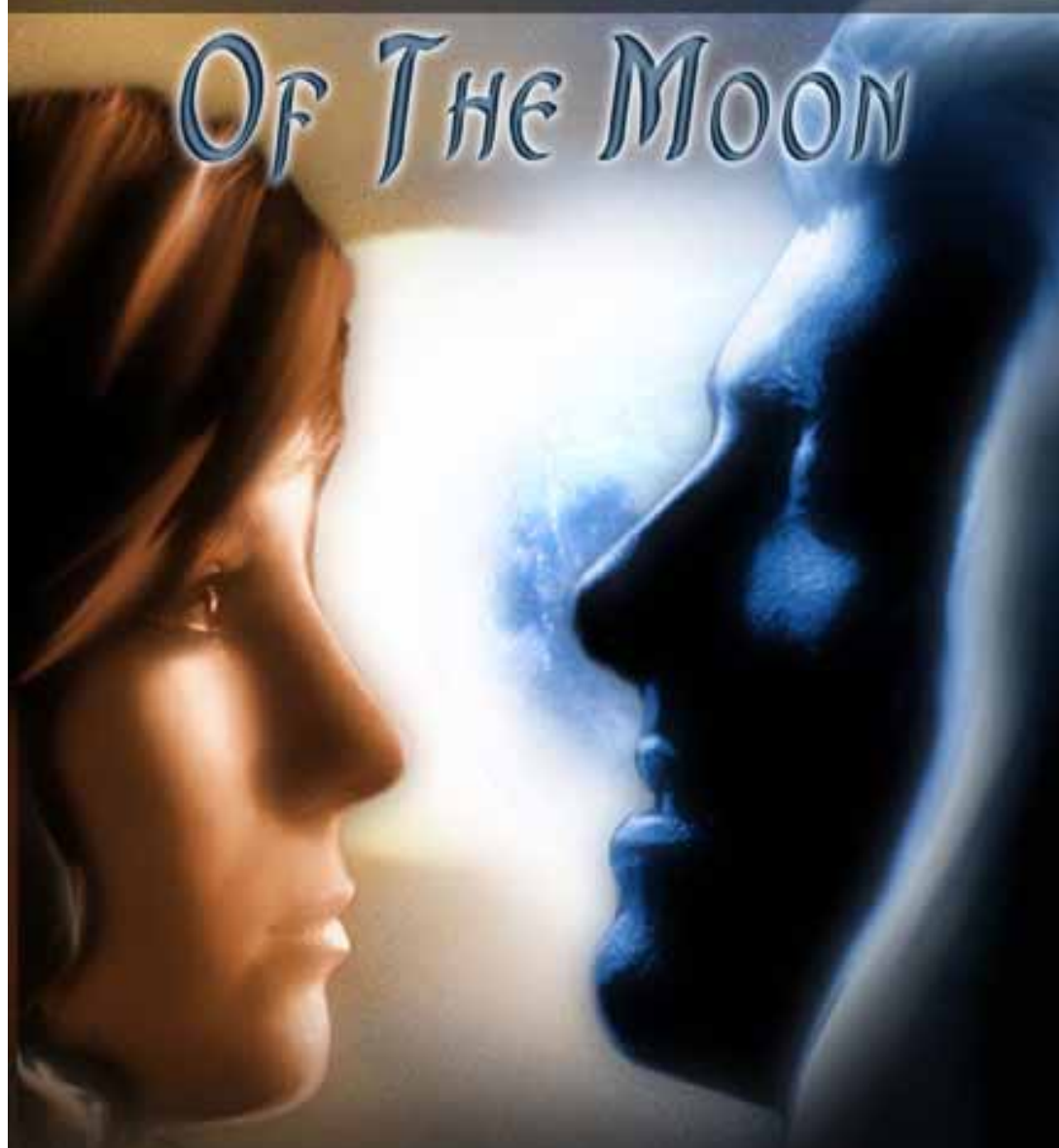


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DRACONIAN LEGENDS *Of The Moon*



VIVI ANNA

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Draconian Legends: Of the Moon

Vivi Anna

Dedication

For Emy. My Celtic Wizard.

