.

Allegra studied Sophia thoughtfully. A petite Venetian beauty, she had olive skin, large almond-shaped amber eyes, a patrician nose, high-boned cheeks and lustrous chocolate-brown hair. One who was rather perceptive would say she was beautiful on the outside, however, not so within.

Sophia had inherited her husband's and her family's vast fortunes after they perished in her family home on Christmas five years past. The authorities detained her, suspecting she murdered them, but they found no proof to sustain that notion and had to release her. Allegra never asked Sophia what happened, fearing her reply. Now, at the age of twenty-five, she was rather wealthy indeed. Outwardly, she had it all...but men avoided her after one or two encounters, whereas Eloise drew both sexes like a moth to a radiant flame. Therein lay some of Sophia's vexation with Eloise.

"Personally, I like unpretentious sophistication," Sophia was saying. She took a sip of wine.

"Meaning?" Eloise asked, clenching her teeth, the muscle pulsing in her jaw.

"Tawdry isn't my thing." Sophia looked Eloise up and down. "However, 'tis appropriate for you, you wear it well," she explained.

Eloise opened her mouth to retort and Allegra hastily interrupted her. "I hear tell Lord and Lady Lamberti hold the most exclusive parties in all of Venice," she said, her tone a little too high.

"They're virtual orgies," Eloise added, her green eyes fairly bulging. "I'd have made a fortune, had I

not retired..."

Allegra groaned inwardly. *Here we go again!*

"We don't need another *French* courtesan in Venice," Sophia retorted.

"*Au contraire*, we *French* are much sought after here," Eloise countered.

Sophia glared. "A misconception, I'm sure."

"I wish the gondolier would hurry up," Allegra muttered. She dearly wanted to be away from both women at that moment. *Why, this day of all days, do they have to feel so damned prickly!*

"Why send their gondolier to fetch us, when yours is just as capable of taking us there, Allegra dear?" Sophia asked.

"Convenience, I suppose."

"For you, maybe." She just smiled at Sophia.

"Mayhap they like to have complete control over their guests," Eloise uttered, grinning broadly and winking at Allegra.

Sophia sighed, rolling her eyes. "There you go again! You can't help yourself, can you, Eloise?"

"Don't behave as though you've just got your courses, I was merely teasing," Eloise stated.

Allegra cleared her throat. "Let's not bicker, ladies. We're friends, aren't we?"

"She *started* this," Eloise objected.

Sophia pasted on a smile. "Allegra's right, we're going on this adventure because we need a little entertainment in our lives, bickering is no fun at all. Besides, Allegra has only just recovered from whatever was ailing her. Please be considerate,

Eloise." Allegra could see Eloise badly wanted to retort, but held her tongue.

Eloise glanced back at Allegra. "Are you still feeling unwell?"

Allegra pondered the bizarre life-like dreams that coincided with her illness and again wondered whether she should tell them. "I feel fine."

"You look a little pale, *mon amie*."

"I'm fine, really. I was merely thinking..."

"Contemplating what, pray tell?" Eloise inquired.

"Nothing of great importance."

"I think 'tis," Sophia interrupted. Eloise scowled at her.

"Perhaps, but I'll not discuss it with you now," Allegra replied.

Sophia tossed her thick locks over her shoulders. "And why not, pray tell?"

"I—"

Loud English curses mingling with Jeanette's jumbled French and English intruded on their discussion. The doors burst open and Jeanette stood on the threshold, Lord Michael behind her, dressed in his finest satin-brocade doublet and knee-length breeches of silver-gray, crimson and sable.

"God give me strength!" Allegra muttered beneath her breath.

"I'm *sorry*, madame," the servant uttered, her eyes wide.

"'Tis all right, Jeanette, you may go," Allegra said quietly.

Lord Michael entered the chamber, his gaze raking

over Eloise and Sophia as he moved to stand before Allegra. He doffed his plumed hat and bowed his head, his hazel eyes boring into her when he raised it. "My lady, I'd like a private word, if you please?"

"What do you want, Lord Michael?" she asked tonelessly, willing herself to remain calm.

Behind him, Sophia made faces and rolled her eyes toward the ornate ceiling. Allegra forced her features to remain impassive, which proved almost impossible when Eloise started mimicking Sophia.

He angled a look at them. "I'd prefer to speak to you in private, my dear." He tugged on his thick, squared beard.

"You can prefer whatever you like, but it doesn't mean you're going to get it," Sophia said, hands on hips. "If Allegra wanted to see you, then her maidservant would have willingly shown you in, and it appears to us that she didn't. Y—"

"Sophia, that will be *enough*," Allegra interjected, giving her petite friend a warning look. "Please..."

"As you wish." Sophia crossed her arms over her breasts, continuing to glare at the arrogant Englishman. A cold light filled his eyes as he turned back to Allegra; his jaw clenched and color crept up his aristocratic features. Allegra knew he dearly wanted to wring her neck, and his powerlessness pleased her no end.

Lord Michael had recently met the Venetian beauty, disliked her almost as intensely as Eloise and had not attempted to hide the fact. It didn't surprise Allegra, as she surrounded herself with independent

women and he found this trait rather daunting. Everything she'd done since he'd arrived in Venice grated on his nerves, yet he continued to hound her.

"Well?" he prompted, motioning to Sophia and Eloise.

Sophia grasped Eloise by the arm, turned and said to Allegra, "We'll await you on the balcony. If you need us, just call out."

Allegra nodded at her. "Thank you." She watched them go and then turned to Lord Michael. "I thought we agreed you'd no longer pursue me, my lord. What do you want now?"

"I want a chance to redeem myself," he said in a subdued tone. Please don't reject me again."

"I..." She shook her head. His persistence astonished her.

How many times must I tell him! "I told you, we're not compatible. You know my words are true. Before you say you'll change to better suit me, remember, there's *that* special someone out there who likes you just the way you are and when you find her, you'll wonder what you ever saw in me." She laughed forcibly. "Honestly."

"Not compatible?" Lord Michael angled an accusing look at her. "How can you say that after all we've shared?" He snorted loudly, tossing his head back. "No woman has ever made me feel the way you do! Why must I change to better suit you? Why can't we both make an effort to change?"

The answer was simple. She didn't want to change, period! Allegra eyed him incredulously. *You're weak,*

selfish, pompous and affected...and you repulse me!

"My lord, neither of us should have to change and that's my point," she said as calmly as she could. "Please don't imagine what's not there."

Open-mouthed, he just stared at her.

Out of pity, she'd given Lord Michael countless opportunities to redeem himself, and each time he'd become more demanding and neurotic. Upon occasion, he was like an obsessed madman. She thought his smothering behavior was due to the fact he needed her money to pay his debts and was eradicating his opposition by living in her pocket. However, she later discovered his father had paid his debtors in full, leaving her with the knowledge his attachment to her was entirely unhealthy.

In the end she decided to return to Venice, as it was the easiest way out without hurting him further. She told him she was leaving and that their short affair was over. He appeared to take it well, and Allegra was pleasantly surprised when he offered to take her to the docks in his carriage to save her the bother. They said a quiet farewell and she thought that was the end.

She should have known better. When he arrived in Venice, she promptly told him they had no future and to return to England. There was no point encouraging his abnormal behavior by being soft on him—a grave mistake on her part.

"I don't know what to say," he said at last.

"Say you'll go home to England," she returned. "Please."

The maidservant hesitantly knocked, much to her relief. "Yes, Jeanette?"

"Your transportation has arrived, madame. Lord and Lady Lamberti have sent Master Simon to escort *Dona* Sophia, Eloise and yourself to their home. The servants have loaded your trunks onboard the gondola and he is waiting for you all to board, madame."

"Where is he now?"

"He awaits you downstairs." Jeanette wrung her hands, her eyes on the floor. "H—he said that he c—couldn't linger, madame."

Allegra nodded. "Very well. Inform *Dona* Sophia and Eloise, please." The maid looked puzzled. "They're out on the balcony."

Michael waited for the servant to leave and then threw himself at Allegra's feet, his arms going about her voluminous hooped skirts, almost tripping her over. "You never gave me the opportunity to prove myself to you! Don't go!"

"I have to leave now, I don't have time to argue with you." Allegra tried to free herself from his grasp, to no avail. "L—Michael, *please*," she said as calmly as she could, her eyes connecting with his.

He ignored her request. "Where are you going?"

"That would be none of your concern, my lord."

"Aren't you going to at least try?" he asked.

Allegra sighed in exasperation. "How many times must I tell you that 'tis *over*?"

"Did our intimacy mean naught to you?" he asked.

"'Twas a casual affair, as you well know. I made

the mistake of trying to preserve your feelings."

"You *callous* woman, you don't have a heart at all? 'Twas never casual for me!" he said, burying his face in her skirts. Allegra stumbled backward and fell flat on her back. She'd barely regained her breath and he was upon her, his wild gaze boring into her. "'Twas never casual for me!" he repeated. She struggled in his grasp.

He released her upon hearing sounds from outside the parlor. Rising hastily, he composed himself and held out his hand. "I—I'm sorry, Allegra."

Ignoring his offer of help, Allegra scrambled to her feet. "You *fool!*" He visibly flinched at her insult. Allegra winced when she placed weight on her foot. It throbbed painfully. She was thankful that she wore boots instead of chopines, or her injuries would have been far worse. "Be damned, Lord Michael!"

She was in the process of dusting off her lavender and ivory gown when a thin, well-dressed man of average stature and ruddy complexion entered the parlor. His neat, pointed beard was the color of his hair, a rich golden-blond. His ice-blue eyes filled with concern when they rested on her. "Are you hurt, madame?" he asked with a strong French accent.

Allegra flushed beneath his knowing scrutiny. "N—no. Thank you for asking."

He tilted his head and studied Lord Michael, who didn't bother to hide his aggravation and retorted, "Why are you ogling me, sir?"

The visitor ignored Lord Michael. "Would you like me to remove your unwanted guest, madame?"

Allegra eyed the frail-looking man doubtfully, her mouth ajar. He appeared too delicate to do much of anything. "No, thank you. He was just leaving," she said, glancing at Lord Michael.

"Looks can be very deceiving, madame," The visitor added knowingly.

"Oh." She colored further.

"I doubt that this *pigeon-egg* could carry my hat, let alone forcibly remove me from this chamber. I say, if he wishes to aid you, then so be it." Lord Michael leaned forward, his blonde hair falling in his eyes. "Let him, *giglet!*"

She gasped in horror at the insult.

"Forgive the impromptu introduction. I am Master Simon, my master sent me to collect you. 'Tis my duty to protect you..." At her incredulous look, he added, "I am a fully qualified guardian, trained in the ancient art of the Ninja by a Japanese warrior."

"Again, I thank you, sir. However, I can handle this situation myself." Allegra found Master Simon's description of his duty rather unusual, but now wasn't the time to question him about the matter. She turned to Lord Michael. "Please leave now."

"No. We haven't resolved our issues yet."

"It would be wise for you to leave," her newfound protector quietly interjected.

"I challenge you to throw me out." Lord Michael stood legs apart, hands on hips, a smile on his well-formed mouth.

"I have no choice but to accept," came Master Simon's reply.

Lord Michael held his hand up. "There's no need for that."

Allegra noted the murderous glint in the other man's eyes and instinctively became aware of just how dangerous he could be. "Please go."

Lord Michael turned to Allegra. "I'll not cause you any more distress, my dear. I'll pay you a visit before I leave Venice... Fare thee well." He bowed, retrieved his hat and then departed without a backward glance.

Allegra smiled. "Thank you."

"'Tis my duty." Master Simon bowed before her.

She viewed his prematurely balding head with a slight grin. *He's a humble man indeed.* She liked that he wasn't vain, that he didn't cover his head with a wig like most nobles with his predicament did. *He is a servant, silly.*

"Madame Allegra, I'm here to escort you to *Villa del Romano*," he explained in a gentle tone.

"Yes, I know." She laughed nervously—a release from the pent-up stress. "Again, I thank you for your assistance."

"'Twas my pleasure." He studied her thoughtfully. Allegra limped over to the settee and seated herself. "Are you badly hurt?" he asked.

"No, 'tis only a tiny ache."

"He was once your lover?"

It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him to mind his own business, but his genuine look of concern stopped her. "Yes...a mistake."

He nodded. "We all make mistakes, madame. He appears rather mad. Hopefully, he'll leave Venice

before you return."

"He is too persistent to do that," she replied.

Master Simon cleared his throat. "Perhaps he'll find someone else to fixate upon whilst you're gone."

She laughed. "You're a pleasant individual. I like you."

"Thank you." He motioned to the doorway. "Come, we must be away." He helped her to her feet and they made for the door.

"I pray you, forgive me for the delay."

"You weren't to blame." He flashed another smile as he followed her out the door.

"I hope your employer is understanding."

He laughed. "Yes, I'm certain that he—*they* will be."

Allegra frowned. *He or they?* she wondered. They made polite conversation until they reached the others.

"'Tis about time!" Eloise said.

"Where's Lord Michael?" Sophia asked, looking perturbed.

"Didn't he pass you by?"

"No."

Allegra turned and looked up at the towering building. Arched entrances, shuttered windows and white balustrades greeted her gaze, but there was no sign of Lord Michael. "Where could he have gone?" she wondered aloud.

"Never mind. If he's inside, he'll soon grow bored and leave," Master Simon said quietly. "Or the servants will discover him and alert the authorities."

Allegra nodded and then looked about her. "Where is my maidservant, Jeanette?"

Simon motioned to the gondola. "You will be well taken care of." Allegra opened her mouth to protest. He held up his hand. "Strangers are forbidden at *Villa del Romano*."

Allegra became apprehensive. *Forbidden!* She disliked the word immensely. "But I *want* Jeanette—"

"Allegra, you're being offensive," Eloise interrupted behind her.

"Such a magnanimous master you have, " Allegra amended, eyeing Simon closely, her paranoia taking over. She opened her mouth to voice her concerns and found Sophia and Eloise glaring at her. She shrugged and stepped into the canopy-covered gondola, wondering how many more peculiarities they'd encounter before this jaunt was over.

Chapter Two

Vampires

Allegra thoroughly enjoyed a relaxing stroll through the Lamberti's gardens. She stopped by the row of grayish-green cypresses and plucked a soft, brown, slightly elongated cone from one, its scent refreshing. The landscaped grounds were directly out of an enchanted folktale. Sculptured marble statues, pergolas, stairways and limitless water features placed strategically throughout gave credence to the dreamlike effect.

She admired the endless rows of neatly pruned hedges, some of which formed great mazes. They served to remind her of her dear departed brother, Andreas. As small children, they would play hide and seek in their uncle's enormous labyrinth-like mazes and secret grottos. They were so very close until their parents sent him away to be educated at Padua, leaving her neglected and craving affection.

Her parents were about to ship her off to a convent when she met Lord Charles Montague, a

compassionate English aristocrat with loads of wisdom and a zest for life.

He was an ailing fifty-three years old, and she was nineteen. Charles offered Allegra marriage in return for her companionship, and she agreed. He was impotent, and allowed her to take lovers at her own discretion. They swiftly became friends and he cherished her as much as she did him. Finally, she'd found someone who wanted to be with her for her. He filled her heart with laughter and her mind with knowledge.... When he'd died of consumption two years past, loneliness afflicted her once more. The long succession of potential suitors did little to ease the emptiness inside her. She knew they wanted the opportunity to squander her inheritance and that none of them really wanted to know her, with the exception of the *deranged* Lord Michael.

Another traumatic blow came six months after that, when Allegra received notification of the death of her father, mother and beloved brother, Andreas. They were journeying to the New World to meet with her brother's betrothed's family when the ship encountered a violent storm and sank to the bottom of the ocean. No one survived the shipwreck.

In her world, surrounded by hordes of people, she'd never felt so utterly alone. Eloise and Sophia were misfits in society, too...and felt much the same way she did. She supposed that's what drew her to them in the first place.

Allegra glanced around her again. *One could become lost on these grounds.*

"Allegra!" She looked up at the white two-story villa. Sophia leaned out and waved at her from the colonnade veranda.

"Hello." She waved back. "What is it?" Eloise had taken to bed upon arrival, in the vain attempt to rid herself of a rather nasty headache and Allegra wondered whether she was all right. "Is it Eloise?"

"She still sleeps."

"Oh. What is it, then?"

"'Tis getting late. Come, I'll meet you inside," Sophia replied.

Twilight was rapidly descending upon them. Allegra supposed she should join Sophia in wait for their beautiful host and hostess. She felt it was rude of Lord and Lady Lamberti to invite them into their home and then not greet them. *They are even more peculiar than I first thought.*

A pair of obsidian eyes burned into hers, searing her very soul as they lightened to gold. She involuntarily shuddered. "I'll never forget those eyes as long as I live," she whispered.

Enough! Eloise would laugh herself silly if she knew!

Sensing someone watching her, Allegra scanned the open windows. She looked directly at him. His mouth curled in satisfaction, at what she knew was a shocked expression on her face.

What is he doing here?

Allegra shook her head when his image disappeared. "I must be going mad," she muttered.

* * * *

Gabriele's gaze touched her curves and his hands clutched at the sill when her thoughts washed over him. She was thinking heated thoughts of him, and he took pleasure in this fact. Relief flooded him to know he wasn't the only one affected by their meetings...

Unable to resist, Gabriele blinked and appeared before her. "You must forgive my maker and his beloved one, they meant no disrespect," he said at her left ear. She squealed in surprise and stumbled back. He reached out and righted her before she fell.

She held her hands up, palms out. "You're a figment of my overactive imagination! Blood-drinkers are as real as the pagan gods...y—you don't exist!"

Gabriele took her hand and placed her palm against his cheek. "Your heart beats wildly, can it be that you're excited over nothing?" He leaned in and sniffed her delicate scent. "Frangipani," he said softly. "I once favored eastern flowers, but now I find the Venetian and French varieties more appealing..."

"Pardon?"

He knew his nearness affected her and thrilled in the knowledge. "I like the way you smell, 'tis so refreshing," he continued, as though she hadn't spoke a word. Her unsteady breathing sounded loudly in his ears. "I like the way you appeal to the eye as well."

"Oh." She flushed from root to tip.

He buried his fingers in her hair, tilted her head back and lowered his mouth. "Moreover, I especially like the way you taste." His mouth touched her

heated throat. "Don't fear, my sweet, I've already feasted." He ran his tongue up her pulsing vein and then lightly nipped at her flesh. A soft cry left her trembling mouth. He rolled his tongue over the small wound. She moaned this time, heat curled in his gut and raced through his body. He sucked at her neck, her taste intoxicating him. It took all the power he possessed not to tear her throat open and drain her dry. His labored breathing filled his ears as he fought against the blinding hunger. She moaned and pressed her flesh harder against his mouth. He growled and sank his teeth deep, sucking vigorously.

Gabriele! If you wish her to complete you, mustn't drink so much from her! Queen Claudia's voice sounded loudly inside his head.

I couldn't help myself!

Try, or lose your only chance! came Queen Claudia's reply.

Curse you! Gabriele released Allegra, a mournful cry bursting from him before he blinked from her sight.

* * * *

Allegra's head buzzed as she hastily scanned the area. She sighed in relief upon finding she was entirely alone.

I must be completely insane! She touched her neck and flinched, her eyes darted back to the window and she saw a shadowy form retreat. Unnerved, she picked up her skirts and hurried toward the villa.

As she ascended the stairway to her temporary bedchamber, an exotic olive-skinned woman descending stopped her. "I've been searching for you, Lady Allegra."

"Really?" She didn't think she'd been gone that long.

"Milady wishes for me to dress you in a *peplos*," the woman tugged at her floor-length tunica, "so that you may join in the welcoming celebration."

"A costume party?"

The woman nodded. "Yes, a Roman one, with some Greek influences," she lowered her almond-shaped eyes, her lashes brushing her broad cheeks. "And *they* await you..."

The word *they* again. Allegra gulped for air, her heart beating more rapidly. "Very well, let us not dally, time awaits no mere mortal."

Her words caused the woman to give her an inquisitive look. She shrugged off the nagging feeling something was wrong. Hurrying up the stairway and down the dimly lit corridor, she stopped at the entranceway to her temporary chamber.

The maid opened the gilt framed doors and motioned Allegra to enter. Once inside, she helped Allegra out of her over-gown, underskirts and *farthingale* – a hooped underskirt. Allegra climbed into the steaming bathtub, and the servant proceeded to thoroughly cleanse her.

"Your name?"

"My name is Nadia, and as long as you're here, I'm at your service."

Allegra nodded, considering that fair, since she couldn't bring her own maidservant.

"How long have you been in *Dona* Claudia's employ?" she asked.

"My twin sister and I have been in milady's service since we were five...fourteen years."

"Five?" Allegra didn't mean to sound so incredulous, it just came out that way.

"We were orphans, *Dona* Allegra."

"Oh." Allegra sank lower in the tub so Nadia could rinse her off. "You've such beautiful skin. Where were you born, Nadia?"

"Egypt." The servant rose to her feet, produced a linen towel and briskly dried Allegra off.

"Do you like being here?"

Nadia fetched the silk tunica laid out on the bed, "Indeed I do," she answered, pulling the garment over Allegra's head. She fastened a golden fibula at each shoulder and then tied a belt beneath Allegra's breasts. "Beautiful."

"'Tis an exquisite gown."

Nadia motioned to a pair of red sandals at her feet. "Slip into those, please." Allegra slid her feet into the sandals and Nadia laced them. "Now all you need is your curls tended to," the woman softly mused.

Allegra glanced down at her semi-transparent attire. She was adventurous, but this was ridiculous. "I can't wear this! What of my over-gown? I can't go out in my undergarments."

"It matters little to them; their preternatural eyes see right into one's head. They seduce one's mind and

torment one's body, regardless of what one wears."

Preternatural? What on earth is she talking about?

"I—I need more cloth on my body."

"Every woman down there is wearing a tunic of sorts and you will too, milady's orders."

"A—a *chemise* conceals more than this flimsy piece of clothing!" Allegra spluttered indignantly, rubbing her naked arms.

"You must wear a *peplos*, milady wishes it." Nadia looked irritated.

Allegra's felt her eyes bulge. "But 'tis far too revealing!" she protested, feeling like a small child once more. "It doesn't have sleeves! I'm practically naked! Do you understand?"

Nadia knelt at Allegra's trunk, rummaged through it, removed a black velvet cloak and rose to her feet. "Wear this, if it will appease you," she said, handing it to her.

"It most certainly will!" Allegra affirmed. She quickly donned the cloak, feeling much relief after doing so.

Nadia went to the bureau and patted the stool before it. "Come and sit, so I may brush your hair." Allegra complied, her mind upon the peculiar events of the day. The maid picked up the silver inlaid brush and proceeded to stroke her thick curls.

Who do they think they are! The powers that be? She was an independent adult and didn't need manipulating, especially by a pair of bored aristocrats.

"How many guests are there?"

"I don't know," Nadia said, placing the brush down on the elaborate timber dresser. She dressed Allegra's hair with two wooden combs, then motioned to the small, hand-held mirror. "Observe my creation." She walked to the entrance, opened the twin doors and stood on the threshold. "Come, you've made us unimaginably late."

Allegra had barely glanced at her reflection. "Come," Nadia repeated, turned and hurried away.

To hell with you!

Allegra didn't care for the servant woman's tone, but directly followed her downstairs and into the large, intensely illuminated, fresco-covered sitting room. Looking about her at the fantastic over excesses, the word *ostentatious* came to mind.

"I'll return to you in the morning," Nadia said. She bobbed her dark head and then departed, leaving Allegra to the wolves.

She shivered and pulled the cloak tightly about her. *Thank you very much!*

Allegra was taken aback to see both Sophia and Eloise, dressed in diaphanous robes of white, being handfed by half-naked beings of great beauty—male and female. The scene was reminiscent of Ancient Rome with its togas, tunics and loincloths, embellished columns, and in addition, Roman gods depicted on every wall. Quite obviously, this was an orgy. She swallowed the lump in her throat.

"Ah, you've finally arrived." Allegra turned quickly. Lady Lamberti held out her hand and Allegra obligingly kissed it. "Welcome to our world,"

she purred, extracting her slim, milky-white fingers.

"I—I thank you for inviting me, Lady Lamberti," Allegra said, vehemently wishing she'd listened to her inner voice and stayed away from this place. Too late, she'd accepted their summons. *No regrets, Allegra.*

The woman smiled and angled her silver-blond head, her ice-blue eyes assessing. "*Dona Claudia, please.*" Allegra nodded. "And you can thank the elder, Gabriele, for inviting you into our exclusive society." She motioned with an open hand and Allegra's gaze followed.

He and *Don* Marcus were standing apart from the group. The latter was dressed as a Roman Emperor; he wore a purple toga with gold edging and had a knee-length tunic of pure white beneath and his blond head bore a laurel wreath. His brooding gaze lowered to the liquid in his goblet as he swirled it. She wondered what weighed on the man's mind to make him appear so lost.

Tall, dark-haired, wide-shouldered and lean-hipped, dressed as a Roman Centurion, the elder's back was to them. He bore an intricately embellished muscle cuirass—*breastplate*—of hammered bronze that had reddish-brown leather tabs at the shoulders and skirt, which was edged in gold and came halfway down his powerful thighs. She caught flashes of the crimson tunic beneath his elaborate attire as she admired his long, muscular legs.

Who are you? Turn, so that I may observe all of you. I want to see your face.

"Isn't he the most beautiful sight in that attire?" Dona Claudia asked, her shrewd eyes moving over Allegra's enshrouded figure. "'Tis a pity he forgot to don the helmet, and that you insisted on wearing that cloak."

"I'm not used to being in such a state of undress."

"Or orders, child."

"I wasn't aware I was to take orders from anyone," Allegra replied.

Not a muscle flinched in that beautiful white face. Allegra's throat went dry; something was wrong and she couldn't quite distinguish what it was. *Why did I come!* She pulled the cloak tightly about herself. *Remember, no regrets.*

"Don't regret your decision now, Dona Allegra."

You can't read my thoughts! This isn't real!

"You want to know who he is." Allegra nodded. "First, I'll tell you what he was."

This is too much! A shiver raced through Allegra.