Prologue

Diary entry, the 35th sun turn of the Dark Clan rule

I fear for my sanity this day. I have been ordered by Overlord Rica de c'Intunecos to give myself to the visiting emissary from the Moon Clan. He comes for the union of the Overlord and his new bride. However, I know it is for political purposes as well.

Lord Gogu's army grows. In the Black Lands of the Dragon Mounts, I fear he breeds an army to protest the continuing reign of the Dark Clan.

Overlord Rica is a ruthless and brutal ruler, but Lord Gogu would be worse, much worse. I fear for my people as I fear for myself. If the Draconian Clans go to war, it will be the Romas that bleed. It will be our bodies that litter the battlefield. They will use us as foot soldiers, sending us to our deaths.

Although Rica has the loyalty of the Midnight Clan, he needs the strength and cunning of the Moon Clan. I know it is my duty, as a thin bond to the only Roma royalty, to do what I must to ensure our continuance, but the thought of the cold, lethal touch of a Draconian on my flesh makes me wish to abandon my post and flee. To where, I know not.

I have been lucky thus far in my young life to escape such depravity. I have witnessed too often the debasement and cruelty imposed on my people at the hands of the Draconians. I can escape it no more. It is my turn to sacrifice the only thing I have left to the inhuman horde...my humanity.

Alexandreina de cu Soare, the last heir to the Sun Clan rule

Chapter One

“Don’t fret about the serving, my lady. It can be quite pleasant. Those from the Moon Clan are said to be very skilled in the sensual arts, and gentle too.”

Alexandreina de cu Soare sniffed her scorn toward her maid. She knew Nicoletta was trying to soften the consequence of the night’s events. However, nothing could lessen Alexandreina’s revulsion at what she was being forced to endure.

“Who’s told you this?”

“Mirela. She went with Lord Mihai to the Moon Clan lands a few moon turns ago. She told me that it is very different there.”

“I highly doubt that. Mirela is much too trusting of the Draconians. It will get her into trouble one day. None of them can be trusted.”

When the Draconians invaded and conquered their country, they forced blood-serving, a cruel and barbaric practice, onto the Roma people. Because the Draconians were stronger, faster, lived longer and were gluttons for food, sex and blood, they fed on the Roma people like cattle. It became a necessity for them to thrive. Without digesting blood once a sennight, the Draconians became weak and frail. Not something they allowed to happen. And because the Draconians alone held the decision if that bloodletting was painful or pleasurable, the Romas continued to serve out of fear.

It was that fear that had her family imprisoned in the keep, as the conquered royal family. To keep the peace and simulate some sort of normalcy in the country Lord Rica let them live comfortably, at least for a

while. He liked to remark that they had been his guests out of the kindness of his heart. But Alexandreina knew better. He had no heart.

It was that supposed respect, something her father, mother and brother died for, that allowed Alexandreina to escape most of their depraved acts. Until now.

As Nicoletta pulled the jeweled brush through Alexandreina's long, thick sable hair, she found a knot and yanked it through.

"Ouch," Alexandreina yelped as she pressed her hand to her head. "Be careful. I would like to have some hair left when you are through."

"Beautiful hair." Setting the brush down, she smoothed a hand over Alexandreina's head. "You'll be the belle of the evening."

Alexandreina's face darkened. She hated dressing for the banquet. The last place in Draconia she wanted to be was in the dining hall this eve. Nevertheless, it was her duty as the last royal heir of the Sun Clan, and she would do what protocol demanded. It also did not help that she was kept as a servant in the keep and the thought of her punishment, for disobeying a direct request from Overlord Rica, disturbed her thoughts.

As Nicoletta plaited her hair with ribbons, Alexandreina stared hard at herself in the vanity. Restless sleep lined her generous green eyes, as she had not had a peaceful night since the news of her impending service.

Pinching at her cheeks, she noticed too well how they were filling out. Much farther than she wished. The honey cakes she bought from the village market were just too tempting.