"Well?" Dona Claudia's blue eyes penetrated deeply.

"Please explain, Dona Claudia." Allegra's heart was in her throat.

"He used to be a commander, but not a centurion," Dona Claudia answered. She smiled, running her long nails through her silver locks. "He fought for the Holy Roman Empire *until* eleven hundred and ninety two." She thought for a moment. "The third Holy Crusade."

Allegra could scarcely believe the woman's words. "That's not possible."

Dona Claudia simply laughed. That's when he

turned and looked at her. The muscle in his jaw twitched and golden sparks flared within his black eyes.

"He is only in my dreams! He isn't *real*," Allegra whispered.

"Oh, he is, and he is yearning to be alone with you."

Spellbound by his seductive aura, Allegra couldn't tear her eyes from him. With great effort, she calmed her breathing and gathered her thoughts. "H—he can't be from eleven hundred and ninety-two."

"He can and he is."

"What are you saying?" she asked, her voice barely a murmur.

"Gabriele is four hundred and thirty years old. He was embraced by my husband over four hundred years ago."

"Embraced?" Allegra dared to ask.

"Transformed."

"I...I don't understand."

"Made immortal, child. He is a blood drinker, a vampire..."

"What?" Allegra tried to tear her eyes from his, but failed miserably. "I don't believe you." She shook her head.

"I don't lie," *Dona Claudia* stated firmly.

Rest assured, my sweet, I'm factual, he answered inside Allegra's head. *Dona Claudia is our Queen. Listen well, as she is wise.*

"Get out of my head! Get out of my head!" she began to whimper.

"Calm yourself. It will not do for the others to see you in such a state." *Dona Claudia's* voice had a soothing affect on Allegra.

All but the servants are immortal blood drinkers, he telepathically relayed.

A chill ran down her spine. "Am I to be provisions?"

"No, dear, he is in need of a bride, you and your friends are contenders for the position as his chosen one," *Dona Claudia* answered.

"*Listen well.*" He inclined his head and turned back to *Don Marcus*.

"And what if I don't want to play this game of yours?" Allegra tried not to scowl.

Dona Claudia burst into laughter once again. "You were summoned, you came and now you *must* play..."

Allegra knew there was no way out of this quandary. The thought made her weak with dread. "Tell me about this so-called game."

The transcendent creature passed a long finger over Allegra's cheekbone, and she dared not flinch as the nail sliced into her flesh.

"There are three levels you must pass, just to be accepted for final selection as his chosen one." *Dona Claudia* placed her finger in her mouth, her full red lips suckling it before she pulled it out. "If you're fortunate enough to pass all three levels, the elder will choose from that selection, *if* you pass the one and only test he has set down. Should you fail the first three tests," she smiled, "we'll drain you dry and feed

your carcass to the water creatures. The same applies if you should try to escape."

Allegra didn't want to play, but she didn't want to die, either.

"If you succeed, then you shan't have to worry about that ever again," *Dona Claudia* purred.

I would've liked to have a choice in the matter! Under the being's cold scrutiny, Allegra felt the blood drain from her face. She fleetingly wondered whether Eloise and Sophia knew what was at stake.

"Your two friends know their lives depend upon passing the test. Immortality is a very tempting offer a—"

"You leave me very little choice," Allegra said tightly.

"'Tis true."

"What steps must one take?"

Dona Claudia shrugged.

"What does one have to do to surpass one's opponents?" Allegra rephrased.

Dona Claudia stroked Allegra's arm. "Now you're seeing sense. You will each receive your time with the elder... You must be prepared for the challenges when they arise. Therein lies the secret to succeeding, child. If the judges approve of you, then you'll become one of us."

"How very *unfair* of you," Allegra hissed. "My life depends on this. You could be more forthcoming."

"To enlighten you would be unfair to the others."

"And what you did was?"

"Passion is an irresistible quality," *Dona Claudia*

stated.

"I didn't ask for this."

"Do you think Eloise asked for her predicament? Mmm?"

Taken aback by the question, Allegra remained silent a moment. "What do you mean?"

"She's dying, child."

"I see." Allegra caught her breath. Deep down she had known, but was afraid to ask Eloise. That would explain her excessive use of laudanum. "Does she know?" she asked.

"She feels it," Claudia answered.

"I see why she would embrace the notion of immortality," Allegra said.

"Do you see?" *Dona* Claudia studied her.

"Yes."

"And you, will you *embrace* the *notion*?"

Allegra shrugged. "I...well, unlike her, I have a choice. I like being alive, despite the melancholy moments. The thought of losing my life at week's end is a very frightening one."

"Death is daunting for any mortal. I once experienced it myself sixteen hundred years ago and I can tell you, 'tis mind-numbing. However, 'tis not a death as such, rather a rebirth... 'Tis a thrill to know one can live on forever and suffer none of the human illnesses or weaknesses." She raised her pale brows. "And what a wonder to spend that in the arms of a male who doesn't suffer from mortality." *Dona* Claudia cleared her throat. "Well...almost impervious to destruction."

"I—I assumed *immortality* meant forever, no exceptions."

"There are exceptions to every rule, my child. In time you shall learn of our minuscule weaknesses... as they will also be yours, should you pass."

Allegra's back ached, she longed to sit and rest, but would die before she asked to be excused. *I wonder what her highness means by 'minuscule'.*

Dona Claudia laughed. "Because I like you, I'll offer you a little advice." She waited. "Do you want it?"

"I...please," Allegra said, frowning.

"Shield your eyes, if you wish to hide your thoughts from us. I'm not bonded with you, therefore I can't affect you as one you're bonded with can. But you can learn to block your mind from those..."

"How?"

"The closer we get and the more we learn, the more susceptible we become to our chosen ones. Put simply, it's easier for a chosen one to reject enchantment."

"Thank you, I think."

"You're most welcome." Dona Claudia pointed her index finger at the elder. "Gabriele is quite intoxicating. He doesn't need to entrance a woman to get her attention. He is very taken with your humanity." Her mouth twitched. "You like him, too. I smell your awareness of him...and your desire for him, more than the others."

"Meaning?" Allegra wasn't in the mood for cryptic words.

"I believe he's the one you can't shield your thoughts from, child. At least for now...not until you learn to block him."

What rot! Allegra bit her lip to keep from uttering an unpleasant retort, knowing it wouldn't do to anger her captor.

"I should think he'd like to make your acquaintance now."

"Oh... I—" Allegra felt paralyzed.

* * * *

"You're being summoned," Marcus said tightly.

Gabriele forced a smile. "I know," he said, tracing his maker's pale cheek with his right index finger.

Marcus's eyes darkened to a midnight blue and he pulled away. "Go."

Gabriele nodded. "I leave you to entertain yourself with Lady Sophia."

"Yes, just go." Marcus raised his glass, tossed his flaxen head back and drained it. "Leave me in peace."

"Why do you begrudge me what you yourself have?" Gabriele asked.

Marcus's golden brows rose high. "I begrudge you *nothing*." He laughed acrimoniously. "I even allow you to fuck my chosen female without a murmur of discontent."

Gabriele forced himself to remain calm. "You allow me nothing, Marcus, 'tis her right to choose, just—"

"I somehow doubt you'll share with me..."

Gabriele motioned to Allegra. "Join me with the

wench, if you wish."

"How magnanimous of you." Marcus glanced at Sophia and she beckoned him. "Perhaps next time."

Relief washed over Gabriele, but it was short-lived as Marcus cupped his chin. "Rest assured, there will be a next time, my exquisite creation."

"Whatever you wish." Gabriele was careful to mask his emotions.

"Oh, I wish..." Marcus leaned in, running his mouth over Gabriele's jaw and up to his ear. His teeth nipped at his earlobe. "*I will* discover her treasures for myself," he whispered. He drew back and searched Gabriele's gaze, a hint of sadness in his.

"I—"

Marcus held up his hand. "Don't compound the situation by..." His words trailed off. "Claudia has summoned me, you're to see to *Dona* Sophia now, and go to *Dona* Allegra when I return." Marcus inclined his head and then moved to Queen Claudia's side.

* * * *

The elder appeared mere inches from Allegra and startled her. She stumbled backward and he steadied her with a firm grip on her shoulders. The heat of his touch sank through her cloak, sending jolts of pleasure through her entire being. He'd obviously fed well this evening, because he felt warm. She dared to look up into his fathomless, obsidian eyes and her heartbeat quickened. *You're one fine-looking creature!*

She read the amusement in his eyes and was mortified to know he'd just read her thoughts.

"Count del Fra, formally meet Lady Montague," Dona Claudia said.

His lush mouth curled and a set of perfect white teeth flashed at her. Much to her chagrin, she felt her face color and her stomach tumble. His words came back to her. *I'm the one from your dream...remember?*

Is this a dream?

He took her quivering hand and his heated lips glided over the back of it, his eyes not leaving hers. She'd never been so aware of him than at that moment. Her mind didn't cloud over as it usually did when he was with her. He towered over her frame, which was tall for a woman, dwarfing her. She sucked in a grounding breath and inhaled his unforgettable musk cologne. His teeth grazed her knuckles, and she hastily snatched her hand from his grasp.

"I'm delighted to meet you at last, Lady Montague," he said, at length, in a voice that was soft and caressing.

"L—likewise, Lord del Fra."

God, I sound like a dim-witted fool! Shock caused her to gawk stupidly at him. *Perhaps I'll awaken soon.*

"Dona Allegra and Don Gabriele," Dona Claudia waved a hand in the air. "Go away and entertain yourselves."

The elder bowed his head. "As you wish, My Queen." Allegra followed suit, and then he took her arm in his and they retreated to a nearby lounge seat,

in a softly lit corner. She was stunned to see that Eloise and Sophia had discarded their clothing and were now openly fornicating with Lord Marcus and two other males on the cushion-strewn settees.

"My maker is an exhibitionist," he said.

"Oh, really?" Allegra tried not to frown.

"He takes pleasure from being watched, among other things..."

Thinking the gratuitous display was appalling, all Allegra could utter was, "I see." She doubted this was real, surmising she'd awaken in the morn and have a good laugh at her overactive mind.

"Do you, in truth?" he asked.

"I, ah...p—pardon?" she stammered, hating that she had no control around this creature.

His mouth twisted. "Do you understand why one would become stimulated whilst fornicating in public...why one would feel a rush from having others watching them take pleasure, excited because they are?"

"I...*no*! Do you, Lord Gabriele?"

"Become excited, *Dona* Allegra?"

She nodded.

"Of course I do, but not as much as when I conquer the one I desire," he smiled, "and make her my concubine."

Allegra felt her cheeks flame yet again. He was implying he wanted to conquer her, and the notion caused her heart to pulse quickly. Allegra always dominated. She never allowed a dominant man too close, for fear of losing control...and she would never

be powerless again!

Master Simon, the same manservant who had accompanied them from her home to the villa, removed Lord Gabriele's cumbersome breastplate and leather armor, leaving him dressed in a thigh-length tunic of crimson.

Oh, my, what wonderful legs you have! She could barely take her eyes off him.

"You may retire, my friend," he said quietly.

The servant bowed his head. "Thank you, master." When he raised it, he smiled warmly at her. "It is a pleasure to have you here, *Dona Allegra*."

"Thank you, Master Simon. 'Twas a pleasure to make your acquaintance, too."

He nodded, then turned and walked away.

"Master Simon approves of you, 'tis a favorable indication."

She flushed beneath his intense regard. "Why?"

That faint smile touched those delicious lips once more. "Simon is my guardian, I trust his judgment."

"Guardian, what does he do to protect you? He is so frail-looking."

"Yes, he looks breakable, but looks can be very deceiving." Lord Gabriele smiled and it reached his eyes. "Simon has been specially trained in martial arts, his ability is similar to the *Yamabushi* – a mountain warrior. He watches over me whilst I sleep, or if you prefer, hibernate."

"A *Yamabushi*? I'm confused."

He nodded. "Allow me to explain."

"Please do," she said.

"The *Yamabushi* are of the Shingon sect of Buddhism. They were originally mountain hermits and holy men, who studied *shugendo* – the search for spiritual, mystical, or supernatural powers obtained through asceticism. Various other warriors later joined them and trained with them, including the ninja."

"I see."

"Shiro Toku hailed from the island of *Honshu*, and was a great *Yamabushi* when he was human. He taught Simon the art of the mountain warrior." He smiled. "Shiro is a three-hundred-and-ninety-year-old immortal, an elder and guardian trainer. Is that clear enough for you?"

"Yes."

"Queen Claudia chose Shiro as her guardian...and now many of our guardians are trained by him, or ones he has trained, from the age of five or so." She made to speak, but he held up a silencing hand. "Guardians are human, and our extraordinary guardians become immortals, as payment for services well rendered. The major difference between the traditional training method is that our guardians don't have to abstain entirely..." He caressed her lower lip with his thumb, his eyes searching hers. "Anything else?"

"Oh. Were you a guardian before you became immortal?"

"No."

"What are you? I've heard soothsayers tell of immortals that suck the life from their victims...but

they're not supposed to have a heartbeat, or be able to breathe. And I've h—had dreams..."

"You poor little dove." He laughed wholeheartedly.

"Don't make sport of me! I don't like it."

He took her hand and placed it on his chest. His heat seeped into her fingers and the unmistakable pulse of his heart made her eyes widen. "It beats like yours when I'm awake. When I'm resting, hibernating, it slows so much so that a human can't detect it, or the fact that we breathe. Hence the myth..." He smiled. "Does that satisfy your curious mind?"

She nodded. "Oh, yes."

"Hmm." He lowered his head and looked as though he was going to kiss her.

She closed her eyes, waiting for the touch of his mouth and when it didn't come, she opened them to find him absorbedly studying her features. She wanted a hole to open up and swallow her. *What has become of me? I'm acting like a loose woman!*

"You are far from that," he said, as though she'd spoken aloud.

"*Dona Claudia* says you're four hundred years old. Is this true?" she asked hastily, trying to hide her embarrassment.

Lord Gabriele passed a hand over his alabaster cheek, his exotic eyes straying over her nipples, which puckered tightly as the warmth of his gaze touched them. His white teeth flashed briefly. "Four hundred and thirty, actually. I was thirty years old when I was

embraced."

"I believe she told me, but I just forgot. " Allegra fought for control.

Lord Gabriele nodded, a glint of merriment in his eyes.

He turned and addressed a petite maidservant. He took the liberty of ordering Allegra's dinner; chicken in catalana sauce and pasta, sugared almonds, custard tart, raspberry jelly and brandy. She favored all the dishes and the alcohol, and didn't need to wonder how he knew.

The food and drink arrived swiftly. "As this is a casual affair, you'll eat here instead of the dining room."

Allegra shrugged. "As you wish."

She studied him. Although he wasn't what one would deem handsome, she believed him to be thus, but not ruggedly so. To describe him as exotic or even beautiful would have been more accurate. Her eyes raked over his extraordinary appearance, devouring every inch of him. Tousled, lengthy curls of sable framed his pale features; sable lashes his brooding, obsidian eyes. They kissed his high cheekbones when he blinked. He had a straight patrician nose with flared nostrils, a strong angled jaw line and a firm, sensual mouth. Made for savoring, his lips drew her hungry eyes more than once. A lean muscular build and flawless white skin completed the magnificent package.

"You may call me Gabriele, and I shall call you Allegra, my sweet," he said candidly, handing her the

glass of brandy.

She composed her thoughts and accepted the alcohol. "Thank you." It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him she didn't give him leave to do such a thing, but caution stilled her normally wayward mouth. She sipped the full-bodied drink instead.

"Do you like it?"

She nodded. "But you knew that."

"Of course. I was merely making conversation." He took a forkful of chicken and pasta and offered it to her, his mouth twitching when she tentatively opened hers.

"The fork is a wonderful Italian creation," he said quietly. Allegra had to agree, even took her own when she moved to England, after she married.

"The chicken is rather delicious, my lord."

"Gabriele."

Her eyes darted up to his. Her mouth went dry and her stomach flipped. "G—Gabriele."

My God! I sound like a simpleton!

"I've all but forgotten the taste of foodstuffs." He smiled. "I used to enjoy eastern coffee, when I campaigned in *Outremer*.

"*Outremer?*"

"The Holy Land, my sweet."

"Oh." She liked the way his eyes remained riveted on her face. He made her feel special and she needed that, but didn't realize it until now.

"And I liked roasted venison very much." He stroked her cheek and then supplied her with more tender pasta. "And I especially enjoyed mulled wine."

She chewed with relish, swallowed and sipped more brandy. "And do you miss all that?"

Gabriele nodded. Dipping his head, he stroked her lips with his tongue. "Sweet and luscious. More heady and even more addictive than any wine."

"Oh..." The words stuck in her throat.

He raised his head. "Upon occasion, I missed being human very much. More?" he asked. She opened her mouth and he filled it. "However, I am content with immortality."

He plied her with food until she'd consumed her fill, refilled her glass and relaxed back against the plush pillows, quietly studying her. He pushed the loose curls from her forehead. "What beautiful big amethyst eyes you have, little dove."

"Th—thank you." The way he looked at her made moisture pool between her thighs.

"So fallible...so alive...so human," he whispered.

"What are the three tests I must pass?" Allegra shifted uncomfortably beneath his intense scrutiny.

"I can't divulge that, as you know well."

"No harm in trying."

"Indeed. I'd be disappointed if you didn't."

"Let's talk about you." A long silence came after his words. "I'll start for you." Another pause. "You're twenty-six years of age, widowed and well-off."

She nodded. "Did you love him?"

"That's none of your business."

"Please don't make this difficult."

"Very well." She forcibly calmed herself. "He soothed my loneliness. Yes, I loved him very much."

"But not with any kind of passion. He was safe because you never had a sexual relationship with him."

"Yes, you're right, he was my confidant."

"He married you out of pity."

"Now you're being insulting."

"'Twas not my intention. You've never had a torrid love affair that has left you breathless and wanting more. He gave you no pleasure, and never attempted to." His mouth curled. "He was incapable of giving you a child, as he was impotent." His look was penetrating. "At his encouragement, you've taken many lovers between your silken thighs, not once experiencing real pleasure...hoping to find it and much, much more...too afraid to allow yourself the opportunity." His right brow curved up. "*Charles* married you out of sympathy," he repeated. "And you know it, I see it in your eyes."

Allegra immediately lowered her gaze. "We were companions."

"Yes."

"And do you attend me out of pity, Gabriele?" she asked, bitterness edging her tone.

"Your question is fraught with the petulance of a child."

Allegra wasn't one to be discourteous. "Indeed, and I apologize."

"I have touched a raw nerve. Forgive me, little orphan."

"'Tis all right." She studied him. "Is there anything you don't know about me?"

"Yes, many things..."

"You're not supposed to be real." She tried to calm her shaking. "I only identify with you in my dreams." The words burst from her throat, before she could stop them. "You're not supposed to be real."

He caressed her cheek. "I'm very real." He leaned in and nuzzled her cheek. "I'm thrilled you're here."

"How did you come to be embraced by Lord Marcus?"

"'Tis a long story."

"I'd like to hear it."

"Very well." He rested back against the settee and took her hand in his, lacing his fingers through hers. A long sigh left him. "I was gravely wounded in battle, I lay there dying on the blood-soaked field, when Marcus came to me and offered me immortality. Naturally, I accepted the gift."

"What happened?"

"A Saracen had run his scimitar through my gut and my own men left me to suffer and perish, too spineless to end my torment. I lay in the baking sun the rest of that day, feeling the blood drain from my limbs and my life-force ebb from my body." He sighed again. "The heat in the desert could roast your dinner." He passed his index finger over his lips, as though remembering. "I can't tell you how relieved I was to see the sun set over the horizon. The night brought with it a gentle draught, as it usually did. Inevitably, I'd have perished, had it not been for Marcus. I shall be forever grateful to my maker."

"And did you reap revenge?"

"Of course. Would you not?"

"Yes." She nodded. "Did you leave a wife?"

"No, I was far too busy being a chivalrous hero." He laughed harshly.

"What is it like to be a vampire?"

"Lonely. Enough for now, inquisitive little mortal." Suddenly, he leaned in and unclasped her cloak. When she made to speak, he silenced her with a light brush of his mouth. "'Tis warm, you've little need for this."

"Don't." She turned her face away.

He cupped her jaw and pulled her to him, his teeth nipped at her lower lip until she opened her mouth. *Don't say what you clearly don't mean! Forget all that you've ever learnt regarding modesty and deportment. Free your soul if you wish to succeed, lovely mortal,* his voice whispered inside her head.

His hand moved over her leg and up her thigh, hot, probing and forceful. She warmed to his shameless touch, arching against his fingers when they moved over her mons, the sheer fabric teasing her moist heat as he stroked her through it. She shuddered and moaned into his mouth, her hands working their way into his thick curls. His tongue rolled over hers, persuasive and intoxicating, eliciting a heady response. His allure was far too great to discourage.

If this is a dream, then don't let me awaken! Allegra could only think to soothe the ache inside her throbbing wet center. She clung to him like a starving wild-thing, her mouth locked with his, urging him to give her more while she thrust against his able

fingers. His mouth moved over her jaw. Her labored breathing washed over her, but she was past caring to silence it.

"Arrgh, you're heavenly." He hiked her tunic up and pulled her onto his lap, so that she straddled him. Another groan escaped him when she began to undulate against his erection, the fabric of his tunic having an arousing effect. He gripped her hips and rocked against her.

"More." Allegra let her head fall back and moans escaped her mouth. She braced herself against his broad shoulders. He'd thoroughly awakened her rapacious desire.

Her tenuous control abandoned her entirely. Her mind screamed for him to take her and her body told him in many ways. However, he appeared to prefer to torment her. Juices flowed from her heated sex and blood thrummed through her veins. She briefly wondered if he could hear it race through her body and limbs as she curled them about him.

"Look at me." She opened her eyes and watched Gabriele's pass over her breasts, which were clearly visible through the transparent material of the tunica. They moved against the soft fabric, taut and aching, their peeks begging for his attentions.

"Taste them." The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them.

"So perfect," he whispered hoarsely. His hands roughly caressed them, pinching the tight nipples.

She leaned forward, past caring she repeated, "Take one into your mouth." She swiveled her hips

against his; his cock felt harder than steel. She rubbed her clit over its length. Her eyes glittered triumphantly when he released a ragged cry, and his sparkled with flecks of gold. "I want to take you inside of me," she added huskily. "*Oooh!* Can you feel how much?"

Of course, he could. How could he not? Her wetness seeped right through his clothing! She was his for the plundering, if only he would! She felt crazed and couldn't stop herself.

She groaned. "Can you f—feel... Arrgh!" She threw back her head, her movements becoming stiffer and hastier. "Ah, ah, arrgh!" Her nails sank into his shoulders. "*Ooh, yes! Yes!*" She bucked wildly against him.

He watched her climax, obviously enjoying the expression on her face when she found the temporary relief that she sought. "You are lovely."

Allegra buried her face in his throbbing neck, trying hard to still her erratic breathing. Her mind could scarcely believe the fact she'd rubbed against this stranger's groin like a dog, leaving her copious juices all over his costume. Her gratuitous behavior mortified her. She fleetingly wondered whether he'd used some kind of enchantment to enthrall her. Her lack of control frightened her.

"You smell sweet, irresistibly sweet." Gabriele drew a breath and exhaled loudly. "The sound of that sweetness roaring through your veins is tormenting me beyond reason. You stir my ravenous animal desire, driving me beyond reason. I must savor you."

"I..."

"You're a lusty woman, Allegra," he murmured hoarsely into her hair. "You're more fiery than I ever imagined."

"I...I don't know what came over me. I don't know whether this is real, or just another of my delusions." She inhaled his musk cologne as she nestled further into him. "And if this is real, I fear my actions have been rather improper." She immediately cursed herself for sounding redundant.

He cupped her cheeks and drew her face back so that he could look into her eyes. "You would not have been chosen had you not been compatible with me." His sensuous mouth curled up slightly, briefly, displaying his dimples. "I like your, *ah...* enthusiasm. I'm of the opinion we'll excel in the bedchamber," he said in that drugging voice of his.

"And what of Eloise and Sophia?"

Gabriele's mouth twisted. "I enjoy Eloise's taste far more than her charms, and Sophia's charms more than her taste."

I must be the least attractive to him! Allegra was dumbfounded. If she had any growing illusions about being his favorite, his words dashed those notions.

Allegra tried to pull away, but he held her fast. *Why should I care if this is so! What is wrong with me? Am I not to his taste? Well, I don't care to be his willing plaything anyhow! I merely want to survive... immortality will suit me well. Why didn't they tell me of their interludes with this being?*

"Unlike you, they didn't remember much about

my nightly visitations," he answered, as though she'd spoken aloud.

Allegra frowned. "I don't remember much, aside from you kissing me," she shivered, "and drinking from me. The rest is indistinct. Sometimes remember moments...and then wonder whether they were real or delusions. " She reddened. "I know there's more, but I can't seem to remember."

"Oh?" His right brow slowly curved up. He didn't appear to believe her, and she couldn't care less. "Did I make an impression on you?"

"No, not really. I've met various blood-drinkers in my life, Gabriele, 'tis a common occurrence for me to sit on their laps and flatter them at will...act the harlot."

Gabriele smiled at her words, her irony appearing to delight him. "Such things tend to shock most mortals, not you, my sweet, you're very accepting of our kind. You delight and thrill me. Especially tonight."

"I'm glad you liked the show." Allegra felt her face glow. She had to remind herself that he wasn't a man and therefore didn't think like one.

"Sophia and Eloise appear to accept your kind, too," she muttered. Gabriele merely nodded, barely concealing a smile.

Bastard! she silently fumed.

He leaned in and buried his face in her neck. "You're hot."

"Pardon?"

"Your flesh is hot." His tongue laved her sensitive

skin. Allegra shivered, excitement thrumming through her body. He was intentionally distracting her and she wanted no part of it.

His tongue flicked over her neck. "You are a delight to the senses." She gave up resisting and felt him smile against her skin.

She passed her hands under his tunic and stroked his rippling torso. "You haven't won, my lor—"

"Gabriele," he corrected. He captured her hands and drew his fingers through hers. "You smell like you taste." His teeth grazed her neck, a tortured growl emitting from him. "Offer yourself to me."