That was one of the reasons why the Draconians lusted after Roma women, she supposed, because they were fuller, thicker and more robust. A glaring opposite to their women who were tall, thin and pale, like antagonistic ghosts. At least that is how Alexandreina perceived them as they floated around the keep demanding service in one form or another.

Nicoletta finished her hair, and then set the sheer golden scarf over her head, wrapping it around and securing it under Alexandreina's plaited hair. When she was done, she looked at Alexandreina in the mirror and smiled.

"There, Overlord Rica will find you more than pleasing for his guest."

The disdain of the night's events made her stand and pace the dressing room, her heavy brocade amber skirt dragging on the pale stone floor.

"I don't care how pleasing I am. It shouldn't be my duty to give myself to someone not of my choosing. It is cruel and debasing."

Nicoletta curtsied to her mistress. "We all have our duty, my lady."

Alexandreina stopped in her pacing and glanced toward her young maid. She sighed and reached for her. With tears already welling in her doe-brown eyes, Nicoletta rushed into her arms. Alexandreina stroked a hand over her hair. The girl had suffered more than was humane. If only Alexandreina had been stronger, to stop the guards from taking Nicoletta the first time she was summoned to Lord Rica's chamber. The broken wrist she suffered seemed so insignificant compared to the agony she heard resonating from Rica's room all that night.

Every time Nicoletta was summoned, Alexandreina's wrist throbbed in memory of that time she failed her...again.

"I'm sorry for your plight, Nicoletta. Here I am complaining about my first service to the Draconians, and you have been blood-serving Lord Rica himself. If it were in my power, I would abolish all blood-serving. It is heartless and cruel."

"I know you would, my lady," she sniffled. "That's why we still have faith in your family bloodline."

Flinching, Alexandreina pulled back and searched the girl's face. "Faith to do what?"

"To free us."

Alexandreina stared in stunned silence. Freedom? Surely, Nicoletta did not think it was possible. That notion died in Alexandreina the same year she watched her mother's brutal death in the Messenger Ceremony. And it had been even more evident when her brother had been tortured and killed by the priestess. Her fate could easily follow her ancestors' path, as could any Roma citizen. The Draconians were stronger, faster, and as far as she could tell, infallible. How could simple Romas defeat the undefeatable?

Before Alexandreina could answer her maid, there was a sharp knock at her chamber door. The door opened and a Draconian guard stepped into the room. Outfitted in full traditional garb in respect for the visiting clan members, the guard wore black armor and carried a spear. It always shocked Alexandreina to see them dressed as such, as if war was on the doorstep. However, from the rumors she heard, a war was not that far removed.

"It is time to go," the guard snarled. "Lord Rica is not to be kept waiting."

Alexandreina nodded.

Expecting her to follow with the arrogance of assumed control, he stepped out of the room, but left the door open.

Alexandreina glanced down at Nicoletta and wiped the last of the girl's tears away. "We will talk of this later."

Nicoletta nodded and stepped back to curtsy. "*Bun Seara*, my lady."

"*Bun Seara*, Nicoletta."

Alexandreina ran a hand down the gold brocade bodice of the gown that was her mother's, and the only dress she had managed to hold on to after her death. Lord Rica had stripped her of everything connecting her to her family. Isolating her from her ancestry, to make her forget what it had been like before the Draconians had come to destroy their way of life. But it had backfired. Alexandreina held onto her faith, her family history, even harder now.

Drawing strength from the one thing she had left, she took in a deep breath, held her head high and went out her chamber door.

The walk to the main dining hall was a long one. Alexandreina's chambers were in the far northeastern corner away from the courts. The rooms she occupied once belonged to the servants of the keep when the Romas used to rule. She did not mind. Actually, she preferred it that way. Although she had a guard constantly, she still received the privacy she craved. The less time she had to spend within the Draconian courts, the better.

Eyes downcast, she marched down the halls, not wanting to view the spectacular murals on the walls or the weavings of her past hanging from windows and draped over opulent furnishings. These things always reminded her of her mother and the times they had spent wandering the halls looking at such arts.

As she passed the drawing room, her eyes flickered over the life-sized portrait of Lord Rica hanging above the great hearth. Dressed in his battle gear, his sword held expertly in his hand, he stood over a dead servant arranged artfully at his feet. Dreadful shivers surged over her body, reminding her of the evil that she was forced to serve.

The guard stopped at the dining hall doors and glanced over his shoulder, growling at her to hurry.

She picked up her pace and followed him into the large room. Blushing, Alexandreina glanced toward the low table and saw all nine guests already seated and staring impatiently at her. All but one. His presence dominated the room, and she had trouble looking away.

When Lord Rica cleared his throat, she bowed her head and rushed to his side at the head of the table kneeling before him in subjection.

"I apologize for coming late, my lord. I was unaware that you had already arrived."

"You cannot tell time, Lady Alexandreina?"

“Yes, my lord, but I wished to make myself beautiful for this eve, as I know how important it is to you.”

“And you have, my lady, you have indeed.” Rica chuckled. “Is she not exquisite, Sorin, as I have boasted?”

Beside him, Lizuca, his future bride, sniffed indignantly.

Alexandreina risked looking up to peer at the man Rica addressed. Close up, he was even more powerful. Her eyes widened at the sight of him. He was not like the others. While they had hair as black as ink, his was the color of moonlight that cascaded around a face of sculpted plains like those on the statues of the gods in the courtyard. Lips, full and sensuous, graced his comely face and were a brazen comparison to the cruel thin lips of the others. He looked more like an angel from the heavenly plains than a demon from the darkest regions of the Underworld, as she had come to associate with the Draconians in her keep.

Sorin smiled softly at her. Averting her eyes, she sucked in a shocked breath. His wide, warm smile was unnerving. A tickle of something pleasant brushed against her flesh. She shivered at the unexpected sensation.

“She is all you have said, Lord Rica,” Sorin commented.

Rica elbowed him in the ribs. “And more I promise you.” He chuckled. “But that can wait till later, yes?”

Sorin laughed with him, but kept his eyes on her.

Rising from the silk cushions, Rica loomed over Alexandreina. Sorin followed suit and stood beside Rica.

“You may rise,” Rica commanded, extending his hand in demand, forcing her to offer hers in return.

Reluctantly taking his hand, Alexandreina straightened and raised her head, but avoided looking Rica in the face. The dark void of Draconian eyes unsettled her. Her father had once said, “A man with no

color to his eyes is a man without a soul.” As far as she was concerned, he had been correct in his assessment.

Rica raised her hand, pressing his mouth to the back. Even though she desperately wanted to pull away from his cold touch, she held herself still. Her stomach roiled with the press of his dead-like lips on her skin.

“Lady Alexandreina, be presented to Master Sorin de cu Luna, emissary and chief councilor to Lord Vali of the Moon Clan.”

Sorin took her hand from Rica and bowed before her. Surprise at his action lifted her brow. No Draconian had ever bowed to her.

“I am most honored to be...gifted to you, Master Sorin,” she said, almost choking on her words. With a deep bow, she fought the bitterness off.

Expectant, Alexandreina squeezed her eyes shut, preparing for the blow her disrespect demanded. But no blow came. Only a warm, masculine laugh rumbled around her. Daring to open her eyes, she looked up.

Sorin grinned. “Yes, I am sure. Please rise, Lady Alexandreina and sit beside me so we may dine. I am sure your legs must be aching from all this curtsyng.”

Silence filled the room, as the other Draconians watched Sorin seat Alexandreina at the table. Sitting down on the cushions, Rica lounged back and started to laugh. The others followed his lead and joined in.

Alexandreina arranged her skirt around her pillow as she sat cross-legged at the low table. She did not look around at the others as she settled herself. She knew they were not happy at her attendance. On more than one occasion, they voiced their disdain, mostly in rather rude and unsettling terms. She didn’t need to look around to know who attended the banquet. The usual courtiers, Lord Mihai from the Midnight Clan, Cezar, Rica’s army general, Rica’s bride-to-be Lizuca, his twin daughters, Vanda and Valerica from a previous union, and Doru de c’Alb

the only other full-blooded Roma allowed to roam freely around the castle keep.