Knowing what he wanted, Allegra curved her neck. "Take all of me." Her ragged breathing seemed to resonate in her ears.

He came over her, a sharp pain sliced through her when his incisors pierced the tender flesh of her neck. He drank enthusiastically, his lips suctioned onto her throat, his tongue laving. "Oh...stop!" She undulated against him, her cries of surrender floating about the room.

"That's it, come with me," he spoke inside her head.

Her fingernails bit into the backs of his hands, her body trembling violently as she surrendered entirely to his brand of love-play. "Oooh, yesss!"

You're a tantalizing mortal. His words filtered through her cloudy mind.

"Give me what I crave most now."

I want to give in to you, fill you with myself, but not yet, 'tis not time...

Allegra had never felt such ecstasy without some form of penetration or at the very least, clitoral stimulation. She felt drained and exhausted as she snuggled into his warmth. "You should have taken me to your quarters before you debauched me," she murmured drowsily.

Gabriele licked her neck, following a rivulet of blood that she could feel running down her throat and then raised his head, his eyes moving over her features. "I could have, but 'tis rather a long way to Tuscany, little mortal."

"I meant your bedchamber here."

"I'll take you to your bed now." Before she had a chance to protest, he scooped her up and carried her off into the darkened corridors.

"You need your rest now," he whispered, kissing her forehead.

"Mmmm," she mumbled, nuzzling his neck.

Gabriele thanked Nadia when she opened the bedchamber doors. She quietly closed them after he entered and departed.

He laid Allegra on the crimson-covered four-poster bed and sat beside her. She gazed back at him, unable to do anything else.

"You entrance me with your way, little dove." He studied her a moment longer.

"Why?" she dared to ask. He didn't answer. His fingers worked on the lacings beneath her breasts. She arched her body when he drew her tunica up over her head, his fingers grazing her sensitive skin. "Mmm."

He appeared irritated at himself, impatiently

tossing the garment to the floor. His black gaze moved over her ripe curves, blazing a path where they touched. He pulled the crimson coverlet up, his hands shaking.

"Why do you shake?"

He cleared his throat noisily. "I like long limbs, and yours are superb. As a matter of fact, you are beautiful."

"I'm yours to take, for tonight." She flung the bedspread back and stretched her arms wide.

"No," he said quietly.

Allegra pulled herself up and reached for him. "Gabriele, please..." She desperately wanted him to lust after her, to take her in his arms and lay with her. She needed to rid herself of this feeling of insecurity.

"Don't you want me?"

"How could you ask that after tonight?"

"Please answer me."

He sighed. "You're perfect. You're beautiful, both physically and mentally. You curve in all the right places and your breasts are neither big nor small. I'm partial to coral-tipped nipples, especially when they pucker tightly and beg for my hungry mouth."

"Gabriele..."

"Hmm?" He licked his lips when he lowered his gaze. She knew the moisture between her thighs glistened in the soft candlelight.

"Touch me," she said, her hand moving over her flat abdomen. "Let me know you find me desirable through your actions."

"You don't like to share, do you?"

She shook her head. "No. I despise it."

"Jealous?"

"Don't be ridiculous." She forced a laugh. "Of course not."

He leaned over her and ran his fingers across her soft mound, his index finger slipping between her satiny lips. Another growl left him when he moved his fingers against her erect clit. She watched him watch her intimately while he stroked her sex. Knowing her juices seeped over the bedsheets did little to embarrass her; she was far too excited to care.

"Make love to me, Gabriele."

With a resigned growl, he moved over her, his mouth brushing her musky heat, his tongue sliding between her lips. He gripped her hips and pulled her to him.

"Ooh." She moaned in appreciation, thrusting her hips high to better feel his touch. "Arrgh, yes."

He savored her womanly taste, his tongue dipping into her heat, his mouth sucking. His hot loving made her flesh quiver. His words filled her head. *Yes, little dove, let go and allow me to take you to paradise.*

"Oh, yes!" Allegra vibrated from head to foot, the intensity of her climax making her body arch and convulse. She was vaguely aware her cries resounded loudly, thinking she should care, but not having the will to restrain herself.

He kissed his way up her body, his eyes locking with hers. "You should get some rest." He bent his head and gave her a perfunctory kiss before rolling off her.

"Gabriele." He muttered something inaudible and then climbed from the bed.

Allegra rolled onto her side she reached for him. "Gabriele..." She burned for his touch. "Am I lacking? Don't you want me?" She couldn't remember feeling unsure of herself before *now*. She was the controlled one, and she found this new state rather alarming. The silence stretched on and on, making her very aware of his presence and how disturbing it was.

"Why are you behaving like a child?"

"I'm not throwing myself at you to save myself from death. Although, I'd never have come, had I known I was part of some inexcusable game. I...I find you intoxicating. What have you done to me? She yawned. "I—"

"Sleep for now. I'm leaving, before I lack the strength to do so."

He doused the light and then departed the room.

"I'm going to be an entrée at their next banquet," Allegra said, and then laughed.

I think not, his voice sounded inside her head.

"Why can you converse with me this way? Your Queen told me she couldn't read my thoughts if I averted my eyes." She half sat up.

True, with the un-bonded, but we're bonded...

"How?"

Sleep now.

"But, Gabriele? Gabriele!"

She groaned in frustration, thumped the pillow and then laid her head down on it. *Infuriating male!*

"Why did I come here?"

You needed to be out of Lord Michael's reach, came the elder's offhand reply.

"Go away!" she muttered.

Until evening, then.

"Sleep well."

I always do, he answered.

Allegra looked around the darkened room and laughed. "I find I quite like talking to you in this manner. 'Tis interesting."

Hmm...

"You sound so close, are you in this chamber?"

No.

"Where are you, then?"

I'm in Tuscany, at Castello del Fra, my home.

"I don't believe you."

Of course not, that would make you dull.

"Are you really there?"

Of course.

"How did you get there so quickly?"

'Tis called blinking, I close my eyes and think of a place and I go there instantaneously. 'Tis a power that one gains over time...

Excited by this piece of information, Allegra asked, "Are you capable of taking another being along with you?"

Yes.

"Can you show me how you do that?"

Perhaps.

"Now?"

No.

"Oh. Why not?"

I...I must first ask our Queen.

"Please do." She found it peculiar these outstanding beings took orders from a female. A smile touched her mouth as she thought of Queen Elizabeth, the almighty English monarch. The power of the female sex was growing.

His laughter met her ears. *Sleep well, Allegra.*

"Dream of me," she said impishly, feeling bold because he wasn't in the room.

I will...of your luscious body and sweet taste, and the many ways we can please each other...

"Kiss me goodnight, then."

Why, Allegra? Spoken so softly his words felt like a caress. A shiver coursed through her.

"Because you can."

But why do you want me to?

"I like you."

Hmm. I don't think your answer is quite good enough for the effort I must go through to appear to you.

"Then don't!" She felt herself blush in the darkness and heard his delighted laughter. It was as though he was right there in the room with her. She shivered with excitement.

I promise to kiss you upon our next meeting.

"Very well. Goodnight, Gabriele."

Competing for this male would be a thrill! Life had taken a rather fascinating and unusual turn. Allegra decided to worry about the outcome when it arose at week's end.

Sleep pulled at the edges of her mind and she didn't see him reappear...

Chapter Three

Decadence

Allegra awoke with a start and was surprised to find Nadia tying back the red drapes surrounding her bed. *How rude can one individual be!*

"Good morning, *Dona Allegra*," she said, brushing lint from her severe gown of gray and white.

"Is it?" Allegra answered sourly. The sunlight streaked through the arched mullioned windows and bathed her in its glow, its brightness making her squint.

"Now that you mention it, 'tis almost noon," Nadia said condescendingly, her dark, almond-shaped eyes measuring Allegra carefully. "You've been abed two days."

"Oh!" Allegra flushed guiltily. She briefly wondered why she'd slept so long and then offhandedly pushed the thoughts aside. "I didn't realize."

Nadia rolled her eyes and shook her head. "Your bath awaits you," she motioned to the wooden tub in the corner.

Allegra thought she was seeing double. An identical maid, only in a plain blue dress, was placing a wooden screen around it. "Who—"

"Her name is Jada, and she's my twin sister," Nadia interjected. "I'll be back in a few moments." She joined the other woman, and they left the chamber. Allegra sat up, thoughts of *him* filtering through her mind. Upon discovering she was naked, she dragged the silken coverlet up her body, liking how it felt against her sensitive skin.

Lord Gabriele, *the elder*. She smiled at the thought of his attributes, one in particular more enhanced than average. 'Twas a pity all she did was rub herself against it. She examined her breasts. Upon finding no bite marks there, she felt her throat and found the wounds already healed. Allegra yawned loudly and stretched long, passing a hand over her mons. She groaned.

"If I ever find a man to satisfy me after this, I shall be eternally thankful," she muttered, climbing from the comfortable bed. Her body ached and she sighed in relief when she sank into the wooden tub.

He is from Tuscany. Where in Tuscany does he hail from? Was Gabriele part of some fantastic dream, or was he factual?

"Nadia is factual," she murmured. Frustrated, she dismissed her thoughts and went about bathing herself, too impatient to await the surly maidservant.

Eloise appeared, looking elegant and extremely tall, as she was wearing her favorite pair of chopines. Clutched in her fragile hands, voluminous drum-

shaped skirts belled out extensively around her and touched the polished parquet floor at the back. She was also wearing a rather large smile, her green eyes sparkling brightly when she greeted Allegra.

"*Bonjour, Madame Sleepyhead.*"

Allegra tossed her disheveled raven curls over her shoulders and grinned sheepishly. "Good morning, dear friend."

"*Mon Dieu*, is that all you can say?" Allegra nodded. "You've slept for two days, *chère*."

"So I've been informed." Allegra eyed Eloise's elaborate low-cut French gown of crimson, yellow, brown and coffee floral. The overall effect was rather enchanting, unlike the gaudy ensembles she usually wore. She wondered at the change in Eloise and was about to ask, when she interrupted.

"Isn't it exciting?" she gushed, her eyes wide.

"I suppose that 'tis a little."

"Imagine my excitement when I found they were immortal! I thought I was dreaming!" She seated herself on the edge of the elaborately carved bed and eyed Allegra excitedly. "Why did you withdraw that night, *mon amie*?"

Allegra shrugged, unwilling to divulge those private moments with the coldly exquisite Gabriele.

Nadia reappeared, her furious sister and two maidservants in tow. "You're not meant to roam about this villa without first informing me of your movements," Jada said, her black eyes flashing at Eloise.

"I was rather bored on my own. You *guardians* are

far too serious," Eloise retorted, rolling her eyes toward the intricately coffered ceiling while she tapped her chopines against the timber floor.

Allegra stepped out of the bathtub. Nadia held a towel out for her. "Guardian?" she asked. Nadia wrapped Allegra in the linen cloth. For the first time, Allegra caught the semblance of a smile on the other woman's lips. "I don't understand."

"My sister and I are fully trained guardians, *Dona* Allegra."

"Why do you wait on us, then?"

"We don't wait on any human, we serve our immortal mistress." Nadia frowned. "If you're confused, let me enlighten you further, we watch over you at *their* behest. We also make certain you aren't any danger to your hibernating hosts during the day."

Allegra raised her brow. "Do they only sleep during the day?"

Nadia nodded. "Mostly..." She swiftly dried Allegra off. "Once you can be trusted, there shall be no need for us to trail you around, but that won't happen unless you become immortal."

"Is it your chore to follow all the guests around?"

"No, only you," Nadia uttered.

"Oh." Did this mean Nadia would become her guardian should she become immortal?

Nadia motioned to the two maidservants. "Maria and Sabina, you'll dress *Dona* Allegra, and then see to her and Lady Eloise's stomachs." The girls bobbed and then came forward.

Nadia turned back to Allegra. "You both can roam

the gardens and the public areas of the lower floor. You may enter the library also. If you need me, I'll be within hearing distance, just call."

"I will. Thank you," Allegra said.

Nadia turned and walked away, her sister joining her, their movements mirroring each other. If it were not for the different garments, Allegra wouldn't have been able to tell them apart.

They must be rather close.

Allegra dressed in a white smock with close-fitting sleeves and a low-cut square neck bordered with fine black-work. She sat on the edge of the bed beside Eloise, and the petite, timid looking maidservant dressed her pale legs in a pair of finely knitted silk hose that came below her knees. She fixed them with lace-edged garters.

"I don't expect you need to hide your curves after the other eve, *chère*," Eloise said softly, laughter edging her tone.

Allegra flushed guiltily, at the memory of her licentious behavior. "At least I didn't strip naked before all and sundry."

"You're being churlish," Eloise whispered, her copper brows furrowed. "Careful, I might confuse you with Sophia, who, by the way, rutted with Seigneur Gabriele and Marcus on the parlor floor the night before last. They vanished entirely after that."

"Disappeared?" Allegra could scarcely believe that after he'd left her he simply moved on to Sophia.

How fickle can one be? Try as she might, she couldn't help feeling discarded, and more than a little

disappointed.

"Last eve Seigneur Marcus told me Seigneur Gabriele had taken her to his villa. I thought her actions rather free."

"Really?" Allegra asked, trying to sound unaffected by this unpleasant crumb of information.

Eloise nodded. "Indeed."

Allegra tried to quell the resentment that gnawed at her insides. "'Tis unusual for Sophia to behave in such a fashion."

"Please stand, *Dona Allegra*," the servant uttered. Allegra rose, and the girl pulled an ivory corset over her shoulders. Allegra grimaced when she began to lace it tightly.

"I never imagined you to open up to that divine being the way you did either. You're usually so respectable—"

"Proper, Eloise?" Allegra asked.

"Indeed...you usually conduct yourself flawlessly in public. This is one of the qualities I like best about you," Eloise murmured thoughtfully.

"You mean that I'm rather uptight," Allegra said stiffly, wanting to be sick at the notion.

Eloise blushed. "No, *chère*. How could you think I would view you thus?"

Allegra merely grunted in answer.

The two maidservants slipped a farthingale over Allegra's head, fixed the ties to her bodice and then went about straightening it and placing a crescent-shaped bum-roll at her hips. Then came the petticoats and silk underskirt of chocolate embroidered with

gold. She sighed in relief when the taller girl placed a silk partlet over her shoulders and tied it beneath her arms. Unlike Eloise, hers sported a small collar of white-work lace. Her gown was of sable and chocolate brocade trimmed with ivory lace and gold embroidery, opening out to display the chocolate kirtle beneath, the chocolate-lined hanging sleeves opened to the shoulder and displayed the fitted sleeves beneath.

Allegra sat before the ornate dresser while a maid fixed her raven curls. Her mind flashed back to her evening with the elder. She thought they both had a profound connection; obviously, she was wrong. Being one of the irrelevant ones in Gabriele's selection made her feel rather irate.

"How do you feel about feeding off the living to survive?" she asked, feeling small for giving in to her petulance.

"It would not bother me overly much."

Allegra nodded, swallowing the bitter words on her tongue. "One..." She cleared her throat. "One could easily become used to such things. In many ways, we're fortunate to have been chosen."

"Sophia's the fortunate one; he chose to be with her first. I wonder whether she'll become his bride, though." Eloise sighed. "The notion of drinking blood repulses her, she told me as much."

Allegra rolled her eyes. "I'm certain she'll overcome her revulsion."

Eloise smiled. "Beauty comes before character, *chère*, but in this case, one must embrace what they

are about to become. Especially in the immortal world... Well, it doesn't matter to me whether she has him. Imagine if you will, all of us completing this trial and becoming immortal. Now that matters."

"As though we were given a choice in any of this," Allegra retorted. "Moreover, as for marrying the elder, Gabriele... No, thank you!"

Eloise gave her a perplexed look, which gave away to a warm, knowing grin. "You like him," she said, her green eyes sparkling brightly. "Oh, *mon amie*, forgive my loose tongue, I didn't see."

Allegra shrugged offhandedly, feigning indifference. "You mistake my feelings, dear, I meant he wasn't my type of man — male."

Eloise nodded. "I prefer *Dona* Claudia's company to his."

Allegra laughed. "Of course you do. Ever since I've known you, you've never held any man's affection's above that of a woman's."

Eloise rose to her feet. "When Jacques petitioned for a divorce, because I was barren, it devastated me. I...I loved him passionately, you see." She angled Allegra a sad look, her eyes pools of sorrow. "I thought he loved me too, obviously not enough. He'd already found someone else to take my place in his bed. I certainly loved him more than he deserved and this I now know well." She sighed. "That's why I'm the way I am," Eloise explained.

Allegra gave Eloise a sheepish look. "I pray you, forgive me."

"No harm done, *mon amie*. You're forgiven."

"I didn't mean to be so insensitive."

"I know. How were you to know?" Eloise patted Allegra's cheek. "Women are soft and beautiful, and being with one is harmless to my ravaged heart." She laughed, it sounded forced. "I like how they give and receive pleasure. And now that I've been honest with you, be honest with me, *mon amie*..."

Allegra raised her brows. "About what?"

Eloise laughed as she nudged her. "About your feelings toward *Seigneur Gabriele*."

You are meant to be her friend, try acting like one!

"Very well." She rose, turned and looked at Eloise. "I like him. I loathe the fact, and that he's the assertive one, as well." Her friend smirked triumphantly. "And you can remove that look from your face right this instant, Eloise."

Eloise produced a rather fake look of innocence. "What look, pray tell?"

"You know very well what I mean."

"Did you bed him?" Eloise toyed with a copper ringlet.

"No."

"Really?" The look Eloise gave her said she didn't believe a word.

"You're too much, and I'm far too hungry to argue with you, dear Eloise." She rubbed her belly. "I'm positively starving."

"Me, too."

"I have bedded him in dreams."

"Oh, really?" Eloise's eyes widened. "How many times?"

"I don't know." Allegra sighed. "I wonder whether my mind is playing tricks on me. He doesn't seem to want me... Oh, to hell with these depressing thoughts."

"Indeed, let's eat, *chère*."

"She must have read your mind." Eloise motioned to the doorway.

Allegra giggled when Sabina appeared, carrying a tray laden with mouthwatering foodstuffs, hot chocolate and aromatic coffee, she opened the balcony doors and then dispensed the food on the small table overlooking the exotic ornate, sun-kissed gardens.

Allegra made for the doorway. "Let us dine. I want to explore before they arise and ruin the adventure."

Eloise held out her hands. "Come back and help me up. These chopines make such things difficult from this position, *chère*."

Allegra stifled a sigh. "Oh, very well." She went and helped Eloise to her feet. Both women then made their way outdoors into the warm morning air.

"We should ride." Eloise seated herself.

Allegra sat opposite her. "Are we allowed to?"

"Oh, yes, Nadia will accompany you, Jada escorted me yesterday. We picnicked by the canal and after a while, *Dona Claudia* joined us. I genuinely like her."

"And her husband?"

Eloise frowned. "A little odd, if you ask me."

"I agree." Allegra sipped the strong coffee, savoring its rich flavor.

After eating their fill, Allegra and Eloise explored the ground floor, Jada and Nadia on their heels. After

exploring the villa, they made for the stables. Not one for riding frisky horses, Allegra mounted a placid mare. Eloise, being a total opposite, dressed like a man and sat astride a skittish brown gelding. Her pale cheeks flushed pink and her green eyes glittered with excitement. She nudged her steed into action and Allegra's followed. They cantered away across the lush green countryside, Jada and Nadia following closely behind them.

* * * *

Gabriele reached up and untied Sophia. She scuttled to the far side of the bed and began rubbing her wrists. He had to tie her, in case she injured him or herself whilst he slept. Therefore, she spent the entire day abed, in his dungeon-like chamber, with its earthen walls and magical doorway. He knew she wanted to be away from him, her thoughts loud and clear.

"Good evening, *Dona Sophia*." He spoke as softly as possible, not wanting to frighten her further... He could smell her fear as she huddled against the finely carved headboard. She clawed the white sheets tightly about her quivering body, her chocolate-colored eyes wide with fright, reminding him of a startled deer. Knowing his eyes bore a hungry look that made most mortals cringe in terror, turn tail and run, he rose from the bed and distanced himself from her.

God in heaven, help me! I could never be one of them!

Never! He read her mind.

He'd almost given up on trying to save this human... She had failed, and the kindred already knew! How could he save her now? He cursed beneath his breath as he peered about the darkened, underground room. Allegra would never forgive him and the notion ripped at his gut. He must find a way.

"I'm about to leave you, so that I may dine." She nodded rapidly. "Are you hungry?"

"Yes." The word was a shaky whisper.

"I'll have Simon see to your needs." He didn't miss the look of relief in her eyes. The thought of watching him feed again would be her undoing and he knew it well. She'd retched the last time.

"I – want – to – return – home now!" she enunciated tightly. "I'll never tell. You have my word."

Gabriele pushed his curls out of his eyes, strangling a sigh. "It may not have occurred to you that you must be accepting of the kindred, but you must. Either that or death, you have no other choice."

She drew in a deep breath, her shoulders sagging when she exhaled. "'Tis nothing against your kind, but I can't..." She shuddered with obvious revulsion. "I would prefer to stay human."

"Didn't our *Queen* enlighten you about the game?"

"Game!" Call it what you will, but I shall not take this so-called '*pastime*' as lightly as you!" She paused and took several deep breaths. "What are the rules?" Her tone sounded strangled.

"Once again, you can only be immortal or *dead*."

"Don't I have any other choice?"

"No. You accepted the summons and now you must play... 'tis the rules."

"I wouldn't tell anyone about what has transpired."

"'Tis not my decision." He sighed. "I regret being instrumental in your plight. Sorry."

She choked on her sobs and tears rolled down her brown cheeks. "So, I'm to die! Is that it?"

"I—I..."

"Yes?" She looked hopeful.

He knew he shouldn't give her hope, but couldn't help it. "I'll see what I can do to persuade Queen Claudia against such actions. Don't do anything foolish, 'twill only make matters worse."

"Like?"

"Trying to escape."

"Oh. What of *Don* Marcus, can he help me?"

Gabriele smiled, slightly amused by the fact this woman thought his maker would aid her, simply because he took pleasure in her arms. "He's devoted to our Queen. She's the dominant one, I'm afraid.

"I'll appeal to *Dona* Claudia myself, then."

Gabriele nodded, knowing Claudia admired courage above all. "Yes, do that, 'twill go in your favor."

She smiled, clearly feeling a little better.

Gabriele's hunger began to claw at his insides and he wanted nothing more than to fill his hunger with her blood, but his conscience wouldn't allow it. "Come, 'tis time for us both to feast. Simon will have the maidservants fix you a bath and feed you."

"Thank you."

* * * *

Allegra stood on the balcony gazing up at the stars, her mind going over the pleasant day she and Eloise had. She sipped a glass of brandy, savoring the taste as it flowed over her tongue. She awaited Eloise, who was tardy, as usual. Their evening entailed a grand ball, for only the few select. Well, she didn't feel very privileged.

Garbed in a velvet and taffeta gown of sable and plum, she felt entirely constricted and utterly wretched. A pensive sigh left her and she flinched, gripping her midsection. *I do so loathe these accursed corsets...and him!*

Allegra.

Allegra felt his presence before he called to her, but didn't have the strength to turn and look at him as her knees went weak. *Damn him!*

Allegra! his voice boomed inside her head again.

Oh, double damn!

She turned on shaky legs, forcing her feet to move toward the doorway. He lounged against the fresco-covered wall, watching her, seducing her with those coldly beautiful, obsidian eyes of his. The soft light from the wall sconces cast its glow over his cool features. She tried not to show how excited she felt seeing him, but failed miserably. Dimples appeared in his cheeks as he flashed her a perfect white grin that softened his face. She knew her eyes lit up and

silently cursed, knowing he was aware of this.

"Good evening, Allegra."

He looked very aristocratic dressed in a blue, gold and sable doublet, with matching ruff and cuffs of white and a pair of Venetian breeches. A short cape and knee-length boots of sable finished his ensemble.

"Aren't you going to speak?" he asked, his voice a soft, seductive purr.

"G--good evening." She swallowed hard, her breathing labored. "I... You look very," she gulped, "very handsome, my lord.

"Gabriele, remember?" His appreciative gaze roamed over her.

"Are you going to the ball?" Allegra cursed herself for sounding utterly redundant. *Of course, he's going to the ball, you nitwit!*

"You look sublime," he stated.

Don't you! she thought heatedly. An involuntary shudder passed through her.

He moved so rapidly, she'd barely blinked and he was upon her.

"*Gabriele.*" She looked up into his eyes and felt herself meld into him. His arms came about her. Every nerve ending in her traitorous body came alive.

He wound her curls around his fingers, pulled her head back and captured her mouth in a soul-scorching kiss that stole her breath away.

I'm acting like a harlot, but I can't help myself!

He drew away. "Did you envy your friend much?"

She felt herself flush with embarrassment. "No." *You conceited fop!*

"You lie. Tell me the truth."

"You know the truth." She averted her gaze. "Don't try to hurt and humiliate me."

"I've no intention of doing such a thing," he murmured, his mouth moving over her cheek. "I simply want you to be truthful with me. Now, did you envy Sophia a little?"

"Honestly?"

"Yes. "

"Mayhap I did. Are you happy now?" she said through clenched teeth.

"Indeed, and you're right, I already knew."

Be damned, Lord Gabriele del Fra!

He gently nipped at her neck. She couldn't help but gasp. His delighted laughter filled her ears. "As you can see, I'm already am damned."

I wish he would stop reading my thoughts.

She could feel Gabriele's potent erection when he pressed against her. Relief came with the knowledge she wasn't the only one to feel this fiery attraction. She sank her fingers into his hair and pulled his mouth back to hers. Her tongue darted out and stroked his firm lips before entering his mouth's recesses and blending with his.

I told Eloise to go on without you, the words echoed inside her head.

Allegra had forgotten all about Eloise the moment he stepped into the chamber. She pulled back. "Thank you."

"You're most welcome." He drew her close and captured her mouth once more, his groin rubbing

against hers.

I know you can hear me... I want you, Gabriele.

You've no notion how many times I've dreamed of this moment. He cupped her jaw, heedlessly plundering her eager mouth. *Can't you feel my need?*

She clung to his clothing, heaving and undulating against him, wanting the feel of his flesh against hers.

He abruptly tore his mouth from hers and stepped back. "You're a tempting wench." Naked desire raced through his eyes as he pinned her with their heat. "No."

"No?"

He cupped her chin and raised her face. "You're a seductress, little dove."

"Am I?" She knew her words were unnecessary, but craved his flattery badly.

A strangled groan left him. "In truth, I hungered for you." He pulled at her bodice, tearing it open. Her breasts spilled forth to meet his intense gaze. "Beautiful." He cupped them roughly. She gasped in surprise, but made no move to stop him. Her underclothes went the same way as her corset. She stood naked moments later, her voluminous apparel pooled about her boot-covered ankles.

"That is the fastest anyone has ever undressed me."

"Oh, I see." A smile slanted across his beautiful face. He seemed amused by this. "'Tis a preternatural ability. The human eye isn't so quick."

"I see. You seem in a bit of a hurry, too."

"What gives you that impression?" He unbuttoned

his doublet, dropping it on the floor, then peeled the white shirt from his broad shoulders and discarded it.

He was indeed impressive to look at. She gulped and licked her lips.

"Hmmm?" He kicked his satin slippers off.

"Now you play with me, Gabriele."

"Oh, no." His gaze raked over her form. "I haven't begun to play."

She followed his long fingers as they unfastened his breeches. Her mouth dropped open as the breeches slid down his pale legs. She knew she was eyeing him as though he was a sugarcoated sweet, but couldn't help it.

"You're superb." The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them. Heat stabbed at her belly and wetness pooled at her sex.

"Touch me, Allegra."

I barely know him and I'm drunk with need! What am I doing? What has he done to me?

"I need you." He almost growled the words. He placed a hand on the small of her back, leaned in and tongued one rosy nipple. His teeth pricked her tender flesh, and she whimpered.

Tell me you feel the same, he spoke telepathically. His tongue whirled over her taut peak. Wet and hot, it laved her hurts. She was of fire.

"I—I need you." She pressed closer to him, her fingers firmly embedded in his thick curls. The tip of his tongue rolled over her nipple, painting it with its ardent brush. "Oh, I like the way you play and I want more." She couldn't seem to get close enough to him.

She wanted to climb into his skin.

He ceased suckling her and drew away. She moved forward and ran her hands over the hard planes of his body, liking how smooth his alabaster skin felt against her fingertips. She lowered her mouth to his hot flesh, his musk cologne assailing her senses.

He inhaled sharply, burying his hands in her curls. "Oooh. You torture me, my sweet." His voice sounded gruff.

She stroked and kissed her way down his body and knelt before him on the parquet floor. Finely honed muscle and hot, velvety skin met her eager tongue and caressing fingertips. She neglected his engorged member as part of her special treatment and part of his punishment, moving on to his powerful thighs.

His grip tightened on her hair and he pulled her head back, his eyes boring into hers. "I want to feel your mouth all over my cock."

"Then be patient," she returned, a victorious smile curving her full lips. His eyes flashed yellow fire and his hands tightened further, making her cry out.

"Patience is my virtue, *sweet thing*," Gabriele bared his teeth, his incisors growing before her eyes.

"Then allow me to pleasure you my way," she urged, her fingers moving over his lean buttocks. "Pretend you're human."

Gabriele's gaze lowered while he digested this information. "Human?" His black eyes burned into hers once more. "Why would I want to do that?"

"Because it will benefit you to do as I wish..." Her

tongue darted out and swept over his erect flesh.

"Very well, I'll play your game, little human. However, don't get used to my submissive behavior.

Allegra rose to her feet and smiled. She wondered whether Gabriele found the notion appealing. "I want you to lay on the bed with your arms stretched above you."

Gabriele frowned. She gave him another of her desirous looks. He sighed. "Very well, but you must return the favor, when I *wish* it." He reached out and ran his thumb over her lower lip. "You'll allow me to do what I like, without question, when I say.

His words sent a chill running through her veins. "Very well. I'm not afraid of adventure."

"Hmmm...*really*? You have lips that denote you know how to pleasure a male, but do you know how to use them?"

"Mayhap if you lay on the bed, you'll find out."

He moved so rapidly she gasped when she saw him sprawled on the crimson-covered bed, his arms stretched out toward the bedposts. "You can use the curtain ties to bind my wrists." She flushed. "I promise not to break them." He propped himself up on his elbows. "I'll act the weak lamb."

Stop reading my thoughts! She averted her gaze.

"Is that an order?" he asked, raising his right brow. She swallowed. "Yes."

"Then say it with conviction."

Here was this perfect male, offering himself up to her, allowing her to have her way with him, how could she resist? "Yes. I order you to stop reading my

every thought as well!" She went further. "I order you to appease my every whim and...and..."

A satisfied smile curved his firm mouth. His obsidian eyes burned into hers. "As you wish, my lady." His tone was slightly mocking.

Allegra approached the bed, her eyes straying over his pale form. *Oh, God!* She swallowed hard. *I hope I can do this now!* She reached out and undid the braid surrounding the velvet curtain, which fell free, obscuring him from view. She walked around the other side of the bed and repeated the same process, leaving the rear curtains fixed. She stood at the foot of the bed and shook out her curls. They floated about her womanly hips.

"You tempting witch." The way he looked at her, Allegra knew her ivory curves thrilled him. His gaze moved over her proud breasts and then down. He eyed the raven curls covering her mons. "So wet." She felt a flood of moisture pool at her sex at his words.

"Yes, I am. Now lay back."

"Your wish is my command." He lay back, eyeing her wolfishly as she climbed onto the bed.

"No touching."

"Very well, I'll resist the urge to grab handfuls of your luscious form."

Allegra climbed over him, purposely planting her soft fur just inches from his mouth. *Let's see just how in control you really are.* She bound his wrists to the ornate posts.

He flexed both arms and gently pulled at the bindings. "More patient than you may think."

Allegra moved down and lowered her head, her mouth capturing his. They kissed passionately before she pulled away. "You fed well this night; your body is hot to the touch," she whispered against his cheek.

"Ah, yes." He traced a line across her cheek with his tongue. An involuntary tremble left her. "I did, observant one."

"Be still." She slid down his powerful form, her mouth exploring his muscular planes. Another shudder left her.

She took his throbbing erection into her mouth, her lips sucking him deep and her tongue stroking.

"Oooh, your mouth is sweet." He strained against the restraints, his hips thrusting up, his cock filling her mouth. Allegra stroked his balls and the base of his shaft with nimble fingers. Triumph filled her when his ragged sighs washed over her. He pumped harder and faster, finally exploding into her mouth. She swallowed, continuing to stroke his magnificent length.

"Enough."

She withdrew and kissed the wilted organ. "You taste heavenly."

"And you lie well."

"I tell the truth."

"Hmm, the truth is you have a gifted mouth. The truth is you've a sublime form. The truth is I'm growing hard again."

"Oh." Suddenly, she felt self-conscious once more.

"And I like the way you blush," he added.

"I—I..."

"Have you lost your voice?" He grinned.

"I thought that it might be wise to, for once." Allegra made to climb from the bed, but he broke his restraints and halted her progress. "You lied!" she accused.

"I've yet to sample your charms." He pulled her on top of him and pressed his growing erection against her throbbing sex. He grasped her hips and impaled her. "Ah! You burn me up." He ground his groin against her, his eyes pinning hers, silently willing her to take control.

"Oh, Gabriele." Allegra rode him slowly, savoring the feel of him.

He pulled her down, burying his face in her bosom and suckled one pointed peak, his teeth lightly biting into it. She cupped his head while he sipped from her. He moved up until his mouth met hers, planting hot, openmouthed kisses there.

She pulled back and rode him more forcefully. Her sex clung to his engorged shaft like a second skin, stretching to accommodate him with every impaling. "Arrgh, yes! Yessss!" She rotated on his throbbing cock, feeling it grow even more. "Oooh!"

She slowed her movements and slid down his thick, velvety shaft at a gentle pace. "Do you like that?"

Gabriele's piercing eyes glowed almost gold. "Oh, my sweet, you delight me." Without warning, he rolled over her, thrusting into her like a crazed demon. Allegra met his wild movements with equal abandon. Her nails raked his back and her hips

arched forcefully, pounding against his, moving in-sync. Her body tightened and intense ecstasy poured over her, choked cries filling the chamber. He jerked suddenly, releasing several grunts as he found relief. His hot seed filled her.

Gabriele braced himself on his elbows and looked into her eyes, his filled with satisfaction and something else...possession. His lips twitched up at the corners. "You have sweated all over me, wench. What are you going to do about it?"

She pushed the curls from his forehead and smiled at him. "Have a bath with you. You can wash my ah...back, and I'll wash yours."

He grinned. "You read my mind." She giggled.

"But we must hurry, I'm late for the ball."

"We're late, my sweet. I'll have Nadia fetch you another gown. You'll not need the undergarments."

She flushed beneath his intense regard. "An underskirt, mayhap?"

He groaned. "Very well."

She stared at him for a moment. "Are you doing it?"

He chuckled. "I've asked her, if that's what you mean?"

"You know I do." Her brows rose in question.

"The closer one gets to their mortal companion, the more confused one becomes," he said, more to himself than to her.

A triumphant smile lit her features. *So, you feel closer to me. That's a small comfort, Gabriele del Fra.*

"Don't read more into this than there is."

"Meaning, my lord?"

"Gabriele."

"Very well, *Gabriele*, what do you mean?"

"You know what I mean."

"I don't."

God help me, I feel so helpless around him!

"You didn't look very helpless when you tied me up."

"I—I feel so cheated. Stop reading my thoughts!"

"I can't help it."

"Do try to," she uttered stiffly, blinking back her tears.

"I pray you, forgive me." He lowered his head and kissed her cheek. "Don't cry."

"I wasn't going to."

"'Tis a relief." He buried his face in her neck. "I can't bear a woman's tears. I would have to cry with you, and that would be embarrassing." She laughed. "Heartless wench."

"But of course."

Gabriele ran his tongue over her lower lip and she groaned, opening her mouth for him to plunder...

Chapter Four

Revelations

“*M*on Dieu. It must be nearing midnight.” Eloise glanced at the grand stairway. “They’ve been up there for hours. Perhaps we should rescue her?”

Sophia shook her head. “Allegra doesn’t need rescuing. Didn’t you notice the way those two behave together?”

“And?” Eloise shrugged. “*Seigneur* Gabriele is not exactly a man, is he? You would know that after two nights with him, *chère*.”

“I believe he’s already made his choice. He—I...” Sophia looked away. “He has no interest in me...I tried.” She patted herself on the back for telling the lie so convincingly.

“Ha!” Eloise’s green eyes widened and her mouth curled into a pleased smirk. “You, the feisty *belladonna*, rejected by the night creature?” She threw back her head and laughed wholeheartedly.

Sophia wanted to slap Eloise silly. She only socialized with her because of Allegra. “Must you

always act as though you're a complete simpleton?"

"With such infantile company to influence me, how can I not?"

Sophia bit her lip, refusing to let Eloise bait her further.

They moved toward the next set of ivory and gilt doors. The soft strains of music coming from within, told them this was indeed the right chamber.

"What about us then, why are we here if he's already chosen Allegra? Why bother at all?"

"*Don* Marcus and *Dona* Claudia invited us, it's traditional..." She'd die before she told the Frenchwoman the truth. She'd learn soon enough.

"Traditional?" Sophia shrugged in answer. "Don't answer."

"I won't." Sophia rolled her eyes. Eloise didn't bother to press her further.

A manservant with beautiful chocolate-brown skin, dressed in an all-white robe and loose-fitting silk pants, half bowed and then ushered them inside with a wave of his hand. Eloise wobbled on through and waited at the side for her to enter.

Sophia's eyes swept over the servant with open appreciation. "Thank you. What is your name?"

"Jamal, mistress," he said, his dark eyes locking with hers.

"I am Sophia."

"I know."

It didn't bother her that he knew her name; nothing about this place surprised her anymore. "Where were you born, Jamal?"

"Cairo."

"Where is this Cairo?"

"Egypt. 'Tis on the African continent."

"Perhaps you'll join me later, to discuss this further and other things?" Eloise gave her an inquiring look. No doubt, she wondered why she was acting recklessly.

Jamal smiled at her. "If you wish to."

"Oh, I wish." Sophia licked her lips to moisten them, but more for affect. "I truly do."

"Then you shall."

"After the ball?"

"As you wish."

She turned and watched Eloise wander into the immense fresco-covered ballroom. *Thanks you for waiting. Troll!* Her eyes moved over the immortals that blended with the mortals throughout the chamber. She saw *Dona Claudia* watch the select humans move to the *Petite Vriens*—a fast-paced dance that one could perform alone. Dancing to this one was a lot of fun indeed, at least the Frenchwoman always made it look so.

Sophia cast a look back at the exotic door attendant. "You aren't *just* a servant, are you, Jamal?"

Jamal flicked his long mane over his shoulders. "I am a guardian."

"Whom do you guard?"

"You, for now..."

"Oh. And... And if I'm don't chose to be embraced b—"

"That outcome is not for us to discuss, *Sophia*."

Sophia stepped further into the room, turned, and looked directly into his tilting chocolate eyes. "I shall see you in my chamber tonight. In my bed," she declared.

Jamal's eyes glittered as they appraised her. "Of course." He did another elegant half-bow.

"'Til then."

She turned and hurried after Eloise, who wobbled across the parquet floor on her favorite pair of chopines. Nothing she did helped to improve Sophia's opinion of her. Eloise was far too self-centered as far as she was concerned, and her heavy consumption of laudanum made her clumsy and dim-witted. It astounded her to know Allegra and Eloise had anything in common. She struggled to catch up to the gangly redhead.

"You truly are the most irritating woman I know," she muttered at Eloise's ear.

"What did you wish me to do? Wait for you to give him a kiss on his cock, or watch you fornicate with him, mayhap?" Eloise laughed loudly, embarrassing Sophia. "Voyeurism isn't my thing, Sophia."

Sophia smoothed the stray wisps of hair that escaped her caul. "Must you be so crude? We are in public, in case you haven't noticed."

"I would never have thought to proposition the help, before all and sundry. I'm not that desperate, *femme fatale*. What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing." If Allegra had asked her that very question, Sophia would have answered frankly.

"As you wish. Keep it to yourself, then."

Sophia brushed her skirt down. "I shall. Now, if you'll excuse me, their Queen awaits me." It wasn't a complete lie; she knew the vampire queen would want to see her sometime soon.

"I bid you *adieu*." Eloise waved a hand at her.

Sophia picked up her skirts and moved away. *To hell with her!*

You have been a very bad girl, Lady Sophia, Claudia's voice quietly sounded inside her mind.

Another voice followed. *I'm rather disappointed in you. We could have been friends, you and I,* it said softly. The voice was male.

Sophia looked around her. A shiver ran up she when she caught sight of the most striking oriental male she'd ever seen. His thickly lashed eyes tilted up exotically, their color soft amber. He inclined his head and then returned his attention to the blonde woman before him. He was quite tall. Garbed in black robes, he wore a lengthy braid down his back. He held himself with a quiet dignity and grace. She guessed he could be none other than the famous *Yamabushi* warrior, guardian and assassin everyone was whispering secrets about. It appeared he rarely attended social gatherings. With all the unwanted attention, she could see why.

Her eyes remained fixed on him, willing him to turn and look at her, but he didn't. Obviously, he didn't lower himself to speak openly to failures like herself. *Well, to hell with him, too!*

"I see the 'great one' has caught your attention."

Sophia turned to find *Don* Marcus smiling down at

her. It was a fake smile. "Yes, he has." She flushed guiltily. "He's rather exotic," she added, by way of explanation.

"His mother was Chinese and his father Japanese; this accounts for his foreign looks and diverse attire. Would you believe he sometimes wears his hair in a lady's bun?"

"Oh." Sophia didn't know how to reply. "Really?"

Don Marcus nodded.

"It would suit him."

"Would you like to meet him?"

Sophia's breath caught when the striking creature looked directly at her. *Don't ask. You would not*, he telepathically conveyed. His eyes remained locked with hers while he shook his head.

On principle, Sophia had to meet him now. "Of course, Don Marcus."

You will regret your decision, The immortal silently returned.

Marcus smiled. "Come."

Sophia gnawed at her lower lip, wondering whether she'd made the right choice.

"Come, we will do this the traditional way," Don Marcus uttered, taking her arm. "You are rather fortunate, as he *never* mixed business with pleasure."

What an odd thing to say.

Marcus burst into fits of laughter, which made Sophia even more nervous. *Why did I have to be so obstinate!*

As they neared, the blonde woman picked up her crimson skirts, curtsied and departed. They stopped

before the immortal and Marcus motioned to Sophia. "Warrior Priest, meet your next victim, *Dona Sophia Busoni*."

"Marcus can be rather insensitive when the mood takes him. I tried to warn you, but you insisted." His voice was soft and beautiful.

Sophia lowered her head. "Indeed."

"I am Shiro Toku, I am this clan's a—"

"I know who you are."

"Assassin," he finished, as though she hadn't spoken. "In stating this, it doesn't mean you have failed yet. There's still time to redeem yourself..."

Sophia was dumbstruck. *My God! He's going to kill me! And to think I was attracted to him!* An involuntary shudder passed through her.

"Ha! This woman hates all that the kindred stand for. She will not change her mind. She has failed, *empathic* one," Marcus said. He waved his hands about excitedly, a crazed look in his eyes.

"*Empathic*? Why do you persist in acting like a fool?" Shiro asked softly, his eyes flecking with gold. Sophia missed none of the signs.

Shiro's tone of voice didn't appear to surprise *Don* Marcus.

"Do you always make it a point to *never* meet your intended victims, sir?" she managed to ask.

Shiro nodded his head. "In truth, yes."

Marcus laughed heartily. "I'll leave you two to become better acquainted," he murmured.

Don Gabriele entered the chamber with Allegra attached to his arm. She stared adoringly into his eyes

and he chuckled at some comment she'd made. Sophia wondered how many immortals noticed the magnetism between the two. Shiro looked satisfied and Marcus appeared angry. Rumor had it the blonde immortal was in love with *Don* Gabriele. Sophia found the entire situation too sordid to contemplate.

"It appears your creation has found his match, Marcus," Shiro said in his quiet tone.

A cruel smile twisted Marcus's boyish features. "He's yet to become acquainted with Lady Eloise. I do believe that will remove the happy glow on *Dona* Allegra's face."

"You horrible creature!" Sophia hissed.

"Watch your tongue, *whore*," Marcus retorted. Shiro's expression darkened. "Don't get all protective over the female, she'll be dead within a few days—hours...whatever. I doubt she will allow you between those heavenly thighs of hers, seeing as you'll be the one draining her. A pity, she makes a superb bedmate."

Sophia felt nauseous. "I—I think I need to sit." The room tilted before her eyes. *My God, I'm going to faint. I never faint!*

* * * *

Gabriele watched Shiro scoop *Dona* Sophia up before she crumpled to the floor. He greeted him with a smile when he neared and Shiro returned one. Allegra hurried over to fuss over the unconscious woman in his arms. She whispered soft, soothing words when

Dona Sophia began to rouse.

I am a little shocked. It didn't take Marcus long to summon you, Shiro, Gabriele telepathically stated.

Marcus was quite adamant I eliminate her as quickly as possible. I enlightened him... Nevertheless, I will await Queen Claudia's command, Shiro replied in the same manner.

Thank you.

You thank me in place of the human.

Indeed. Gabriele couldn't help but smile. Allegra was oblivious to it all; he was thankful for that and wanted to keep it that way.

Allegra shot him an accusing glance and then addressed Shiro. "What happened to her?"

"She fainted," he explained.

Allegra shook her head. "I've known Sophia since we were small children and she has never fainted. Never."

Shiro nodded his head. "There's always a first time for everything, Lady Allegra."

Allegra's brows rose. "And who are you?"

"I am Shiro Toku."

"Oh, I...I...I've heard nothing but good things about you from Gabriele. I'm honored to meet you, sir."

She glanced from the expressionless features of the man she had complimented to Gabriele's. He nodded in approval and her eyes lit up. His insides warmed. She smiled tentatively and he immediately returned the gesture, only his smile was self-assured. He couldn't help it.

Shiro glanced at them both, cleared his throat. "If you both will excuse me, I will take Lady Sophia to her room."

"I'll come with you."

"No, you will stay with Lord Gabriele."

"I'm coming."

"No – you – are – not," Shiro enunciated tightly. "I need to have a quiet word with Lady Sophia."

Allegra frowned. "I –"

"I trust him," Gabriele interjected. "Let him tend to your friend."

Allegra nodded. "Very well. Seeing as this is a formal affair, we needn't draw any unwanted attention."

Shiro shook his head. "Too late," he said, bobbing his head, and then walked away.

Before Gabriele had time to wonder about his comment, Lord Michael Winthrop was standing before them. He looked more like an enraged husband than a jilted lover. *I should have gotten rid of the damned whoreson when I had the chance!* Gabriele wanted nothing more than to rip the Englishman's throat out with his bare hands. A small feat for him, but the results would please him greatly.

"Well, well, well, what do we have here?" Lord Michael snarled, not attempting to hide his malice. "One common whore and one –"

"One uninvited guest, who appears to be rather intoxicated," Gabriele coolly interrupted, his eyes raking over Lord Michael. "No gentleman would say such degrading words to a lady."

"This is not Eton, nor is it Padua. Lose your airs and graces, Lord Gabriele del Fra."

Although he hid it well, it surprised Gabriele that this man had learned his name so swiftly. Since the other man had issued a challenge, Gabriele prepared for a war of words. Gabriele measured the Englishman. He knew the man had been educated at Oxford, and although the university was grand and ancient, it wasn't as *grand* as Eton or Padua, as far as he was concerned. Not that it really mattered to him, but it did matter to the man opposite him.

"As a matter of fact, I was educated at Oxford, *Lord Windbag*," Gabriele lied, liking the way the other man's face colored red.

Allegra buried her face in his shoulder, stifling a laugh. Improper behavior indeed.

"*'Tis Winthrop*, you pompous fop! And I somehow doubt Oxford University would have taken the likings of you!"

"Let's cease with the infantile behavior, shall we? What do you want?"

Lord Michael looked at Allegra and smiled. "My betrothed."

"I'm not your betrothed!"

The Englishman tried to grasp her arm. Feeling their energy, Gabriele peered about him. A sea of curious faces gazed back. *Oh, Christ, they believe she encouraged him to come here!*

Allegra glanced around and looked back at him. "I didn't know he followed me here. Honestly."

"I know." Gabriele placed his arm around her and

rested his hand on her shoulder, pulling her firmly against his side. He knew it was a protective gesture and didn't care who thought it a weakness.

Lord Michael spoke. "Unhand her!"

She flinched and pressed closer to him. "Lady Allegra seems to like my company. Does she appear be to rebuffing me?"

"Take your filthy hands off her!" Lord Michael demanded.

Gabriele had enough of the Englishman's dramatics. "*I pray you*, what are you going to do about it?" Allegra winced and gave him a beseeching look. He regretted his rash behavior, but now wasn't the time to console her.

"We have a future together. I'm not going to allow you to steal Allegra away from me," Lord Michael was saying.

Allegra gave him a pleading look. *Please, Gabriele, I know you can hear me, allow me to reason with him. After all, 'tis my fault he's here.*

He nodded.

She turned and addressed the Englishman. "Please go home, my lord."

He ignored her. "Did you couple with her?"

"That's a rather delicate question." Gabriele felt her anxiety and wanted this conversation over.

"You bedded her, didn't you?" Lord Michael accused his face beet-red. "You've known her two days and you've had your way with her!"

"I'll not discuss this matter with you. *Don* Marcus and *Dona* Claudia didn't invite you, so why don't you

take your leave while you still can?"

Lord Michael looked at Allegra. "How could you bed him?"

Allegra shook her head. "We'll discuss thi—"

"Leave," Gabriele interjected, motioning to the doorway. There was no way he'd allow her to pacify this fool.

Get him out of here, before he causes more of a scene than he already has, in front of all these Venetian officials! Dona Claudia telepathically communicated to Gabriele.

"I'll be taking Lady Allegra with me." Lord Michael reached for Allegra, and Gabriele pushed her back out of his reach.

"She's not your property, damn you!" Gabriele regretted his outburst the moment the words left his mouth.

Lord Michael made to draw his sword. "And she's not yours, either."

"Don't!" Allegra hastened to Lord Michael's side. "I implore you," she pleaded, looking into his face. "Don't do this!"

"Move out of the way, Allegra," Gabriele ground out between clenched teeth.

"No! Both of you have been bickering like children. Considering I'm the source of this argument, I believe I've the right to put things in order, which is what I'm doing now."

Leave her to calm him, Gabriele! Claudia telepathically communicated.

Damn her! Gabriele couldn't believe that she chose

to protect the human, abandoning him before the entire clan, and he couldn't do anything about it. He held up his hands.

"Please, Gabriele."

"Do what you will, I can't stop you."

"Then you'll come with me?" Lord Michael asked excitedly, clasping Allegra's hands.

"No, but I'll speak with you in private."

The Englishman nodded, his eyes blazing in anticipation. "I will be appeased by that. I thank you, my dear."

Appeased! I'll appease you, you flea-bitten son of a whore! Gabriele wanted to break every bone in Lord Michael's body. With effort, he unclenched his hands and schooled his features into an impassive mask.

"After we talk, you must leave this estate. Am I making myself clear?"

"Indeed. You have my word." The arrogant fop had the nerve to grin triumphantly at him.

"'Tis settled, then."

Christ! She treats him like a disobedient child and the nauseous fool delights in it. Well, I'll not be 'just' another of her ardent admirers.

Allegra glanced at him.

"You disappoint me, Dona Allegra," he said quietly.

"Gabriele, I—" Allegra's words trailed off, as though they were stuck in her throat.

"Don't..." Gabriele bowed his head, then turned and walked away.

* * * *

Allegra stared at Gabriele's departing form, wanting to hurry after him and explain her actions, but couldn't, because she had to deal with this madman before her, and fast.