A traitor to his people.

Out of the twins, Vanda had been civil to her in the past. Alexandreina avoided Valerica at all costs. The woman was cruel and ruthless like her father. More so, as she always felt the need to prove her Draconian heritage, since she was born from a Roma blood-servant. Their mother, Ivona, was said to be a kind and endearing woman. But because she died during the child birthing, as most women do from Draconian unions, Alexandreina never had the joy of knowing her.

Roma servants entered the room and brought jugs of *tuica*, plum-brandy, to the table. They poured the thick liquid in every cup. Rica took his cup and raised it in the air. Everyone else followed suit. Alexandreina also lifted her cup, as was expected.

“To the long reign of The Dark Clan. *Noroc!*”

“*Noroc!*” the attendants all shouted then drank.

Without drinking, Alexandreina set her cup down. She would not toast the slavery of her people.

Rica noticed her refusal to drink. “Alexandreina, is there something wrong with the *tuica*?”

She shook her head but refused to look at him.

“Then drink. It is a night of celebration. You should be thankful that I rule, and not Gogu. He would not treat you with the respect that I do.”

Alexandreina eyed him then, boldly. Too boldly, judging by the way Valerica and others around the table snickered.

“Yes, if Gogu were in charge, you would not be sitting at our table Roma. You would be the main course,” Valerica barked gaily.

Others around the table joined in her laughter.

“So true, my dear,” Lord Mihai stated as he picked his teeth with his long fingernail. “Your affection for the servants, Lord Rica, has been a topic of many discussions of late.”

Rica waved away his disdain. “Just don’t mistake my gentle nature for weakness.” He grabbed one of the female servants and brought her down to his lap. He fondled her breasts and licked the side on her neck.

Alexandreina glanced away from the display. She could not watch the abuse her fellow Roma endured, but made the mistake of looking at Lord Mihai. He was watching the display and licking his lips. She knew exactly what was on his mind. Turning away, she locked eyes with Sorin. He was not watching the display but keenly observing her. She blushed and bowed her head.

“What say you, Master Sorin? How does your Clan deal with the Roma servants?” General Cezar asked as he sipped his brandy.

“We seem to be more integrated in my city of Constanta. Roma children even run freely in the streets with Draconian offspring. It is not uncommon to see the two species playing a game of chess in the village square.”

“Really? How...interesting. What do you do when the Romas get out of hand? Certainly they must with that much freedom,” Lizuca calmly pointed out.

Sorin picked up his cup. “Never had that particular problem, my lady.” He took a sip.

Alexandreina caught the little smile playing along his lips.

Curious. The man was different from the others. He seemed more refined, not as barbaric. Even the way he watched her was different. He didn’t look at her as if she were the next meal.

Chapter Two

As the servants brought out the food on big golden platters, the conversation turned toward the impending nuptials. Alexandreina watched on in interest as Lizuca preened like any new bride, about the ceremony and her extravagant ritual gown.

Rica was much more flippant, this being his second union. His first wife mysteriously disappeared years ago. Word was, through the keep servants, she was distributed elsewhere because of her failure to produce him a male heir.

Alexandreina did not remember Crina well. She had been an unhappy woman who never ventured far from her chambers. Not once did Alexandreina ever see her outside in the courtyard. Most Draconians avoided the sunlight as much as possible. That was one of the reasons she spent so much time outdoors during the day, anything to grant her some freedom from prying, hungry eyes.

Alexandreina's stomach rumbled as the roasted pig was set before Rica. She had not eaten since the midday meal, and then it had been only cheese and some fruit she had taken out with her to the gardens.

"Hungry?"

Alexandreina blushed and glanced briefly at Sorin under the hood of her eyelashes. "Yes. I apologize for my rude belly."

"Please, Alexandreina, quit apologizing. You have no reason to."

She looked at him, narrowing her eyes in confusion. He didn't speak to her with condescension.

“Shall I fill your plate for you?” He picked up her clay plate and smiled.