She was irritated that Gabriele couldn't read her intention, his passionate nature overriding his paranormal abilities! *Damn you to hell! You hear me! I... Oh, damn you!*

No reply was forthcoming.

Michael glared after Gabriele. "He looks rather ill, my dear. What afflicts him, pray tell?"

Allegra feigned a confused look. "Whatever do you mean?" She took Michael's arm and guided him from the room.

"His skin is rather pale."

"Really?" Lord Michael nodded. "I didn't notice."

"Oh, I believe you noticed more than that..."

"And now what are you referring to, my lord?"

"That was insensitive of me. Forget I even uttered those words. Please don't get angry with me, my dear."

Allegra removed her hand from Michael's arm when they exited the room. "Come, let us make this as brief as possible," she said stiffly, then hurried down the wide, dimly lit corridor. He had to exert himself to keep up with her and this gave her some satisfaction.

"I don't like that that appalling Frenchman. He has plundered what is mine."

"Don't be ridiculous. What part of *I'm not yours*

don't you understand?"

"Well, he has used you, and I don't like that."

"I can take care of myself."

His eyes slid over the bodice of her gold and sable gown, and she inwardly cringed. "Hmm, I find your garb a little too revealing. Did he make you wear it?"

"No, of course not. I am my own person, nobody tells me what to wear."

"It seems Venice had distorted your approach to life, my dear. I feel you should come back home with me, for your own sake."

"No, positively not." She shot him a sideways glance and he was frowning.

"I would make you a fine husband."

Oh sure, I'll just tell Dona Claudia I'm leaving. She almost laughed at the thought. There was no way she'd subject herself to this madman's company, for the term of her natural life. She would have to be just as insane to agree to such an offer.

"Moreover, you'd want for nothing." He smiled, a sickly smile.

"No." She didn't figure elaborating would help and besides, she needed a good strong drink first.

She stopped before the parlor doors and motioned to him. "Come, my lord."

Lord Michael frowned again.

They entered the stupendously decorated parlor and Allegra seated herself on the same settee she and Gabriele had sat on the first night she arrived. She patted the vacant place beside her.

For the first time since arriving here, the

mythological wall paintings were of little interest to her. Images of their time together filled her mind. *You don't know him well enough to feel this way! My God, you've become desperate and needy, Allegra! He's just a man – no, he's not just a man, but he's more male than you can handle!*

"I would appreciate a drink," he announced, intruding on her thoughts.

"Yes, of course." With a hollow sigh, she helped herself to a glass of brandy, pouring Lord Michael one also, not caring in the slightest that he preferred wine.

"Thank you."

She gnawed at her lower lip. *How do I tell this fool I'm not interested in marrying him for the hundredth time, and get him to leave without a scene? Moreover, how can I trust him to stay on the gondola once he has boarded it?*

The answer came with a knock on the parlor door. Master Simon popped his receding golden-blond head through the doors and grinned at her, his kind blue eyes reassuring her all was well. "*Dona Claudia asked me to attend you.*" Allegra nodded, relieved. "I'll escort Lord Michael to her craft, as soon as you've enlightened him..."

"Enlightened?" Lord Michael asked.

Allegra cleared her throat. "Thank you, Master Simon."

"'Tis my pleasure, *Dona Allegra*. If you need assistance, just call me."

"I'll not accost her, if that's what you're suggesting."

"Not at all, Lord Michael. You weren't invited, 'tis

my duty to see that *Dona Claudia's* guest *remains* and you depart, for good." Master Simon smiled politely and then closed the doors. Lord Michael didn't have a chance to retort.

He looked at Allegra and his hazel eyes glowered. "Enlightened?" he asked again, color rising up his cheeks.

Allegra took a calming breath and pinned him with a no-nonsense look. "Lord Gabriele and I have known each other for quite some time, long before you arrived in Venice," she fibbed.

"Why haven't I seen him around before now?"

"We certainly didn't announce the fact." *If I were male, I would work on stage. I'd make a fine actor!*

"How did you meet?" He waited a moment. "Did Eloise introduce you to him?"

Allegra frowned. "Why do you ask?"

"His Christian name could possibly be Roman, French, or Italian, but his surname is French, my dear. I thought you would have known this."

"Y—yes, of course I did. His father was French," she said, gulped down the entire glass of brandy and then poured another. *Gabriele will have my guts for garters!*

"We..." she looked into her glass of brandy. "We are lovers, have been for almost two months."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes, that's why I'm here...he's a friend of *Dona Claudia's*."

"Where does he live?"

"Tuscany."

"Where in Tuscany?"

"That's enough, my lord, I'll not be interrogated further."

"Are you happy?"

"Yes."

"Do you love him?"

Allegra composed herself before answering. "Yes. He loves me, too," she added quickly, hoping her display was convincing enough to appease him.

"I didn't see his affection for you. Lust, but not affection, my dear." Lord Michael's tone was patronizing. Although it shouldn't have, his comments stung.

"Then you are blind." Her words were too sharp, but it was too late to retract them.

"No, I don't think so." Lord Michael sipped the brandy and cringed. "I detest this drink."

"Then don't drink it."

"You poured it."

"True. How did you come to be here?"

"I followed you."

"Why?" Allegra groaned as soon as the words left her mouth. *God, I sound like his mother!*

"I lived in the vain hope that I could convince you to marry me." He ran his hands over his hair, pushing the pale waves from his forehead. "I thought you felt some affection for me. I didn't know you were using me to satisfy your rampant lust."

She almost laughed aloud. *Satisfy? Oh, please! You don't know the meaning of the word, unless it's in relation to yourself!* "I know this is hard for you to

comprehend, but I was trying to save your feelings when I lied to you." She sighed. "I've told you *repeatedly* since your arrival, we are no longer a couple. You simply refuse to heed my words."

"Uh-huh."

"Truly." Allegra nodded.

"You should have been brutally honest, and I wouldn't have bothered coming to Venice in the first place." He heaved a breath. "I would have appreciated it."

"I know that now, my lord."

"For God's sake, don't call me that!"

"I will not call you by any other name."

"For heaven's sake, why not?"

"Because we aren't intimate."

"Very well, If you wish to place a wall up, 'tis understandable." He nodded. "I will leave Venice on board the next available ship."

"I hope you understand *Gabriele* doesn't like to share."

"Oh, I understand."

"I'm relieved." Allegra drank down her brandy and rose to her feet.

Lord Michael stood. "That's it, then?"

Allegra nodded. "Yes, I'm afraid so."

"Friends?"

"No, G—"

"Allow me to answer," Lord Michael interjected. "*Gabriele* doesn't like to share. Is that it?"

His presumption is correct. Gabriele doesn't like to share...ever! Allegra's heart raced at the sound of

Gabriele's voice.

Don't be a hypocrite! Allegra glanced about her. *He's in the room, but I can't see him!* She tried to formulate a sentence, in answer to Lord Michael, but words failed her.

"Well?" Lord Michael asked.

Allegra bit back the sarcastic words on her tongue and nodded. "Yes. Now I must be getting back."

She called to Simon and he appeared immediately. "Yes, madame?"

"Lord Michael is ready to depart."

She turned and smiled politely at Lord Michael. "I wish you a safe journey home, my lord."

"And you have a care with del Fra." He took her hand, bowed over it and kissed her knuckles. "Have a good life, Allegra."

"I intend to."

He gave her a remorseful look. "I pray you forgive me for hounding you."

"I hope you find what you're looking for. I truly do."

"I will," he uttered, and then walked to the doorway, stopping at the threshold to give her one last smile before leaving.

And please don't bother me ever again! She eyed his departing form.

Allegra retraced her steps back to the ballroom. When she entered, her gaze moved over *Dona Claudia* and *Don Marcus*, who stood conversing with *Shiro Toku*.

She felt curious stares from the immortals as she

crossed the room. She wondered if she'd ever become accustomed to such intense scrutiny, even feared attack. *Don* Marcus worried her the most—she thanked heaven for his gracious Queen, who protected her from his wrath.

She looked about her, wondering where Eloise had disappeared to, and then assumed that she must be attending Sophia. Despite the fact that they rarely got on, both women would aid each other in times of need, a respect born through their mutual friendship with her.

Dona Claudia waved to her. *Come to me, child.* The immortal's purr floated through her mind. She picked up her copious gold and sable skirts and made her way over to the regal immortal.

Dona Claudia kissed both her cheeks, stepped back and then took her hands. "I thank you for your intervention. You were remarkable...so protective of our kind." She bestowed a glowing smile upon Allegra, her perfect teeth flashing. "I'm so proud of you."

"Th—thank you," Allegra stammered, flushing profusely.

Don Marcus scowled in her direction, pulling madly at his goatee. "*Dona* Allegra, I'd like you to formally make the acquaintance of Shiro Toku."

"We have met." Allegra smiled politely and bobbed. "As I mentioned before, I've learned much about you from Gabriele. You are a remarkable being."

Shiro inclined his head. "I thank you for your

praise."

"I'm merely repeating Gabriele's words, sir."

"Lord Gabriele and I are friends."

"Indeed," she answered.

"If you are wondering where *Dona* Eloise vanished to," *Don* Marcus interrupted, a cruel smile touching his lips, "she's with *Lord Gabriele*..."

"Oh. I see." Allegra lowered her gaze, not wanting the awful creature to see her pain, which she was having a hard time understanding herself. "I naturally assumed she was with Lady Sophia—"

"I know," *Don* Marcus's smile broadened.

"Never you mind," *Dona* Claudia was saying, giving her life-mate a sour look. "Gabriele has to spend time with each of you, before he makes his final choice. 'Tis part of the procedure when choosing one's life-mate."

"I..." Allegra cleared her throat. "I must check on Lady Sophia."

"She's resting," Shiro interrupted.

Visibly shaken, Allegra nodded. "I—I need to be with her all the same." She glanced at *Dona* Claudia and then *Don* Marcus. "If you'll kindly excuse me."

Dona Claudia nodded. "Of course, child," she said softly, compassion edging her tone.

Allegra turned and hurried away, knowing that their preternatural eyes followed her. She hated Gabriele at that moment. *Damn you!* She blinked back the tears that welled in her eyes. *How dare he humiliate me this way!*

"You disappoint me, *Dona Allegra*." His words came

back to haunt her. *"His presumption is correct. Gabriele doesn't like to share...ever."*

I didn't betray him! How could he think such a thing?

Chapter Five

Jealousy And Opposition

Sophia opened her eyes and cleared the cobwebs from her mind. She smiled at her sleeping friend. Sitting up, she flung the luxurious ivory-colored sheets aside and climbed from the bed. “Allegra. *Awaken.*”

Allegra blinked several times, giving her a dreamy smile. “You fainted, dear.”

Sophia nodded. “I did indeed.” Her eyes moved to the mullioned window. The fading light touched the smooth faceted panes. “Night has gone and almost returned again.” Her heart hammered and her throat began to close off.

“Yes, dear, I thought you’d never wake,” Allegra said, appearing concerned. “I must have dozed off.”

Sophia straightened and pushed the tangled locks from her eyes. “I’m becoming one of them.”

Allegra frowned. “One of them?”

“I sleep all day and amuse myself all night.”

“Well, you certainly needed the rest.” Allegra

lowered her gaze.

Sophia shuddered. "Two days in that *creature's* company has been more than enough for me."

"You obviously didn't disappoint him." Her sharp tone surprised Sophia.

"Don't feel jealous, Allegra, you have nothing to bother that beautiful head of yours about."

"What has become of the unruffled, well-adjusted woman I once was?"

Sophia shrugged. "She began to have feelings for an immortal and started to feel the stirrings of jealousy, perchance?"

"Oh, I hate myself right now! Please forgive me."

"I'm not angered by your outburst, just a little disappointed." Sophia stepped away from Allegra. "I don't like Lord Gabriele del Fra, you see."

"He's not the evil fiend you imagine him to be—"

"I make no apologies for my statement. I don't like any of them."

Allegra rose from the settee, her amethyst eyes wide. "Do you *know* what will happen if you refuse to play?"

"Don't be afraid for me, my dear, I couldn't live that way."

"But you'll die!"

"Better to die than to become a wild animal who feeds off the living."

"But one lives on forever and—"

"I saw him..." Sophia shuddered at the memory.

Allegra looked perplexed. "I pray you, explain yourself."

"Lord Gabriele."

Allegra's brows rose. "And?" She waited awhile. "I'm not a mind reader, you know."

"He was..." Sophia suddenly felt ill and couldn't finish the sentence.

"Doing what, pray tell?" Allegra asked. "You're really testing my patience, dear."

"Feeding."

"Oh." Allegra paled. "What was it like?"

"'Twas awful." Sophia visibly trembled and couldn't stop. "I...I could never become one of them."

"It couldn't possibly be that dreadful."

Sophia's shook her head. "You've not seen them feed from a person, have you?"

Allegra's cheeks stained red. "No, but I've been bitten, does that rate?"

"You can't see, no, it doesn't."

Allegra shrugged. "When Gabriele drinks from me, 'tis a sexual thing I feel, and nothing more."

"That's because he wanted you to feel that way. Most of their victims don't have the luxury of enjoying the experience."

"I—I never thought..."

"When they feed, 'tis a frightening experience, their teeth grow and their eyes glow yellow. There's so much screaming and struggling...a—and blood." Sophia smothered a sob and tried to calm herself. "They are worse than any wild animal I've seen."

"They must feed to keep their strength, and to exist," Allegra defended, her amethyst eyes blazing.

"I don't want to kill another living *thing*. A—a

human being!"

"I can't see Gabriele being so cruel."

"In the state you're in now, you wouldn't." She couldn't believe Allegra was siding with a male she'd only met days ago. Sophia knew she was losing control, but couldn't stop herself. "Lord Gabriele is a predator, he enjoys hunting and...killing."

"Please calm yourself, dear." Allegra rubbed her arm "One doesn't have to kill to survive, Sophia. I'm sure you were imagining things."

"An elder needs more sustenance than the others. They suffer from blood lust, and kill their dinner more times than not."

"I don't want to think of Gabriele slaughtering people. I can't imagine it."

"If you'd been with me, you wouldn't have had to imagine anything. The older these creatures get, the more blood they crave, and the less control they have over it." Sophia measured Allegra a moment.

Allegra closed her eyes. "No!" She shook her head. "Gabriele is good. I know he is! I don't fear him. He would never harm me. *Never!* You clearly don't understand him or his kind, Sophia. You don't want to! Ignorant is one who judges what they don't know or understand!"

Sophia laughed bitterly. "I don't, and you're right, I don't want to. Moreover, I *certainly don't* want to become one of *them!*"

"You aren't in a position to judge anyone!"

"I didn't murder my family, if that's what you are implying, Allegra?"

"I only have *your* word!" Allegra immediately looked remorseful. "I'm sorry." She tried to soothe Sophia, inciting her further.

"Don't touch me!" Sophia backed away.

"Don't forsake me, I pray you, forgive me!"

"I've not abandoned you, Allegra, 'tis you who've abandoned me... I hope he's worth your bother."

"We've been friends since we were children. You've never questioned my loyalty until now."

Sophia shook her head. "That's because you've never accused me of such atrocities before!"

"I was simply stating that you shouldn't judge—"

"You feel that way, because you've allied yourself with a group of murdering creatures. Please, take a look at yourself—at your behavior."

"I have, and I see nothing wrong with becoming one of them," Allegra answered.

"Eloise agrees with you, too, obviously. She can't think for herself. Which one will he choose? Will you feel the same way about joining the kindred, if he chooses her? Can you honestly answer that?"

Allegra just stared openmouthed. "You can't answer me, can you?"

"I'm far too young to die, I choose immortality over death, Sophia. Who doesn't want time without end?"

"I don't. The price is too high."

"You could easily become accustomed to such a lifestyle."

"No, I couldn't." Sophia sighed in resignation "I'm on my own..."

"No," Allegra touched her cheek. "Look at you. You are so beautiful, it would be a sin to allow your beauty to fade."

Sophia laughed bitterly. "Fade? No, it won't fade."

"What are you talking about?"

"I've *failed*, Allegra. Don't you understand?"

"Failed? No you haven't, you don't want to try."

"Yes, that's what I've been telling you."

Allegra shook her head. "No. What will I do without you? Tell Claudia you want to be one of them. Don't throw your life away. Tell her!"

Sophia sighed. "I don't. That's why I'm in this quandary. If I could, I'd go back in time and never have come here, but I can't."

"You'll become accustomed to it... I will ask Queen Claudia to spare you."

Sophia remembered Lords Gabriele and Master Shiro's words. "Both Lord Gabriele and Master Shiro have offered to help —"

"They must like you, then."

"Shiro is to be my assassin."

The color drained from Allegra's face. "Assassin?"

"That's why he's here; to kill me, because I've failed. Marcus informed me as he was introducing us." Sophia laughed. "When I first saw him, Allegra," she sighed, "I thought he was the most enticing man I'd ever laid eyes upon. Well, you can imagine my surprise when I discovered he was here to assassinate me."

"You *have* a choice."

"No." Sophia went to the side table and poured a

glass of wine for herself and a brandy for Allegra. "There's no going back, *Dona Claudia* said as much on the first night here." She handed Allegra the glass of brandy.

Allegra sipped the amber liquid. "What happened, Sophia?"

"I found the feeding incident not to my liking...and that's all I'll say about the experience. Eloise will tell you, I'm convinced." Sophia took a sip of wine.

The doors burst open and both women jumped.

Master Shiro stood on the threshold, his dark eyes on her. "Never offer yourself to a guardian, 'tis against our law." His voice was soft, but cold.

"I assume you're referring to Jamal?"

"You know who I'm referring to, Lady Sophia."

"I'm human, your laws don't apply, *priest!*"

"You're not impervious to our rules."

"I've asked *Dona Claudia*, and yes, I am. So, if I choose to bed Jamal, there's nothing that you can do about it."

"You try my patience," Master Shiro said at length.

Sophia shrugged her shoulders nonchalantly. "You don't frighten me, *great warrior priest*. I'm about to die shortly, there's nothing more frightening than death.

His smile was almost evil. "Don't be too sure..."

"Save your strength." Sophia contrived a sugary smile.

Master Shiro eyed the sheer linen nightgown she wore, the smile widening across his exotic features. "For what, I ask you?"

"For assassinating me, of course, *priest.*"

Master Shiro didn't even flinch at her barbed comments. His long lashes lowered. "Don't try to elicit pity from me, I have no qualms about ending your life. 'Tis my duty, after all."

Sophia folded her arms across her breasts, because his gaze made them harden. She inadvertently wondered what his mouth would feel like, whether he would nip at her areolas, suck them, or both. She shivered in anticipation when his mouth opened slightly.

I enjoy biting into one's flesh, and then I slowly love one's hurts until the pain becomes pleasure, his words entered her head. "Would you care for a demonstration?"

"My God!" Sophia choked back a shuddered sigh. The wanton in her yearned for him to do just that, and the other half was utterly appalled.

Allegra looked confused. "Are you all right?" Sophia quickly nodded. "He's speaking to you now, isn't he?" She shot Master Shiro an accusing look.

Your friend has no notion what you're really feeling, does she? I know you're wet with anticipation, I smell your excitement.

She shifted uncomfortably.

I want to touch all of you, brand you as my own, but you don't want the touch of immortality, do you?

Her mouth dropped open and with effort, she closed it.

Nevertheless, I know you want me, with every beat of your heart and every fiber in your body.

"I don't!" He just smiled at her outburst. Sophia had to remind herself this creature, although alluring, was about to slay her.

How can one so mesmerizing be so unemotional? Why do I want him, despite the fact that his touch will end my life?

She jumped when his voice entered her head again. *Commit this one selfless act in your life. Send your friend out and spare her the pain of watching you die.*

"Go to hell!"

Allegra scowled at him. "I know you have the same connection Gabriele and I have. What are you saying to her?"

"I'll not discuss this matter with you. Queen Claudia desires your company at tonight's ball. Now, hurry along and prepare yourself. You don't want to miss the excitement."

"There's no need to be condescending." Allegra glanced from Master Shiro to Sophia. "I want to stay."

"You are expected downstairs by ten o'clock, Queen Claudia's behest."

Allegra cleared her throat. "And what of Sophia?"

"She'll be with me." He smiled at Sophia. "We have much to discuss..."

"I'll not allow you to murder her!"

"If I wanted to, you couldn't stop me, but rest assured I don't." He measured Allegra through impassive amber eyes.

"I've asked that Lady Sophia's life be spared and Queen Claudia has granted my wish... Now go."

Sophia clasped her shaking hands together and

forced a smile. "He has no reason to lie, Allegra. Go and make yourself ready, before you miss the carousing."

Allegra hugged Sophia and then hurried from the chamber.

Sophia tilted her head and pushed her locks over one shoulder, exposing her neck.

"You can get it over and done with," she said calmly.

He smiled coolly. "I give the orders." His eyes brightened to gold.

* * * *

Allegra crossed the bustling room. It felt like *dèjà vu*, their eyes were on her once more. The soft strains of music made her wish she'd brought her *viola da braccio*, which she loved to play, its sweet sound transporting her into another world—a beautiful, carefree world.

This was indeed a private affair, and a casual one to boot. Allegra felt overdressed for the occasion, but as she looked around, she noted several other mortals dressed so. Queen Claudia kindly donated the crimson gown she wore, another sign of her approval. Allegra smiled as she visualized *Don Marcus's* anger, knowing his wife's acceptance was a direct affront to him.

She wondered if Gabriele was among the jovial group playing one of the dance games she'd indulged in many times. Her eyes scanned the sea of faces and

her heart plummeted when she caught sight of him and Eloise together. Rooted to the spot, she couldn't move. They looked so happy, as though no one else mattered in the world. Eloise was dressed in crimson as well.

So much for the preferential treatment!

Gabriele looked altogether mouthwatering, his pale features contrasting greatly with his raven curls and equally black attire. Embroidered with fine silver thread, his sable doublet displayed the white silk of the undershirt beneath through the large slashes on the sleeves. As usual, he wore long Venetian breeches and not the short French slops, although his powerful legs would have looked superb in them all the same.

Allegra sighed mournfully. He attracted her like a moth to a flame, and was just as dangerous. How could he be so oblivious to her? It should have been a crime for one to exude such masculine appeal, whilst looking utterly beautiful at the same time!

Such a rat! Her nails dug into the tender flesh of her palms. *A – a bastard!*

She knew he still hadn't forgiven her for *abandoning* him to go off with her meddling ex-lover. However, she did that for him. He acted human in so many ways.

Eloise was laughing at his words. Allegra's stomach clenched and she felt the absurd inclination to cry. Gabriele's eyes connected with hers, and then he lowered his mouth to Eloise's throat.

Allegra bunched her satin skirts in her hands, turned and fled the chamber.

She stared up into the star-spangled sky, as she leaned against a fluted column. She inhaled deeply the cool night air, her eyes misting over. She angrily wiped away the lone tear that escaped and tracked down her cheek. "I hate you." She was furious at herself for feeling so weak around him. "You hear me, Gabriele, I hate you," she repeated vehemently.

"My sweet Allegra."

She froze. He came up behind her, placing his hands on her shoulders. His hard form pressed against her and his heat permeated her entire being. She inhaled his familiar scent and shuddered as his hands moved to stroke the tops of her breasts. "You don't hate me."

"I—I do." She turned and faced him.

"You like me, and that's what scares you the most." He dipped his head and nuzzled her ear. "You like me a great deal."

"Oh, I beg to differ, *Lord* Gabriele. You've not a clue how I feel, because you've no compassion at all!"

"Still your tongue, woman."

"Go to *hell*! I don't want to play this *game* anymore." To her embarrassment, she began to sob.

"A little jealous, my dear?" Gabriele slowly licked the tears from her cheeks. "I too hate to share," he murmured.

"What ever do you mean?" Allegra asked, sniffling.

His lips moved down to hers and brushed over them. "You don't like sharing me with your friends, that's what I suggest."

"Oh, leave me alone!"

"I *can't*. I wish it were that easy. "

"Why do you insist on torturing my friends and I?"

Allegra pulled away from him, turned, and looked off into the darkened grounds.

Gabriele laughed bitterly. "You betrayed me. You left with your lover!"

"I was only trying to help and you know it! "

"Do I?" He caressed her cheek.

"Curse you!" She pushed at his chest. "Yes, you do!"

"You made your choice."

"I had to go with Lord Michael."

"You didn't." He sounded so hurt.

"You're acting like a child, Gabriele. I wanted to avoid a public confrontation before Venice's elite. Furthermore, Lord Michael is no longer my lover."

Gabriele planted feather soft kisses over hers cheek and down over her neck. "And he doesn't move you anymore?"

"No, he doesn't." She shuddered. "Are you satisfied?"

"Then I believe you."

Allegra felt the anger bubble up inside. *Everything has to be his way!*

"Do you?" The words sounded bitter.

He remained silent for a moment, measuring her.

"Yes, now that I've thought about it, I do."

"How delightful for you, my lord." He chuckled warmly. "Because of you, Sophia is in a dilemma. Because of you, I—" His mouth came down hard on

hers smothering her tirade of words and he just as swiftly ended the kiss. Her head whirled on as she clung to him.

"I've remedied that problem." He squeezed her shoulders gently. "Queen Claudia has spared Sophia's life. Shiro and I pleaded her case well." His grin was smug. "Tonight she becomes immortal...like it or not."

Allegra nodded in understanding, relief rushing through her at Gabriele's confirmation. She knew Shiro had a connection with Sophia the moment that he entered the room and warned her off Jamal. The room fairly buzzed with their burning attraction. Being entirely selfish, she didn't care whether her friend wanted immortality or not, she would survive, and knowing the creature who created her also saved her, made it right as far as she was concerned.

"However, she's to be banished to the *New World* until she learns to accept her fate. When Queen Claudia can trust her, she'll return."

"I will *never* see her again."

"Don't be preposterous. Of course you will."

"I suppose 'tis better than death."

"Yes," Gabriele replied. He leaned in, his lips traversing her throat.

"Oh, Gabriele, I... Thank you." Her limbs felt heavy and her skin tingled all over, she melted against him, wanting more, wishing she could simply meld into him.

His tongue flicked out and laved her earlobe. "I like your taste."

"You've such an intoxicating touch," she murmured against his jaw. He lifted his head slightly and she cupped his sculpted cheeks. "Don't stop."

"Here?"

She nodded.

"Are you certain?"

"Yes." She reached out and unfastened his breeches, her fingers curling around his thick, velvety muscle. It throbbed violently in her grasp.

"Ah, Christ!" Gabriele captured her hands, stilling her movements. He crushed her against the pillar, his hard body pinning her there, her hands pinioned above her.

"I want you inside me." Allegra thrust against him, feeling his burgeoning erection through the thick folds of her skirts.

His mouth moved over her tops of her breasts and her neck, stopping at her mouth. A smoldering kiss followed. His hands worked their way under the voluminous fabric and he tore the stays from her corset. "I hate those things," he said raggedly.

Allegra answered with a shaky laugh. Her farthingale and underskirts dropped to the paved entry floor, and on trembling legs, she stepped out of them. The look of promise in his eyes caused her heart to pump more rapidly. "I..."

"I want you as well."

"Do you ever tire of reading thoughts?"

"Hmm, no." He lowered his head, his lips parting slightly when they slanted over hers once more. Fire roared through her veins and burned in the pit of her

belly. His hands roughly moved up over her thighs and hips, his thigh rubbing between hers. She moaned and a low growl burst from him, his mouth dominating hers.

He picked her up and she wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs about his waist, her skirts bunched around hers. He pressed her back against the column.

His heavily-lidded gaze clung to hers, while his cock gradually slid inside her aching sex. She cried out and pushed down further, taking all of him. His lips curled in satisfaction and his fingers bit into her ass.

"*Oooh*, so tight. I'm drowning in your heat." His husky tone washed over her.

Allegra strained against him, her muscles gripping his steely shaft with such intensity that both cried out in unison. He clung to her and guided her movements, his cock sliding deep before retracting. He played her like a fine musical piece, slow and seductive, moving toward a wondrous crescendo, which took them both over the edge. His hot mouth muffled her cries.

She felt Gabriele smile against her neck. "You're adventurous."

She laughed softly. "No, I'm reckless."

"I like that." Gabriele withdrew from her quivering sex and released her. She slid down his muscular form.

"I wasn't always this way you know."

"I know." He had a soft look in his eyes.

"What are you thinking?"

He dipped his head. "Nothing I wish to repeat."

"Oh. Was it about me?"

"Hmm." Gabriele's mouth moved over her throat, his freshly extended incisors nicking her flesh. Allegra flinched. His tongue swept out and collected the blood she felt run from the wound.

"Gabriele?"

"Mmm?"

"Answer me."

"Pardon?"

"Don't tease me," she whispered.

"Oh, but you like being teased and teasing more."

He raised his head, his eyes bearing the animalistic look she'd seen the last time he feasted on her, golden flecks danced within the black. "And I like the temptation. I can scarcely wait to mate with you completely."

Allegra was confused. "There's more than this?"

"Much more. I shall show you soon..."

She reached up and stroked his pale cheeks. "I can scarcely wait."

A rustling in the hedges caught their attention. Gabriele's gaze darted over the darkened surrounding. Although they were on the lit portico, Allegra knew his preternatural ability allowed him to see clearly. A cool smile touched his lips and he snarled.

"Can you see anything?" Gabriele shook his head. A chill ran down her spine that had nothing to do with the temperature.

He turned to her, cupped her face, and brushed her mouth lightly with his. "Cease fretting."

"I'm not." She pulled a face and he flashed a brilliant smile, displaying a pair of dimples. "You have a beautiful smile, Gabriele del Fra, you should use it more often."

"Thank you for the compliment, fair damsel."

"You're most welcome."

He dipped his head again. "I wish for you to kiss me, rapturous human." His mouth was a hairsbreadth from hers, teasing her mercilessly. She couldn't help but indulge him.

* * * *

Gabriele bent and retrieved the cumbersome underskirts. "Come, I'll transport you to your chamber so your maidservant can redress you." Allegra felt herself blush. "Hold on to me." Allegra wrapped her arms around his neck, a split second later they were within the confines of her chamber.

She gasped in surprise. "I want your ability."

"And I want everything..."

"'Tis yours." He frowned.

"Are you all right?"

He nodded, his face an impassive mask. "I must return to Eloise." He gave her a perfunctory kiss on the cheek. "Once you are dressed, come down and mingle with *us*."

His swift mood change stunned Allegra. "Fine." She tried not to look affected, but failed miserably.

Gabriele's expression softened and he stroked her hair. "My obligations take me away from you. I've not had my fill of you, far from it."

"Oh." Relief overwhelmed her, and she blinked back the tears. *God, I hate feeling this weak!*

"What you're feeling right now, multiply that emotion by a hundred, and that's how I feel about you."

The intensity of his tone rocked her. "I—I don't know what to say."

Does this mean what I think it does?

He passed a hand over her cheek and his eyes spoke of a fathomless adoration, which stunned Allegra enough that words were beyond her, and dematerialized.

"Gabriele." Allegra blinked in surprise. "How dare he say such things and then *disappear?*"

Chapter Six

The Embraced Ones

Hidden away in the darkness, Lord Michael watched the peculiar creatures through a side window, thinking how demonic they appeared. Their strange feeding rituals unnerved him most. Images of the disappearing act del Fra had performed played over in his mind.

Sweat tracked down his face and he mopped it off with the cuff of his linen sleeve. His heart beat wildly and his eyes widened when del Fra reappeared at *Dona Claudia's* side, *alone*. He knew he shouldn't dally, but his obsession for Allegra kept him rooted to the spot, his eyes trained on the scene before him, both fascinated and repulsed.

Where did he take Allegra? Is she to be one of their victims? He shuddered at the notion. *No, he is as obsessed about her as I am. He would never hurt her.*

* * * *

Gabriele bent and kissed his *Dona Claudia's* proffered

hand. "You look lovely, my Queen."

"Thank you." Her golden brows rose in query. "Where's Shiro?"

Gabriele stroked his jaw. "With *Dona* Sophia. He is embracing her, as you ordered, my Queen."

Claudia's pale features tightened. "You and Shiro beleaguered me into this." She sighed. "I owe him more than I'll ever be able to repay...and this is the only reason she becomes one of us this night."

Gabriele thought back to one of the occasions Shiro had saved Claudia, and nodded. He supposed she had little choice but to grant Shiro his wish, since he'd saved her from extinction not once, but twice.

"I'm most relieved you chose to give Lady Sophia the opportunity to redeem herself."

"And she'd best try." Claudia flicked her silver tresses over her shoulders. "And *your* Allegra is also pleased by this outcome?"

Self-conscious, Gabriele cleared his throat. "Indeed."

"And her inquisitive lover?"

"Past lover," Gabriele corrected. Claudia laughed.

"He is rather persistent."

Gabriele nodded. "He lurks by the window still."

"Good." Her painted lips curled up. "He'll enjoy watching the way we embrace a mortal."

"He is dangerous to our kind —"

"I'm not a *fool*!"

"I can eliminate him —."

"*Not yet*. Your passion for the human makes you reckless and *weak*, Gabriele."

Gabriele averted his gaze. *Don't you think I know this?*

"I will embrace Eloise tonight, you will do the same with Allegra two nights hence. You can bring the human to me, immediately after I'm done with Eloise. Is that understood?"

"Yes, my Queen."

Claudia patted his cheek. "You can embrace *her* on your own."

"I pray you, repeat your words, I believe my hearing may be affected."

She laughed at his lame jest. Fortunately, for Gabriele, Claudia nearly always knew what was on his mind and spared him the embarrassment of making him ask difficult questions.

"I thank you."

"You have two nights left. On the third, you must choose your immortal bride."

Gabriele nodded, his eyes searching the crowded chamber for Allegra, wondering what was taking her so long. He knew his impatience wasn't lost on Claudia.

"She has you captivated, Gabriele."

He flashed her a devilish grin. "Suffice to say, I like her."

Claudia motioned to Eloise, when they made eye contact. She leaned in to Gabriele. "I don't mean to nag you."

He nodded in understanding. "I know."

"I'm glad you do." She began to laugh softly. "Lady Eloise walks peculiarly."

Gabriele chuckled. The redhead wobbled and swayed in her extraordinarily high chopines. "She likes to tower over all and sundry, my Queen."

"Indeed," Claudia responded, another laugh leaving her.

Eloise stumbled and righted herself. Blood trickled from her nose, and she wiped it away with the back of her hand. Gabriele knew it took all her strength to carry herself across the ballroom floor.

He turned his head and looked at Queen Claudia. She was frowning. "She has not much time left. I must embrace her, before 'tis too late."

"Go to her, I'll announce your intention."

"Thank you." Claudia disappeared.

Gabriele stood on a chair and gazed around at the sea of faces. "*Silence!*" he roared over the loud chorus of voices. The room came to a standstill within moments.

"Fellow immortals, our Queen will embrace this chosen female. Bear in mind the human is of great importance to her. No member of the kindred is allowed to enter her quarters, whilst she is resting..."

* * * *

Allegra stood on the threshold, watching in horrified fascination. Gabriele's velvety tones washed over her as he addressed the crowd. Her eyes remained pinned on Claudia and Eloise.

Dona Claudia lowered her head and sank her fangs into Eloise's neck. Eloise flailed about, trying to

dislodge the creature. Blood oozed over the floor and *Dona Claudia's* white skirts soaked it up. At last, it was over. Eloise lay there unresponsive and entirely lifeless-looking.

Bile rose in Allegra's throat and she tried to quell the feelings of nausea. She looked up and caught Gabriele's mesmerizing gaze. *Come to me*, he said inside her mind. *Come*.

She cast one last glance down at Eloise and shuddered. Eloise vigorously sucked at the immortal's wrist, an untamed look in her eyes.

Claudia looked up. "She was dying, and there was no time..."

"I—I thank you," Allegra whispered hoarsely.

"She was worthy. Now go and play, child."

Allegra reached down and touched *Dona Claudia's* shoulder. "I will never forget this."

"Repay me by entertaining my husband this night."

Allegra stared at the immortal in shock, knowing what she wanted, but hoping she was wrong! "H—how w—"

"You'll know, now go!" *Dona Claudia* turned her attention back to Eloise.

Allegra left *Dona Claudia* to do what she had to do. She was almost at Gabriele's side when she ran into *Don Marcus*. "My apologies."

"Good evening, *Dona Allegra*, I trust you've been enjoying your stay." Marcus frowned, tugging at his goatee. "You have, haven't you?"

"I... Oh, yes."

Marcus surveyed Gabriele coolly. "Go and fetch that inquisitive human for my wife now, Gabriele."

"Don't harm her."

"Calm yourself, Gabriele, I would never think to do such a thing, 'tis against the rules..."

"Then remember not to break them."

"Fetch the human for my wife and then join us."

Gabriele leaned close. "You do this to get at me, you *whoreson*."

"Possessive behavior can be so dramatic." Marcus rolled his eyes. "'Tis so human of you, and you're not human, are you? *Dona Allegra* can hate this or thoroughly enjoy it. It all depends on you, my friend."

Allegra dearly wanted to run to Gabriele for protection, but knew it would be pointless to do such a thing. Did she really want to appear weak, or needy? The voice inside her head answered with a resounding *No!*

"I will join you in a while," Gabriele said lightly, his expression detached.

"Don't put yourself out on my account," she retorted, feeling hurt by his tone and attitude. Adoring someone had so many disadvantages, including gaining a thin skin.

Marcus gave him a victorious smile. "We'll be happy to have you. Unlike you...I'll wait until you arrive," he added.

Gabriele's right brow rose high and his jaw clenched. "As you wish."

Allegra realized the situation was rather difficult for him and felt guilty for snapping at him. *Don't*

forget about me.

That's not likely to happen, our connection is sacred. I will come to you, my dove, he telepathically replied.

His eyes burned into her, filled with sorrow, longing, and something else she couldn't quite fathom. She offered up a tremulous smile and then blew him a kiss.

Gabriele inclined his head and disappeared.

Marcus's eyes swept over Allegra with thinly veiled lust. "He won't disappoint you, *Dona Allegra*. He'll join us."

Allegra wasn't sure she wanted to know what Marcus meant by that.

"Come." He took her arm. "Don't worry yourself, what we're about to do won't affect anyone. Gabriele and Claudia pleasure each other frequently, you'll become accustomed to our ways."

Allegra was lost for words. *I certainly won't become accustomed to Gabriele bedding all and sundry, once we're married, wed—whatever... Oh, God! I'm acting like a shrew! He hasn't chosen me yet, and he may not!* The realization she'd laid claim to him shocked her greatly.

* * * *

Lord Michael brushed the damp tendrils of hair from his forehead and blinked into the darkness, his eyes scouring the shrubbery.

Gabriele enjoyed toying with this pitiful human almost as much as he enjoyed hunting his prey. He

moved closer, creating enough noise to draw the fool's attention.

He paused and watched the human scurry down the pavement, his eyes straining to see beyond what Gabriele knew to be indistinguishable shadows. "Is anyone there?" he called, in a surprisingly firm tone.

Gabriele leapt on him, pinioning him to the ground. His flailing had no effect. "Why did you have to come back? Do you hanker for death?"

Disbelief shone in Lord Michael's eyes. "How can this be? You were in the ballroom moments ago."

"You know how, you've been spying all evening."

"What are you?"

Gabriele laughed. "You know what I am. Why ask an unnecessary question?"

"I do, and I don't care. I want her back, that's all!"

Gabriele had to hand it to the human, he had fortitude. Either that, or was rather stupid. He rose and extended a hand. "Come."

Lord Michael ignored his offer of help and scrambled to his feet, dusting off his doublet and breeches. "I'll not tell anyone, just release her and we'll be on our way."

"She wants you out of her life. What part of that don't you comprehend?"

"She is confused, is all."

Exasperated, Gabriele shook his head. "You're a *madman*."

"I want to marry her."

"Impossible."

"I love her!"

Gabriele shook his head. "'Tis too late..."

"What are you saying?" Michael asked.

"She's to be my immortal bride," Gabriele lied.

Michael shook his head. "No."

"You saw how Lady Eloise was embraced." Lord Michael shook his head. "Bitten."

"Yes."

"On the morrow she'll awaken a fledgling, a blood drinker." Gabriele didn't miss the human's involuntary shudder. "I'll embrace Allegra the same way."

"You can't do that to her. She wouldn't want that! You're forcing her!"

"Forcing her? No, that's what you do." Gabriele grasped Lord Michael's arm and looked directly into his eyes. The man's chronic fear amused him. "I'm not hungry," he said offhandedly. "The answer to your question is inside you."

"I pray you, enlighten me."

"She has told you repeatedly you won't listen, and deep down you know she doesn't want you." Gabriele sighed. "Is she worth dying for?"

Lord Michael nodded. "Yes."

"You're a bigger fool than I imagined."

"Am I going to die?"

Gabriele tightened his grip on Lord Michael's arm and blinked to where Claudia awaited them.

She turned and smiled a catlike smile. "You've caused us some problems." Her eyes changed from blue to a shimmering gold. "'Tis just survival, you understand, nothing personal."

"I...I only want Allegra, then I'll leave and you'll never see me again. I give you my word as a gentleman."

"You lie too much, human, your words bring me little comfort." Queen Claudia looked at him as though he was pond scum. Fact was, he was about as useful to her.

"Give me another chance. I'll not return. *Ever*. You'll see!"

The pitiful display sickened Gabriele.

"We gave you the only chance you'll *ever* get." Queen Claudia bared her razor-sharp teeth.

"Have you no mercy?" The human quaked in his boots. "*P – please!*" He began to back away.

"No, not when it comes to the survival of our kind." She walked around him and he turned with her, watching her. Gabriele could smell his fear and knew his queen could, too.

"Y—you have the power to render me helpless, should I try to inform anyone of what I've witnessed. And who'd believe me? Let me take Allegra and go."

"*No!*" She lunged at him and he stumbled backward, falling to the cold parquet floor. She sank her sharp teeth into his flesh, and he howled and flailed about wildly. "Help me!"

She tore his jugular open and buried her face in the gushing wound.

Gabriele observed the scene with bored detachment, having seen similar scenes countless times before.

* * * *

Allegra stepped from the bathtub. The cool air made her shiver. Marcus's cold blue eyes were on her. She was past caring whether he noticed the dimple on her left bum cheek, or the mole on her thigh. When Nadia first stripped her out of her clothing, it was difficult not to feel awkward when *Don* Marcus's gaze followed her every action. Sparks of desire would repeatedly light and then die within his eyes. She wished he'd just lay with her and get it over with so she could relax. Not that she wanted him, quite the contrary.

Nadia quickly dried Allegra off and then brushed the tangles from her curls. The uncomfortable stool she sat on made her ass ache.

Allegra wondered why Nadia played maidservant once again, since she looked as though she needed sleep. She then surmised it wouldn't do for too many human servants to view their Lord and Lady's 'bizarre' evening rituals.

"I want you to massage her skin with musk oil," *Don* Marcus said, his tone bored.

"As you wish." Nadia's tone was far from pleasant, but he appeared not to notice.

She looked around. The only place to lie was on the large, elaborately carved bed, which dominated the chamber, its white drapes covered in shimmering gold embroidery. It would have looked far more inviting, if she were about to bed the male of her choosing. She moved toward it.

"She has coarse skin, be certain to make it as smooth as possible."

Allegra fumed. *How dare he!*

Don Marcus whistled at her as though she was a dog. "*Halt!*" Allegra stopped in her tracks and turned. He waved an index finger at her. "I didn't tell you to move, be still." She opened her mouth to speak and he waved his finger again. "Ah! Ah! *Don't speak!*"

It took all Allegra's willpower not to voice her discontent. *Why, you insensitive pig!* She belatedly lowered her gaze. If he'd read her thoughts, he made no indication of it, much to her relief.

He rose from the settee and motioned to it. "The human can lie here whilst you rub her down." He made to say more, paused for a moment and then said, "Once you're done, dress her in a male tunic." Nadia nodded. He waited until Nadia turned away. "And guardian..." She turned and faced him once more. "Nothing else, you hear." She nodded again.

"You." He pointed at Allegra. "Get over here and lie down."

"Pompous whoreson!" Allegra hissed between gritted teeth.

Before she knew it, Marcus was before her. He buried his hands in her hair and wrenched her head back. Tears sprang to her eyes. "Don't speak, whore! One more word from you and I'll send three of my fledglings in to rut with you after I've had my fill. Elders may suffer bloodlust, but fledglings have even less control."

Oh, God, when will I learn to curb my loose tongue!

"I *want* you to do as I ask, without an utterance, do you understand me?"

Allegra nodded mutely, lowering her eyes.

"Good." He released her and went off to the far side of the dimly illuminated room.

"Come." Nadia took her arm and led her to the settee. Allegra lay down. She sensed the woman had softened toward her.

Where are you, Gabriele?

Nadia began to massage her tense muscles and she groaned in satisfaction. "That feels wonderful." Nadia placed a finger to her full lips and Allegra rolled her eyes. The dark beauty grinned.

Don Marcus' manservant undressed, bathed and dried him. His eyes moved to her and he frowned. "You are attractive in your own way, I suppose. You're not what I usually bed. I like beautiful things and you're certainly not that, are you?"

Allegra shrugged. "I know Gabriele would heartily disagree."

He turned his attention to the nervous manservant. "Get out, *fool!*" he ordered, sending the man scurrying for the door.

Ignorant swine!

"Gabriele was a magnificent warrior." Don Marcus sighed. "I watched him for months. The way he wielded his sword, with such power and grace, made me think of the first Holy Roman Emperor, Charlemagne, almost four hundred years before him. He was as warlike as he was holy, the same as Gabriele. So virile, so attractive."

Allegra stared at *Don Marcus*. *Holy? Gabriele was a priest?*

"Close your mouth."

Allegra complied.

"Your thoughts almost deafen me, mortal. He was a warrior for your *Christian God*, during the 'third' Holy Crusade." Marcus sighed nostalgically. "Gabriele never married. He was much wiser when he was human, you know."

And you weren't.

"Ha!" he laughed bitterly. "I've become prudent since..."

Allegra averted her gaze. She'd discovered, through Eloise, that Claudia and Marcus existed in Ancient Rome. The famed Lilith embraced Claudia in the year one BC. Lilith was also known as 'Queen of the night'...God's forsaken '*first female*' creation. According to ancient writings, she was the mother of demons and created the vampire by biting into her male victim during intercourse. The thought sent a chill up Allegra's spine. Claudia embraced Marcus in the year four hundred AD, and chose him as her life partner. Allegra shook the intruding thoughts aside and concentrated on Marcus's words.

"He thinks me rather sentimental and I think him unadventurous," he was saying.

Marcus was a product of his time, a time when most males took other males as lovers and it was socially acceptable. He drank down a goblet of what looked to be red wine and then demanded a refill. He rose and came to stand before her, his whiteness

rivaling his semi-transparent tunic. "I've always thought of Gabriele as my supreme accomplishment."

I don't need to hear this!

"Turn over," Nadia ordered, her dark eyes moving over Allegra. "I need to massage your front now."

Allegra groaned and stretched long, her gaze moving back to Marcus. Pale brows rose above blue eyes, his beautiful, boyish features tragic. She wondered how old he'd been when Claudia embraced him.

"I was twenty years old," Marcus answered, as though she'd spoken aloud. "She was the most beautiful female I'd ever seen." He cleared his throat. "She still is."

Allegra stared mutely at him, not knowing whether to speak, then decided it was better to leave him ramble on.

"I care greatly for him," Marcus uttered softly, his melodic tone drawing her attention. He tossed his blond head and laughed. "He knows I adore him and makes small concessions for me from time to time..." He waved his goblet at her. Red liquid spilled from its silver lip and splashed upon the wooden floor.

A soft gasp left Allegra when her mind registered what his *refreshment* was.

"Did you think this was wine? Foolish human." He smiled coolly. He waved at Nadia. "She's done, get out!"

"But her attire," Nadia protested.

"Never mind."

Nadia wrung her hands. "But Lord Gabriele said I

must—”

“Leave. I’ll not harm her.”

“Yes, Lord Marcus.” Nadia bobbed and then departed, leaving Allegra to despair over her predicament.

“Sit up.”

Allegra did as he ordered, her eyes lowered, not wanting him to read her fear. *Well, look at you now, Allegra, be careful what you wish!* the little voice inside her head jeered.

Marcus reached down, grasped her curls and pulled her face up against his burgeoning hardness. She could feel it pulse through the thin fabric of his garb. “I want you to suck on my cock until I explode inside your mouth.”

She shook her head.

Please do this for me, came Gabriele’s poignant plea inside her mind.

Damn you! Allegra nodded mutely. *You’d better remember my sacrifice, Gabriele!*

I’ll never forget, was Gabriele’s telepathic reply.

“On your knees!” Marcus pulled off his tunic and tossed it to the floor.

Tall, pale, square-shouldered, lean hipped with a tapered waist, he met with her approval and as was the case with the males of his kind, his body was finely honed muscle. Her gaze lowered to his rigid member.

“You’ve looked your fill, now kiss my cock.”

She knelt and wrapped her mouth around its pink tip, almost gagging when he forced his entire length

down her throat. *Bastard!*

He pulled back. "I'll be mindful of your limitations," he said gutturally before thrusting into her mouth again.

Allegra enjoyed pleasuring a man this way and since she had to, there was no point in doing the deed by halves. What's more, her pride wouldn't allow it.

Limitations! She clenched his hips and drew his heated muscle deep.

She knew *Don* Marcus watched his thick shaft disappear into her mouth. Males liked to watch themselves being sucked; it heightened the excitement, or so she'd been told.

His fingers tightened in her hair. "You have a very clever mouth." He thrust forward until her mouth was flush with his groin. "*Ah, yes! Suck all of me.*"

Allegra moved her mouth in a circular motion while she withdrew. He growled again. She loved his pulsating head, licking and sucking, drawing it in and pushing it out. His hands tightened in her hair and he pumped into her mouth hard, his breathing labored. Suddenly, he jerked and shuddered; releasing a tortured cry, he filled her mouth. He continued to thrust until he emptied himself and then withdrew. Relieved it was over, Allegra sat back on the settee and stretched her aching legs. He collected himself rapidly and motioned to the four-poster bed. "Get up and get on the bed."

Allegra rose and walked toward the bed, her heart in her throat when she caught sight of the manacles suspended from its sturdy posts.

God! What is he going to do to me? Her stomach churned. *I don't want to be helpless!*

Don Marcus smiled with satisfaction. "Yes. Those are for immobilizing you, so that *we* can better enjoy what charms you have."

"We?" she asked, shock pervading her entire being. "I..." She shook her head. Gabriele would never treat her this poorly. This creature was insane. "Gabriele! Gabriele!"

"*Be silent!*" Marcus came to her side, grasped her arm and hauled her over to the dreaded bedpost.

Allegra tried to ignore Marcus's rough manhandling, biting her lip to stop herself from crying out in pain. She'd die before she showed him such weakness.

Before long, he'd shackled her wrists to opposing bedposts. Allegra was indeed helpless.

Marcus straightened her disheveled curls, his eyes triumphant when they met hers. "Much better, don't you agree?"

I'm not some slave! Allegra pulled at her restraints, moaning when her shoulders began to throb.

"I like watching a good struggle." The gleam in Marcus's eyes reminded her that he was a predator.

Allegra shuddered when he bent and nipped at her neck.

"Gabriele, where are you?"

"He is a little ah...preoccupied."

An image of Gabriele and *Dona* Claudia intertwined filled her mind and in spite of her predicament, jealousy clawed at her insides.

Don't listen to this spiteful creature, Allegra! she told herself.

Marcus's gaze caught hers again. "You have passion, I see why he's drawn to you."

"Do you?" She very much doubted it.

"You imagine my love for Gabriele is somehow twisted, but it is not. "

"Your perception of love is different to mine."

"Indeed, it is. His presence fills me with light," he said softly, lulling her with his mesmerizing tone. They all appeared to be so sexually alluring. Allegra fleetingly wondered whether she'd have these compelling and melodic endowments.

"Yes, you will," Marcus answered. "You will make an outstanding immortal."

"So Gabriele tells me." She feared Marcus was going to embrace her.

"Don't fret, I'll allow Gabriele to make you."

Allow? She couldn't imagine Gabriele at this creature's disposal. She made to speak, but he placed a silencing finger against her mouth. "Shhhhhh. You showed me how gifted your mouth is, now I'm going to show you how gifted mine is." He threaded his fingers through her hair and yanked on it, his mouth ravishing hers.

Allegra was helpless to do more than let him have his way with her. His skillful mouth soon had her gasping for breath, and much to her utter shame, her juices dampened her thighs.

Gabriele, where are you?

He cupped her behind and lifted her. An

involuntary gasp left her when his cock pressed against her mons. A sharp cried tore from him. "Humans generate much heat!" he growled. His hand slid down her sides as he molded his hard planes against her softness. He rubbed her throbbing clit with attentive fingers before inserting one. She sighed and arched against his touch. When a second mouth brushed over her left shoulder blade, Allegra knew it was Gabriele's. His touch always sent shockwaves of pleasure soaring through her. She smiled.

"Oh, Gabriele!"

"Allegra, my sweet."

"Y—you came," she sighed. Marcus's mouth moved over her breasts, his teeth grazing her skin but not piercing it.

"'Tis a good thing I did, it seems that you've become quite comfortable with Marcus," Gabriele replied. She flushed guiltily and Marcus chuckled softly.

'Tis not fair of you to behave so jealously, especially since you asked me to do this for you. Remember, Gabriele? she silently accused.

Gabriele kissed his way up her neck. "And you're a very sexual creature, my sweet." She sighed again.

Marcus raised his head and stared into Gabriele's eyes. He leaned over Allegra and bit into Gabriele's neck.

This is one of Gabriele's little concessions. Marcus raised his head, blood dripping down his pale chin. He stilled its downward motion with an index finger; scooping it up, he licked at it, leaving a smear.

Then, much to Allegra's surprise, Gabriele materialized before Marcus. Two naked, very beautiful, masculine forms melded together, torso against torso, thigh against thigh, Gabriele's slightly darker than Marcus's, captivating her eyes.

Gabriele's hands moved through Marcus's blonde hair, drawing his head back. He lowered his mouth to Marcus's chin, his tongue darting out and moving over the smear of blood.

"I want to taste her on you," Gabriele uttered hoarsely to his maker. She gasped when their mouths connected in an utterly erotic, open-mouthed kiss.

The erotic display excited Allegra. Her pussy throbbed and juices seeped down her thighs. She tugged at her chains, wanting to be free, wanting to join them.

Sensing her excitement, Gabriele broke the kiss, leaned over, cupped Allegra's chin and brushed his lips playfully against hers. She sobbed with need, pulling at her chains, needing to be closer to him. He obliged her by coming nearer, his possessive eyes sweeping over her face. "You liked that?"

She nodded swallowing hard. "Yes. Can't you tell how eager I am?"

Marcus came up behind her and plied kisses to her shoulders and back. Gabriele studied her, his intense eyes pulling at her, silently encouraging her to enjoy the moment.

Allegra stood on tiptoes and raised her mouth, her eyes begging Gabriele to kiss her. *Kiss me the way you kissed him, damn you!*

"A little jealous? Mmmm?" Gabriele's eyes flashed triumphantly and a smile curved his lips.

Allegra swallowed her pride. "Yes, damn it, I'm jealous!"

"You have no reason to be." Gabriele moved closer still, Allegra strained against his hardness, trying in vain to become one with him. He lowered his mouth and slowly, sensuously plundered her recesses, his tongue mating and dancing with hers, his arms stretching out along hers, their fingers linking.

Gabriele broke the kiss, his gaze locking with hers before he stepped away. Limp with desire, Allegra would have pooled at Gabriele's feet if it weren't for the shackles. Marcus pushed her forward; sharp pain shot through her shoulders and arms, and she couldn't help but cry out. Much to her horror, tears tracking down her cheeks.

"*You bloody cur!*" Gabriele raged at Marcus. He promptly went about releasing her from the offending manacles.

Freed, Allegra wrapped her arms around Gabriele, burying her face in his neck.

"Hush, love," Gabriele whispered, rubbing her hurts.

"Why, Gabriele, you're too soft on the human," Marcus sneered.

"I'm not excited by pain."

Marcus laughed bitterly. "I'm not the one who explodes at the sight of a trussed woman, Shiro is, remember?"

"Shiro's tastes, while not my own, aren't

something to be laughed at, or talked about."

Allegra dried her face on Gabriele's shoulder and stepped back. "I'm ready."

Gabriele studied her carefully. "Are you certain?"

She nodded. "Yes."

Gabriele led to her to the bed and she lay down at his bidding. Marcus moved to her side and kissed her thoroughly while Gabriele spread her legs and moved between them. He lowered his mouth to her heated sex and laved her sensitive flesh.

Allegra arched up, sighing, into Marcus's mouth when Gabriele's fingers slid inside her. His tongue rolled over her nether lips and clit, feasting on her musky heat. His fingers rotated and dipped deeply, keeping rhythm with her urgent thrusts.

Marcus tore his mouth away from hers and kissed a path down her throbbing body, joining Gabriele. Their mouths moved over her, eliciting waves of pleasure. Gabriele moved to lick and suckle her proud breasts, biting into one and suckling it.

"Oooh..."

Marcus's mouth was harsh and unrelenting, his goatee abrasive. Waves of rapture rolled over her and he clenched her hips to still her wild movements. She began to climax.

Gabriele's mouth traveled to her throat and his teeth buried there. Her toes curled and a powerful orgasm ripped through her body. *You're so addictive*, he relayed. He licked her wound and then kissed her neck and her jaw.

"You're beautiful, Lord del Fra, and you do

beautiful things to me."

Her gave her a delighted grin. "Do I just?"

"Mmm...yes." She nuzzled his neck.

Marcus rose from the bed and growled his annoyance. "I'm going to leave you bid her goodbye, the sun is due to rise in less than an hour."

Gabriele raised his head and looked Marcus in the eye. "As you wish." He curled up with Allegra once more.

"Oh, and Gabriele, I agree with my wife..." Marcus added, his eyes moving over Allegra. He blinked from sight.

"Thank you."

Allegra studied Gabriele's mobile expression with mounting curiosity. "Whatever does he mean?"

Gabriele caressed her cheek. "'Tis personal...it doesn't concern you."

"Oh." Allegra's cheeks turned pink. "Forgive my forwardness, my lord. I should know my place by now." She smothered a sob. "I would hate for you to think me *significant* – "

"Don't!" Gabriele grasped her shoulders and shook her. "Don't make this harder than it already is! You must understand – "

"Oh, I understand!" Allegra took a moment to compose herself. "You...*you whoreson!*" Allegra flailed his chest with balled fists, her emotions rampant. *How dare he treat me like a common whore!* "You asked me to do it and I did, for you!"

He captured her wrists. "Christ, I don't think that of you! We are purely sexual beings. We don't

condemn one for having a lusty appetite. If anything, we revel in it. I—”

“Don’t touch me!”

Gabriele dropped his hands, a frustrated sigh leaving him. “The day is about to dawn, and there isn’t time to express how I feel, Allegra.”

Allegra felt an utter fool for not reading the signs; she was nothing more than a bedmate. To believe he was her dream come true was indeed a fantasy. She wondered how long she had loved him. Her chest ached and she had the overwhelming urge to cry. “I must go.” She scrambled from the bed.

She felt his eyes on her as she struggled into her gown. There was no possibility of fastening the back, she cast him a glance and was about to ask his assistance, but thought better of it. She bent and scooped up her underskirts and farthingale, which dragged on the floor when she strutted for the doors, her head held high.

On the threshold, she stopped without turning. “Forgive my outburst.”

“’Tis done,” he said softly. The pity in his tone brought tears to her eyes. She didn’t want his damned pity, she wanted his love!

She composed herself. “I hope you find what you’re looking for, *Lord del Fra*.”

“I think I have.”

And I’m not it! She hurried from the chamber before she embarrassed herself further.

Gabriele stared at the empty doorway. “I am sorry, Allegra. I will allow you to see everything...

everything."

Chapter Seven

Awakenings

Allegra lay in bed, staring up at the crimson canopy. Daylight shone through the windows, bringing with it warmth and a brilliant glow. She'd lain there several hours, unable to sleep. She remembered everything, as though she had found the key to 'her' Pandora's box and opened it. It all came flooding back to her in waves...

She knew him better than she could've imagined. From their first meeting he'd bedded her; it wasn't a dream after all. She laughed, remembering how she fought feelings of inadequacy because she thought he found her lacking. They'd always had that special connection and for reasons of his own, he chose for her to forget, until now.

She knew Gabriele was an only child and hated being alone as much as she did. He longed for that special someone to fill the emptiness and longing inside him, but was as afraid of being hurt as she was. She felt his pain and knew she could take it away. She

wanted to be his chosen one. The thought of immortality didn't appeal to her overly much without him.

Eloise is not his type. He cares for me. I feel it in my bones! I just know it!

Allegra sighed with resignation. Throwing back the covers, she climbed from the bed. Today she would go for a ride and take lunch in the breathtaking gardens, or down by the canal. She needed to occupy her mind. She had enough of this game and wanted it to be over, but dreaded the outcome.

* * * *

A knock sounded. Gabriele scowled at the oak doors. "Who goes there?" he asked, dipping his quill into the inkpot.

"'Tis I, Master Simon, Lord Gabriele."

"Come!" Gabriele rose and crossed the gray and black tiled floor, his eyes passing over the freshly made canopy-covered bed, making certain it was pleasing to the eye. It was. Silver lace edged the surrounding curtains and matching bedspread of ivory. The maid had sprinkled blood-red rose petals over it, at his behest. Gabriele instinctively knew Allegra would enjoy this historic setting. His mouth curled up into a smile. Tonight, he would take her for a stroll back into his time...to where maidens were damsels and knights were heroes, who also spouted poetry when the mood took them, where couples handfed their mates and danced gaily. Entertainers

regaled guests with tales of happiness and woe, performed acrobatics and danced as well. Ladies didn't wear god-awful corsets or cumbersome farthingales, they dressed in soft flowing gowns of samite, velvet, damask, silk and so on... They wore their hair simply and were romantically disposed, rarely having time for the artifice of today.

"Please still be romantically inclined toward me," Gabriele murmured, sighing loudly. He was acting more like a human every day.

"Evening, master."

Gabriele turned and grinned sheepishly. "Good evening to you, Simon. I trust your day has been pleasant?"

"It has. You look very medieval."

Gabriele glanced down at his attire. "Indeed I do." He was dressed in a red and sable knee-length surcoat, emblazoned with a silver dragon, sable hose and soft leather boots, a crimson lined cloak topping off his ensemble. "What's more, I hope that my ballroom does, as well."

"Certainly." Simon inclined his head, his bald spot gleaming in the soft candlelight. "The dining hall and ballroom have been prepared precisely as you wanted."

"And the entertainment?"

Simon stroked his beard. "The jesters are very entertaining." He smiled. "The musicians are waiting for your word before they begin."

Gabriele waved a hand. "By all means, tell them to play. And the others?"

"They are rehearsing."

"Good." He nodded. "And *her*?"

Simon cleared his throat. "*Don* Marcus informed me he'd fetch *Dona* Allegra."

Gabriele tried to quell the immediate resentment that filled him.

I'll not allow you to ruin my moment, Marcus.

"Will she like my residence?" He angled a look at Simon.

Simon nodded mutely.

"Will she like my theme? Hmm?"

Simon cast his gaze around his *refurbished* bedchamber. "If she doesn't, then she's not worthy, master."

"Ah, my faithful guardian." Gabriele chuckled. "I do believe she's worthy."

"And true," Simon added.

Warmth filled Gabriele. "I like that you approve of Allegra. I'm so enamored with her, I feel like a fool..."

"Don't, she's just as enamored with you."

Gabriele ran his fingers through his curls, pushing them off his forehead. "I've lost the capability to tell," he groaned.

"You immortals appear to lose the ability when you give your heart to another; a hindrance, to be sure."

"Indeed, thank you for enlightening me. I don't plan to exist this way, communication is the key."

Simon nodded. "Agreed. Does she know?"

"Know what?" Gabriele asked.

"That you love her?"

Gabriele averted his gaze, another sigh leaving him. "No, not yet. I dislike being at her mercy." He turned away.

"I see. *Communication* is the key."

Gabriele whirled back to face Simon. "Don't give me *that* look, guardian."

"'Tis refreshing to know you have a weakness."

Gabriele merely grunted.

* * * *

Allegra turned before the mirror, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "'Tis such a beautiful gown." Nadia nodded, tying the sable and gold girdle around Allegra's hips.

The gown was rather simple, a deep shade of purple silk, which was trimmed in sable and gold embroidery. The neck was rounded and the bodice tight; it laced up at the sides with silk ribbon, had tight-fitting sleeves and a soft flowing skirt that dusted the floor when she walked. Soft leather slippers encased her feet.

Nadia placed the gold amethyst-encrusted circlet on Allegra's head, stepped back and surveyed her handiwork. "You'll be the fairest damsel at Lord Gabriele's medieval ball."

Allegra blushed at the thought of Gabriele's reaction to her appearance. She was overjoyed to be visiting his home. She wasn't too excited *Don* Marcus was escorting her there, though.

"You look ravishing," *Don* Marcus uttered from

somewhere behind her.

She gasped in surprise. It was as though her thoughts had conjured him up. He was dressed in a red floor-length surcoat with a gold griffin emblazoned down its front. It had slits up both sides, revealing gold-tone hose beneath. The color of blood seemed to occupy *Don* Marcus and *Dona* Claudia's minds; Allegra found it a little excessive for her tastes.

He bowed before her, took her hand and kissed it. Allegra's face flamed at the memory of his touch. He lifted his head, a victorious smile playing over his mouth. "I could just *eat* you now," he murmured, eyeing her lewdly.

"Don't try to demean me." Allegra snatched her hand from his grasp and stepped back. "I did it for Gabriele."

Don Marcus rose. "Ha!" He tugged at his blonde goatee. "The ever faithful whore, aren't we?"

"Your wife deserves *better*." Allegra grasped her skirts and turned away.

Don Marcus glided to stand before her. "And what manner of creature is more beautiful than I, my lady?"

"You're rather vain, 'twas not your looks I was referring to!"

"Oh?" His pale brows rose. "You seemed to like them last evening."

"I told you, I did it for Gabriele." Allegra stomped her foot on the floor. "You're not my type, Marcus."

"I should certainly hope not," came a feminine purr from behind them.

Allegra felt the color drain from her face. Marcus laughed wholeheartedly.

Dressed in a medieval gown of crimson, *Dona* Claudia looked strikingly exquisite, like a silver-haired goddess, her extensive mane flowing loosely about her slender white shoulders and past her hips.

"I—I didn't mean...I..." Allegra lowered her head, words failing her.

My God! What must she think?

"Don't be embarrassed, child, I know Marcus can behave like an infant at times." Claudia stopped before her husband and eyed him coolly. He grunted, but uttered not a word. "I don't blame you for his inane actions." She kissed his cheek.

"I thought that you..." Allegra gulped for air, unable to finish her train of words.

"'Twas a test, child," Claudia stated

"Pardon?" Allegra couldn't believe her ears.

"To see if you would obey my command." Claudia smiled. "You passed."

"Oh."

"And I?" *Don* Marcus inquired.

"Of course, darling."

Allegra blinked in surprise. "A—and Gabriele?"

Claudia smiled fondly. "Gabriele hasn't failed me yet."

His pale face flashed in Allegra's mind's eye and her stomach somersaulted. Everything about him was pleasurable. She sighed. *He hasn't failed to thrill me!* She shuddered as a memory overtook her.

His lips moved over hers, hot and urgent, demanding

her immediate response. His hands, fingers splayed, moved over the outside of her parted thighs, cupping her bottom, their impression firm and sensuous. His heated member pressed against her open sex. She gasped into his mouth. His fingers gripped tighter and his mouth moved to her throat. Sharp teeth sank into her flesh. She cried out. He slowly penetrated her moist heat, his mouth drawing her essence while his cock pumped into her. Gabriele loved and he fucked...gently...violently...abandoned and yet restrained...but always intense and thoroughly gratifying.

How many nights did you bed me and then mesmerize me into forgetfulness? Why did you do it? Why allow me to remember it all now?

"Are you with us, child?" Claudia asked, breaking into Allegra's reverie.

"Oh, my apologies."

"We should be going." She took Allegra's hand and gave her a concerned look. "The elder worships you, dear."

"Oh, I admire him, too," she said lamely, shooing away the remnants of a steamy evening with the mouthwatering immortal.

"We know that you love him, child," Claudia replied.

"I'm going to be ill," Don Marcus interjected sourly. He blinked, leaving them alone.

"Never mind Marcus, he'll come to like you someday. He's a little jealous of you, is all."

"I see."

"Do you?"

Allegra bowed her head. "Yes, clearly."

"Good. Then you can understand my elation at the thought of dear Gabriele choosing a life-mate."

"Indeed. Are they –"

"No. Not ever!"

* * * *

Castello del Fra was very, very old.

How old? Allegra wondered, eyeing the austere furnishings with awe.

'Twas built in the eleventh century by my Grandfather, Gabriele telepathically communicated, making her jump. *My apologies, I didn't mean to frighten you.*

Viewing the interior now, Allegra could see many restorations. Judging by the modern furnishings, sculptures, frescos and the beautiful mullioned windows that graced the hall and main entry, she guessed the latest overhaul had been recent.

How does he manage to stay here without causing suspicion? Who cares for it?

Guardians and humans...Simon now acts as master of my home, my sweet, came his telepathic reply.

Of course! Allegra laughed softly. She passed the long line of trestle tables. Immortals, pale and beautiful, occupied the bench seats to the left and mortals to the right. The hairs stood up on the back of her neck.

The humans appeared to be oblivious to the fact that the beings opposite only drank crimson wine from their pewter goblets. They were too busy ingesting all manner of foodstuffs with great gusto.

She felt Gabriele's gaze follow her across the hall. She glanced up and smiled at him, feeling absurdly shy. As she ascended the dais, he rose and motioned beside him. "Come and sit by me." He held out his pale hand and she took it with trembling fingers. He drew her closer, his gaze touching where it looked. She heaved a shuddered sigh, trying to compose herself.

Gabriele leaned in and brushed his mouth over hers, his heated lips clinging, burning her with his brand...showing the kindred they were intimate, not caring who saw. Allegra was more than a little surprised, considering the formal setting.

He drew away and smiled and at her. "Don't be afraid."

"'Tis easy for you to say, my lord." She looked away.

"'Tis Gabriele."

"Very well, *Gabriele*," she uttered stiffly. "I remember everything..."

"I know you do, and so does Eloise."

"Whatever entertains you, Gabriele."

"You're still angry with me."

"No."

"I beg to differ."

Allegra's mouth tightened when she looked upon the newly made Eloise. She tried to relax, but couldn't. *His other choice for a life-mate*, the little voice inside her head reminded her. Eloise fairly oozed sexual energy, and this intrigued Allegra. She wondered whether she would exude such sexual

power once immortal.

"Yes, you will have such energy," he said, as though she'd asked the question aloud. "You'll have all my strengths and my weaknesses. Although some will take time."

"I see."

Allegra sat on the bench beside Gabriele and regarded the occupants. In the same manner as the other tables, the head table had mortals to the right and immortals to the left.

"Am I to be embraced this night?" He nodded. Allegra swallowed, fear making her sweat. "I don't know whether I'm ready."

"You are." Gabriele motioned to the assorted foods. "Eat your fill, before 'tis too late."

Allegra eyed the guests. They grabbed handfuls of meat and piled it on their plates, skewering it with knives, or directly placing it in their mouths. Fat dripped from many of the diners' fingers and chins. Her stomach heaved when one woman stuffed wild boar into her mouth, bits still dangling from her lips as she chewed and talked at the same time. She lowered her eyes to her empty trencher, controlling the urge to vomit.

Where are the forks? I know this is a medieval reenactment and all, but isn't it enough that we have to sit on this uncomfortable seating? She eyed the lords and ladies with disgust. Shoving a pointed dagger in her mouth wasn't her notion of eating like a *lady*.

Allegra tentatively touched Gabriele's shoulder. He turned and gazed into her eyes. "Where are the

forks?"

Gabriele grinned. "This is a medieval celebration. It wouldn't be authentic if I were to place forks on the table, my sweet."

Allegra raised her chin. "I'll not eat with my fingers, I'm not a sow."

Gabriele glanced at the woman Allegra referred to and chuckled. "A sow? Hmm..." He pretended to think. "She does have poor manners."

"Indeed, she does."

He began to laugh. Her tone must have amused him.

Don Marcus and *Dona* Claudia joined them, sitting at the far end of the table, *Dona* Claudia immediately striking up a conversation with the vivacious Eloise, much to *Don* Marcus's aggravation. Allegra again wondered why the vampire queen tolerated such a being, when she could have anyone she desired.

Gabriele leaned in and nipped at her neck. "Don't think too loud, they will hear you, little dove." His lips slid across her skin, his moist tongue flicking out to taste her. Wetness pooled between her thighs. "You tremble when I touch you, and I like that. I like it a lot."

Allegra pushed at his chest. "*Stop.*" He ran his tongue over her ear, ignoring her.

"You didn't care the last time. Why do you now?"

"'Tis different." Allegra lowered her eyes.

"They don't care, as you'll soon see."

"I care and besides, I have to eat."

He pulled back and reached into his cloak.

Producing a silver fork, he held it high. "I knew you wouldn't eat without it, my lady."

"How very true." She smiled at his thoughtfulness.

"Behold, fair damsel, the object you require."

"Thank you." Allegra held out her hand, but Gabriele shook his head. She rolled her eyes toward the high ceiling.

"One stolen kiss and 'tis yours."

"Surely you jest?"

Gabriele grinned. "I don't, not when it involves the affections of a beautiful maid." His smile broadened, perfect white teeth flashed and she felt her cheeks stain. "Ah, your most endearing quality."

"You tease me mercilessly," she whispered, her voice filled with emotion.

He waved the fork in front of her. "One kiss."

"I don't need it," she said primly, raising her chin further.

Gabriele waved it closer. "You won't eat without it."

Allegra snatched the fork, laughing at his disgruntled expression. "You know me so well and this unnerves me, Gabriele." She reached out and patted his cheek. "I have my fork, without the public display." Allegra knew to challenge him was foolish, but the imp inside her loved a good dare.

Gabriele leaned forward, his lips a hairsbreadth from hers, his gaze heavily lidded. "Imagine if you will, our first night together..." Her breath caught. "Remember how I kissed you then?"

"Y—yes." The memory made Allegra weak.

"You stimulate me." Gabriele took her hand and placed it on his bulging erection. She drew in a ragged breath. "And I know I excite you as much."

Allegra wished he'd be silent and kiss her, but knew he was waiting for her to tip her head that fraction and do the same. He'd win if she did, and she couldn't have that! She removed her hand and made to turn away. He stopped her.

"Seriously, I have many things I wish to divulge, and most will have to wait till after I embrace you."

Allegra nodded. "I see."

"There's something you must know now." Gabriele paused and cleared his throat. Allegra's heart was in her throat. "Lord Michael is dead."

"Dead!" Allegra was shocked. "How?"

"We caught him trespassing again and he was illuminated, for the safety of the clan."

"Oh!" That made sense to Allegra. He just never gave up.

You fool!

"How does that make you feel?"

"I suppose I'm relieved. He'll not bother me ever again. I also feel a little guilty."

"Why?"

"He died because of me."

"You're not to blame for his imprudent behavior."

She shrugged. "I know, but I feel I may have encouraged him a little."

Gabriele frowned. "Don't be absurd, you didn't. He was a fool. I warned him more than once..."

"He only wanted me."

"To own you, as one would a possession, Allegra."

"And what about you, do you want to *own* me, Gabriele?"

Gabriele took her plate, loading it with bread, roasted quail, wild boar and vegetables.

"Eat." He placed the platter down in front of her.

Allegra skewered a piece of leek with her fork, her eyes moving to Gabriele. "Please answer my question." She placed the leek in her mouth and chewed.

"I want to possess you, but not in the sense you think..." He handed her a goblet of mulled wine.

Allegra nodded, swallowing. "And you'll tell me the meaning of that when the mood takes you, Gabriele del Fra?"

He cupped her chin and brought his mouth down on hers. Hot, demanding and urgent, his kiss melted her. Allegra flushed with excitement when Gabriele ended his assault on her senses. He grinned knowingly.

"What is it like?"

"What?" His brow rose in query.

"To be embraced?" She stabbed at a piece of boar and dumped it in her mouth.

"Like nothing you'll ever experience again."

"Well, your explanation doesn't enlighten me."

"I'll show you soon."

"Did it scare you?" She thought of Eloise's making.

He nodded, then leaned in and nuzzled her neck.

"Of course."

"What did you fear?"

"The unknown. We all fear the unknown."

She gulped for air. "Yes, indeed." The pit of her stomach felt heavy.

"I promise you you'll never forget..."

"Gabriele?"

"Yes."

"Tell me about your parents."

Gabriele studied her for a moment. "Very well," he said at length. "My mother was from the Holy Roman Empire, *here...*" His eyes twinkled. "She was beautiful and had long brown hair," he reached out and stroked her hair. "...curls almost as lovely as yours."

His comment warmed Allegra's insides. "Thank you." He caressed her cheek with the back of his knuckles. "Please tell me more."

"She was tall and had the softest brown eyes." He looked away. "She was kind to all creatures, always affectionate and was never too busy to listen. She died when I was but a squire."

Allegra's heart went out to him. "How old were you?"

"I was fourteen."

"You must have been lost."

"I was almost as devastated as you when your family perished, Allegra."

Allegra was astonished by Gabriele's extensive knowledge of her life, even her inner turmoil. *Is there any part of me you don't know?*

"Death is all around," he was saying. "I feared death. I thank the kindred for giving me the gift of immortality."

Allegra sipped more of the mulled wine, liking the taste. "Your father, was he French?"

"Yes. Count del Fra was a great warrior, King Philip was his liege." His mouth twitched. "He suffered greatly over my *untimely death*... I was meant to carry on the family name, as there were no other offspring, you see."

"The *poor* man."

"Indeed." She pushed the half-empty platter away. "Have you had your fill?"

"I ate far too much." She sighed contentedly when he pulled her against his side.

Why do I feel so complete and yet so lost around you, Count del Fra?

"You think too much," he whispered, one hand stroking her hair. He nipped at her ear and fire erupted in the pit of her belly.

"*Oh, Gabriele.*" Past caring, Allegra placed her hand in his lap and stroked his erection through his surcoat, his heat seeping into her hand.

"Feel how hard you make me." He groaned in her ear and she shuddered. Tapping at the other end of the table ended their sensual game.

Claudia smiled down at them. "Gabriele, we are starving," she said pointedly.

Gabriele rose, his black eyes moving over the occupants seated at the lower tables, before returning to Claudia and Marcus. "Welcome to my family home. Eat your fill, and remember to clean up after yourselves."

The immortals moved rapidly, with stealth and

agility...piercing screams rent the night air. Mortals took to their feet, in a vain effort to avoid being part of the evening's banquet.

Before Allegra's horror-filled eyes, gnashing razor-sharp teeth shredded and gnawed at supple throats, wrists, breasts and chests. Their ravenous mouths gorged at the life's essence flowing from their flailing food source.

Blood, so much blood! Rivers of blood flowed everywhere her eyes touched. It ran down their necks, faces, arms, legs, hands...spilling onto the white tablecloths and the floor. Deep, dark jewels glowed beneath the torch's yellow radiance.

Gabriele grasped a nobleman's arm and hurled him to the floor. He bent over him and sank his incisors into the man's yielding flesh, drinking like a starving demon.

Attracted and repelled, Allegra stared in utter fascination. The victim shuddered and convulsed as death gripped him in its fierce arms, pulling him *down* into its dark abyss. That was how she saw death. She wanted to look away from the scene, but her head refused to move.

Do I want to be like that? Do I? No! I don't!

Gabriele raised his head, wiped his lips with the back of his hand, and then licked it clean. *Think of your friends!* he reminded her, his yellow eyes pinning her with their brilliant fire. *You wanted immortality for Sophia, in spite of her refusal. Can you honestly say you're being fair? Furthermore, I know Eloise will feel betrayed.*

"She'll have you to console her, won't she?"

Allegra muttered sourly. His laughter rang throughout the chamber.

"You know you must do this, if only to appease your own sensibilities, my sweet." His words rang true, but Allegra couldn't bring herself to admit it.

The room slowly emptied, immortals disappearing with their victims, some returning with armies of Guardians, who busied themselves cleaning the vast chamber. Allegra sat alone for what seemed like forever, benumbed, watching their actions. Then slowly, one by one, the immortals filtered from the room and into the ballroom, looking more like courtiers than ageless killer beasts.

She could hear music coming from somewhere beyond. Very medieval, another of Gabriele's authentic party treats. Her mind distinguished the harp, flute, lute, lyre, trumpet, and drums, the sound very jolly. She laughed at the irony in that.

Her stomach knotted and bile rose in her throat again. Gabriele and Eloise crossed the mosaic floor. Eloise's green eyes shimmered brightly and she was more effervescent than ever before. Beautiful, she looked wildly beautiful, something Allegra never thought she'd believe possible for Eloise to look. It was obvious Gabriele thought so, too.

Allegra bent over, grasping her stomach. She took several deep calming breaths and the bout of nausea passed. *I don't want to be one of them! I don't... I truly don't!*

"Yes, you do, you just don't know it, my sweet," Gabriele whispered at her ear, his seductive voice

wrapping around her. She pushed the feelings of longing away.

He doesn't deserve your affections!

"*Mon Dieu!* Whatever is the matter, *chère?*" Eloise asked in her new seductive voice.

Allegra swallowed hard, claspings her shaking fingers in her lap, lest Gabriele see them. "I see what Sophia meant..."

"You're not serious, *mon amie*. Once you've been embraced, you'll thrill in the experience!" Eloise sat beside Allegra.

"I don't want to *murder* a living being."

"You don't have to," Gabriele said quietly. "You can mesmerize your dinner and feast, your prey won't remember a thing."

"Oh. Then why –"

"The kindred like to play." He smiled. "We elders can't resist sometimes... The beings that we feasted on deserved death. They were specially selected because of their heinous crimes against their kind... murders and corrupters of innocence and innocents."

"Y—you befriended them with the notion of –" Her words trailed off. "That doesn't make it right."

"I'm not a humanitarian. Would you have objected if one of them had murdered your brother? Hmmm?"

"I...that's *unfair* of you!"

Allegra looked away, tears welling in her eyes. *How dare he use Andreas to make his point!*

"Forgive me, that was tactless of me." Gabriele took hold of her chin, tilted her head and gazed into her eyes. "I'm a thoughtless fool." Drawn into their

hauntingly dark depths, Allegra's words stuck in her throat.

Gabriele knelt before her. "Eloise, leave us," he ordered, without taking his eyes off her.

"Allegra, *mon chère*, please don't be hasty," Eloise whispered. Allegra nodded. Eloise rose and wobbled away on her extra high chopines.

"Please," he uttered, running his index finger over her quivering lower lip. Allegra nodded, her mouth working, but still no words came forth. Allegra's mouth felt so dry. She tried to tear her eyes from his, but he wouldn't allow it. His musky cologne wrapped around her, bringing to mind one of many erotic memories. The glinting gold lights in his eyes told her he'd read her thoughts, and that made her feel utterly powerless. She was drowning in a river of overwhelming emotions and needed to be away from him to think!

"I need you to be strong..." He pulled her to her feet, his hand moving down her back. "You're my responsibility, I'll not let you die. Understand? I can't."

Allegra nodded hesitantly. His touch did outrageous things to her body and his eyes drained her of all willpower. Deep down, she wanted this. She needed him more. She never ever wanted to share him again.

"Christ, I don't want to share you either. I know I have no right to feel this way." He lowered his mouth and she raised hers to meet him half way.

Slow and seductive, their mouths brushed and

moved in unison, their tongues blending sinuously. Allegra ran her hands up the hard planes of his back. His were in her hair and on her hip, pressing her against his pulsing desire. She undulated against him, her breathing heavy, her nails raking over his surcoat.

Gabriele broke the kiss and laid her back against the table. She rested against her elbows and watched him remove his hose and braies. He drew her gown up over her hips. His hands moved up her thighs and she opened her legs. His eyes burned into her sex and more moisture flooded there. "You're beautiful."

"Says the most angelic looking creature of them all," she uttered. Her voice sounded husky in her ears. Raising her ankles, she placed them on his shoulders. "Love me, Gabriele."

He lowered himself over her and teased her entrance. "How deep do you want me?" He pushed until the head of his cock stretched her wide enough to slide in and then withdrew. He moved in and out, lubricating it with her juices. "How deep?" his breathing was ragged.

Allegra pushed against him. "All the way."

His shaft glided into her drenched sex, his hands gripping her hips while he pressed all the way. He paused, throbbing inside her. "Like this?"

"Oooh, Gabriele!" He slid out and thrust deeply again, her flesh widening to accommodate his thickness. The delicious sensation of his sliding, pulsing heat made her mouth water. He plunged relentlessly into her welcoming flesh and she writhed and moaned beneath his thrilling touch.

He lowered his mouth to her skin and nipped at a taut nipple through the gown. She arched up, pressing her breasts in his face, her hands in his hair. *"I like that... More."* Waves of bliss rolled over her. Her sex clutched and pulsed tightly around his cock. He roared and came inside her shuddering body.

Allegra lowered her legs and he snuggled against her breasts. She caressed his face and hair. She sensed his need and wanted to fill the emptiness inside him. He filled hers, but the question was, would he choose her, and if not, could she live with the pain of losing him to her friend?

"We must attend my ball, my sweet," he said softly, nuzzling the tops of her breasts.

"No," she moaned in protest, wanting more time alone with him.

Gabriele raised himself up on his elbows, his black eyes scanning her face. "We can't stay here all night, someone may see." He raised his brow and chuckled.

She looked about her and laughed. *"Oh, dear."* Anyone could have come upon them!

"Come. We must have at least one dance before we retire." He rose and pulled her to her feet.

"Agreed." Allegra straightened her gown.

"Indeed." Gabriele went about redressing himself.

Chapter Eight

Gabriele's Embrace

They danced half the night and then Gabriele transported Allegra to his chamber by blinking.

Allegra gaze moved to the rose-covered bed and she gasped in surprise. "'Tis lovely, Gabriele."

Gabriele motioned to her and she moved back into his welcoming arms. "I thought you'd like it. We will rest here this night; the drapes are thick enough to keep the sunlight at bay." He helped Allegra remove her clothing and then led her to the large wooden tub. "I'll treat you."

Allegra sank down in the steaming tub and Gabriele lathered her skin with frangipani-scented soap, paying extra special attention to her erogenous zones. She panted and moaned in appreciation. He slipped two fingers inside her heat and Allegra thrust up, burying them deep.

"Oh, yes, ride them, my sweet," he said softly, caressing her breasts with his free hand. Allegra bucked wildly, her eyes clinging to his, silently

expressing her overpowering need. She tightened abruptly about his probing fingers and he ceased his ministrations. "You're very hungry."

Allegra groaned in exasperation. He wrapped her locks around his fingers and gently tugged as he leaned in to her.

"You *torturer!*" Her lips met his with fervent hunger, her hands biting into the flesh on his shoulders. Gabriele pulled away.

"Enough."

"You're cruel."

"Mmm...such luscious lips," he said hoarsely, lightly running his thumbs up over them. He rose to his feet and she opened her mouth to complain. "*Shhhhhhhh*. You must have patience."

Gabriele passed his long fingers through his hair, his heavily lidded eyes caressing her. "You're making me self-conscious," she stated. She felt the color rise up her face. His lips twitched. "'Tis rude to stare."

"I know, my mother once told me that, when I met sweet Eleanor, the fairest flower in all of France...but I couldn't help it, she was sublime. I followed her for weeks. I adored her, you see. "

Allegra felt a stab of jealousy at his soft faraway tone and brusquely interrupted. "How *sweet*."

He angled her an amused look. "Are you jealous?"

She vehemently shook her head.

"I'm relieved. I was only six and she was seven."

Allegra grinned sheepishly, and he answered with a chuckle. He slipped into the wooden tub behind her and massaged her back with practiced fingers.

Allegra wanted to tell him he was everything to her, that she lusted him, loved him even more, that he filled her, challenged her, and was made for her, but was too afraid of his rejection to be so bold. She'd often wondered if he was privy to how she felt and sincerely hoped he wasn't! *He probably wants Eloise anyway.*

He must have sensed her mood change. "Are you all right?"

"I'm only thinking..."

"I see. I must tell you some things before I embrace you, fairest flower."

"Hmm." She nodded.

"All new members must pass three tests to meet the requirements of the kindred." He cleared his throat. "One must accept the kindred's ways, be loyal and sacrifice something. 'Tis not a major challenge."

Now I see!

"Our weaknesses are few, but detrimental to our existence." He sighed. "All members of the kindred can cease to exist after a wooden stake has pierced their heart and then are they burned before sunset. Being beheaded and then burned before sunset, or being seriously burnt by sunlight or flame has the same affect."

After a long silence, Allegra asked, "Are those the only things that can destroy you?"

"Yes." He rubbed her shoulders. "Elders have the ability to become invisible to both humans and fledgling immortals, and in some cases, to other elders."

"Can you?"

"Yes, Marcus, Claudia and Shiro can also. We can pass our gifts onto our fledglings."

"Oh. You are powerful, then?"

"Indeed,"

"Master Shiro's gift will aid Sophia's survival in the new world. I fear for her without the clan's guidance."

"Shiro will make certain she is well cared for. He has sent Jamal along to watch over her."

"Master Shiro is beguiled by her."

"Indeed." He sighed again. "'Tis rare for him to be taken by a woman."

"I'm pleased. Now, allow me to cleanse that splendid form of yours before the sun rises." Allegra rose from the tub, shuddering as his hungry eyes devoured her. She dried off and knelt beside the tub

She moved his damp curls and soaped his shoulders and back. "Tell me more, Gabriele."

"We have the power to mesmerize any human mind. They can become our willing slaves, again, if we so choose. Our preternatural strength and speed bewilders the human mind. Our pleasure and pain are one hundredfold, which can be a delight, or intense agony. All of our senses are acute. We can move from one place to another in an instant, as you know, as long as we've been to that place before. It's called blinking."

"I'd like to do that," she murmured. He placed a finger to his lips.

"Some of us have reflections, some don't and some

loathe drinking from one who's consumed garlic."

"I would be one of those!" She shuddered. Gabriele frowned. "Oh! Please go on."

"Some fear God, crosses and such, and some don't. We can fly, but not over water. I can transform into a bat and a wolf, most of us elders can. Some say beings from other clans can transform into any being or animal they see."

"Other clans?"

"Apparently, there are many, but I've not met any of these beings. It all began with Lilith..."

"Yes, I've been told."

"We sleep from sunrise to sunset. Some elders can stay awake during the day, hidden in shadow, but are quite weak. We have guardians to watch over us and care for our human devotees in our absence. We lose our ability to read the mind of one we love, unless he or she allows it, or hasn't learned to block it." He paused. "'Tis a paradox, really. We form strong bonds with our life-mates, and they are the only ones who can affect us this way. A couple will usually open their minds to each other, 'tis our way."

"Oh. You mean they never hide their thoughts or feelings?"

"Yes, once they have chosen to spend eternity together, there's nothing to hide." He took her hand and brought it to his lips. "Any other questions?"

"Yes." Allegra rose, collected a towel from the armoire and handed it to him.

"Thank you." Gabriele stood and dried himself off.

"Can you show me?" He raised a brow. "How you

transform."

"Indeed. Watch and see." She merely blinked and a beautiful gray and white wolf stood before her, its golden eyes fixed on her. She moved forward, knelt and patted its soft fur. It nuzzled her hand. "You're a beautiful creature." It moved away and a bat flapped around the ceiling. "And you're not so cute," she murmured.

"Cruel woman."

Her heart leapt in her throat. "That was quick."

"I did tell you. Is there anything else?"

"What's it like?"

"I'll show you."

"No! I'm so afraid..." Allegra hugged her naked form. "What if..."

He pulled her into his arms and held her tightly. "Christ, I'd never let anything dreadful happen to you!"

"Oh, Gabriele." Allegra rose on tiptoes and kissed his descending mouth. Tender and loving, his lips affectionately brushed over hers, his teeth nipping at her lower lip. He stroked her cheek and jaw with gentle fingers, his mouth lightly urging her to let go, to free herself, to feel. She choked back moans as she clung to him, body undulating against him.

Gabriele bent and scooped her up in his arms, carrying her to the bed. He placed her down, his lips still locked with hers. Nudging her thighs apart, he slid between them, his heat pressing into her slick opening. She gasped, her nails digging into his back. "That's it, open for me, little dove," he said against

her neck.

"Oooh." Allegra shuddered when his teeth grazed her throat. Gabriele slowly impaled her, every inch of him stretching and filling her while his tongue flicked over her jugular. She wrapped her legs around him, arching up to meet his hips. "Harder," she whispered raggedly.

His mouth moved over hers, muffling her cries. Her body convulsed as wave after delicious wave of rapture washed over her. When she came down, another more intense orgasm took hold of her. She let go, allowing the feeling to build. Her muscles contracted sharply around his stroking shaft.

"I'm lost in you," he whispered against her cheek.

"Oh, Gabriele." He continued to pump into her with slow deliberation, his unrelenting penetration building her excitement to a blinding crescendo, his mouth tantalizing her as it moved down her throat. Great shudders wracked his muscular frame. Sharp teeth sank deep into her neck and icy pain pierced her entire being, shattering her rapture. "*Gabriele!*" He drank with the appetite of a starved creature, his lips suctioned onto her neck. She pushed at his chest, to no avail. "*Gabriele!*"

Blackness descended on her, pervading her whole being. This was the end! Then from far away, she heard his beautiful hypnotic tones. "Drink. Drink my blood, it will revitalize you."

His wrist was at her lips, wet liquid spilling into her mouth, making her cough and splutter. Allegra swallowed, and something strange and exhilarating

overcame her. She grasped his forearm and sucked, his blood making her feel afire. The more she drank, the more alive she felt. She wanted to consume all of him, needed to fill the emptiness within.

"Enough." Gabriele pulled his wrist from Allegra's mouth and passed a calming hand down her face. "Sleep. When you awaken, you'll be a member of the kindred, an immortal."

Helpless to avoid the mesmerizing arms of sleep, Allegra let the darkness take her down into its fathomless depths.

Chapter Nine

Immortality

Allegra opened her eyes and blinked several times, the pale canopy coming into sharp focus, every fiber standing out in bold relief. Her stomach grumbled fiercely and she groaned, curling over. She inhaled deeply, a variety of aromas assaulting her senses. She could smell Simon's presence, hear him breathing beyond the bed. She began to laugh, the sound strangely husky in her ears. Another presence...it was *Nadia*. She sensed the woman's fear and frowned, she would never do anything to harm her guardian. A smile touched her lips.

Allegra thought of Gabriele, hurt that he'd departed before she'd awakened. The notion of him brought with it a mixture of pleasure and pain. *Does he want me? Am I just another conquest? How will I bear this existence without him?* Sudden tears spilled down her cheeks and she wiped them away, shocked to find blood staining both her hands. *My tears are of blood!* She closed her eyes briefly, containing her feelings.

She rolled over and pulled the curtains back.

"Good morning, mistress," Nadia said.

"'Tis indeed." Again, her purring tones shocked her. Allegra gazed about the chamber and smiled. "His room is as I like it, not as he does. However, does he *like* me enough to choose me as his *one*?" she mused aloud. No one bothered to answer, not that she was asking anyone to.

Allegra watched dust particles fall to the tiled floor, amazed at her highly altered state of being. She felt Eloise's presence and had the wild urge to see Gabriele before the formalities began. "Where's Gabriele?"

Simon cleared his throat, his eyes averted. "The master is downstairs, my lady," he said, his fingers stroking his blonde goatee.

Allegra assumed Simon averted his eyes because he was hiding something from her, and realized why when Nadia almost dove on her, pulling a white chemise over her head.

"Thank you." Allegra turned and made for the door, her movements rapid.

"Wait!"

Allegra turned and looked at Nadia.

"You must dress appropriately for the *claiming ceremony*...regardless of whether he chooses you," she explained.

"I don't have time," Allegra purred in her new voice. "If he rejects me because of my dress, then he wasn't worth having in the first place." She turned and moved into the antechamber and then down the

spiraled staircase. The brick walls blurred before her eyes; she surmised she'd become accustomed to seeing things in this manner soon enough, or learn to focus better.

The most haunting music began to play as she crossed the mosaic-covered floor. *Who plays the harpsichord?* She moved toward the sound. She came upon a set of doors, opened them and stood on the threshold. *Ah-ha! A modern music room.*

Frescoes of Ancient Rome covered the room from floor to vaulted ceiling and padded velvet settees were strategically placed throughout. Various string, wind and percussion instruments, carefully laid out on console tables, delighted her eyes. In the center stood a finely carved harpsichord and on the stool before it sat Gabriele.

He was dressed in a white undershirt, black breeches and knee-length boots, his sable curls tousled. His dark head bowed over the instrument, while his long, graceful fingers struck the keys, creating beautiful music, which tugged at her heartstrings and drew her closer.

She found the sight of him utterly breathtaking and wanted to go to him and melt into his powerful arms. Nothing sexual, she just needed to touch him.

"I knew you'd come," he said softly.

"I—you...I'm hungry," she said lamely. Her stomach grumbled on cue.

"I know." He played on.

"Oh... When do we eat?"

He ceased playing and looked at her, his dark gaze

moving over her revealing attire. "You look breathtaking, my sweet. Come," he held his arms out.

Allegra hurried across the room, threw herself into his embrace and buried her face in his neck. Then something extraordinary happened, her incisors began to grow and the urge to bite into his neck became overpowering.

"You may drink," he said in soothing tone. "Arrgh!" Her newly acquired fangs sank into his yielding flesh. He buried his hands in her hair. "Now, drink slowly."

I'm trying.

"Already, you telepathically speak."

Allegra's mouth sucked on his neck, feeling his essence flow over her tongue and down her throat. The more she consumed the more she wanted, his taste exciting and delighting her. Fire roared through her veins when she heard his groans of pleasure.

"Enough!" Gabriele detached her eager mouth with effort. She moaned in protest and he chuckled softly. "You're greedy, fledgling." Burying his face in her neck, he tasted her, too.

Allegra stroked his curls, pressing herself into him, his musky cologne delighting her senses when she drew breath. She loved his scent. *This is divine!*

Gabriele withdrew his teeth, licked her wound and then thoroughly ravished her pliant mouth. He raised his head. "I knew it." He looked deep into eyes. "I knew you were worthy from the moment my eyes touched you," he said hoarsely.

"Really?" Allegra's emotions overwhelmed her

and she began to sob.

"Hush, little dove." He raised her chin and kissed her cheeks, his obsidian eyes capturing hers. "Don't cry. You'll get used to your new state of being soon enough."

Allegra planted kisses all over his face. "I wanted you to know that I—I..." She averted her gaze.

Gabriele waited. "Yes?" he asked at length, his look curious.

"I love you! I don't know when I started loving you, perhaps from the first moment I laid eyes on you and if you don't choose me, I shall die!" she said in a rush. "I will. I truly will!"

Her outburst must have surprised him. Gabriele stared, his expression unchanged. "I'm flattered by your words. I...I—"

"Oh," Allegra pulled from his arms and rose to her feet. "This is somewhat embarrassing." She laughed. "I don't know what came over me."

"Allegra, please allow me to—"

"*Bonjour*, Gabriele and Allegra." Eloise entered the room, looking flamboyant as ever in her emerald and cream brocade gown.

Allegra feigned her happy face and hugged her ungainly friend. "'Tis wonderful to see you."

Eloise kissed her cheeks and laughed. "We're immortal at last, *chère*." When she stepped back she gasped in horror. "Look at your clothing, *mon amie*! You must get dressed before the rite."

"Yes." Another fake laugh. Allegra tucked some errant locks behind her ears "You're right, I shouldn't

dally."

"You had better not. *Go!*" Eloise shooed her.

Allegra turned and smiled at Gabriele, hoping he didn't sense her feelings of wretchedness. "You play beautifully, forgive the intrusion." She turned and fled the chamber before he could reply.

* * * *

"You have hurt her feelings, *Seigneur* Gabriele. I do hope you're male enough to appreciate her deep affections for you."

Gabriele scowled at Eloise. "This, coming from a woman who beds other women because she's afraid of being hurt by another male! You know *nothing!*" he sneered. "Spare me the lecture."

"Claudia isn't just *any* woman."

"Furthermore, just because she created you doesn't give you the right to reprimand me, *fledgling!*" he roared. "Know your place!"

"Don't take your frustrations out on me, I'm not at fault. Why don't you go to her and tell her how you truly feel?"

Eloise was right. He was angry with himself, not her. *What if Allegra refuses me?* He groaned. *You damned fool! Didn't she just open her heart to you?*

"Thanks. I will...I have to go." He gave Eloise an apologetic look, and then blinked.

* * * *

He startled Allegra when he appeared a hairsbreadth from her. He looked pointedly at Nadia. "Get out!"

Nadia glanced at Allegra and she nodded. The servant swiftly left the chamber, closing the doors behind her.

"I—"

His mouth slanted over hers before she could utter a word; hot and hungry, he devoured her sweetness, savoring her taste before lifting his head. "I love you, too, Allegra Montague. I have and will *always* love you, passionate wench. Be my life-mate, my chosen one. Be mine forever." He stared into her big amethyst eyes, awaiting her response.

"I knew you cared for me. I did. Although you do have a strange way of showing it at times."

"Forgive me, I'm but a stubborn fool who fears rejection as much as you. I was shocked by your unexpected admission. I'm sorry I hurt you."

"I took a chance. You weren't very forthcoming, my lord."

"Yes, you did." Gabriele grinned sheepishly, raking his hands through his hair, pushing it out of his eyes. "I never meant to hurt you." He looked away. "I didn't want to be hurt by you either..."

"Oh, Gabriele." she melted into him.

"You've turned my orderly world upside-down, little fledgling." He sighed.

"And you have mine, Gabriele." She laughed joyously, her eyes sparkling brightly.

"I was drawn to you from the moment I first saw you at Marcus's masquerade ball, five and a half

months past. I chose you, because I was fascinated with you. Everything I've learned about you since has made me burn for you all the more. I've never wanted or needed a woman the way I do you." He nuzzled her cheek. "I—I hated sharing you with Marcus. It ripped me apart."

"I did it for you."

"I know."

She nodded. "My sacrifice, Queen Claudia told me."

"I had no choice. Sharing never bothered me, until you."

"You beautiful creature, I love you beyond expression," she whispered.

He grinned down at her. "You have passed *my* test."

"Ah-ha, your chosen one must *love* you, am I right?" Allegra asked, eyes dancing.

"Indeed. I wouldn't have it any other way."

"Sophia and E—"

"Claudia and Marcus chose Eloise and Sophia, Queen Claudia's rule, and it needs reviewing." He laughed. "Eloise is a charming creature, but more suited to a female companion, at least until she learns to like men. Now, you silly wench, will you be mine, exclusively and forever?"

"Certainly." Tears of happiness streaked her face. "And will you do the same for me?"

"Christ, yes!" He nodded. "I need no other in my arms, or in my bed." He pressed his erection against her. "Only you can keep me in a constant state of

arousal."

"You complete me, Gabriele del Fra." She nuzzled his neck, becoming alarmed when her incisors began to grow again. The desire to bite him began to overwhelm her.

He held her to him. "Drink, satisfy your hunger and mine, my beloved chosen one."

The End

Author's note:

The Immortality's Caress Series is Erotic Romance fiction. Sub-genres: Historical & Paranormal.

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About the Author

I was born in 1970, in a small town called Longreach, which is located in Outback Queensland, Australia. I began writing in 2000... I write Historical, Contemporary, Fantasy and Paranormal Erotica & Erotic Romance. I write a little poetry, too.

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