Unable to form a response, she nodded. She was not used to such manners and respect, especially from a Draconian.

“Let the feast commence,” Rica declared as he grabbed the front legs of the pig and tore them off.

Around the rest of the table, the attendants tore pieces of meat, and slopped yams and candied fruit onto their plates. There were no utensils. They ate with their hands, juices dribbling down their chins.

She could never get use to the savage way they dined. Under their refined speech and proper royal titles, deep down inside they were barbarians. It was evident at meal times, and when they engaged in festivities.

She tried to smile politely as Sorin ripped off a piece of the pig and set it on her plate. He added mashed turnips and fruit gelatin to her plate. He slid it in front of her then filled his own. Gingerly, Alexandreina picked up a chunk of meat and bit off a piece. She chewed slowly, savoring the tender morsel, while trying to ignore the grunts and slurps from the others.

Risking a look, she peeked at Sorin. He ate with his hands, clearly enjoying the rich flavors and spices they used in the food, but she did notice that he used the provided napkin to wipe his mouth. She was surprised and grinned despite herself, hiding it behind her raised hand.

He glanced at her and leaned toward her conspiratorially. “These feasts are so messy, don’t you think?”

Alexandreina laughed aloud at his mocking tone. She put a hand to her mouth when Rica glanced at her, annoyance on his face. She bowed her head in respect and he went back to his meal.

Peering at Sorin, she saw that he grinned behind his napkin. She was pleasantly shocked at his odd behavior. She had never known a Draconian with a sense of humor. It was a refreshing change.

After the meal, the servants cleared away the trays and plates, Roma musicians rushed into the room and set up in the corner. They were dressed in the traditional festive garb of the Roma people. Flowing, billowy, colorful tunics with bell shaped sleeves, tan suede breeches and knee-high suede boots adorned the four-man ensemble. Alexandreina smiled whimsically as she watched them arrange their instruments. She always loved the folk music of her people.

More tuica was poured as the music started. The heavy thumping of the drums vibrated around Alexandreina. It made her heart thud in rhythm. The soft lilt of the flute joined in, then the tambourine.

As the song reached a crescendo, dancers ran into the room. Each girl possessed jewel-toned veils draped over their bodies, but they barely covered their naked breasts. They wore colorful sarongs that lifted when they swirled, revealing bare legs, full rounded hips and the sweet juncture in between. Leather ropes around their ankles sang with tiny golden bells. They twirled and clapped their hands. It was a dance of sensual pleasure and seduction. Alexandreina had seen it many times. It was the only dance the Draconians ever allowed them to perform.

Alexandreina tried not to watch the faces of those around the table. She knew she would see contorted masks of arousal. Each of them eyeing the dancers with visions of sex or worse in their minds. She glanced at Lord Mihai. Drool dribbled from between his pale lips as a voluptuous girl danced beside him.

He reached out and grabbed her arm, pulling her into his lap. She didn't scream or protest. Each dancer was expected to comply with every wish of the visiting guests. Because the dancer was very well versed in the game, she cuddled up against him, knowing her duties.

"I have made my choice, Lord Rica. She will do nicely." He rubbed his hand over the girl's back and slipped it down to her round backside where he squeezed. The action reminded Alexandreina of being in the market and testing fruit the same way.

“Good choice. Nedelcu is very succulent. I have had her myself.”

Lizuca chuckled. “So have I.”

The dancers continued to perform. Alexandreina knew that most or all of them would be servicing someone at the table before the night was through and the sun came up. Lord Mihai ran his hands over Nedelcu, removing the veils that covered her. He molded her full breasts with his hands and lapped at her flesh. She moaned and ran her hands through his long black hair.

Alexandreina turned away. She could not watch their sexual display. The public exhibitions of sex that the Draconians reveled in disturbed her. If they were not eating, they were engaged in some sexual depravity. Their appetites were voracious, and they attacked each of them with single-minded purpose.

Sorin suddenly stood up from the table and bowed his head to Rica. “I will take my leave, my lord. I commend you on a hearty feast. I was most pleased.”

Rica tipped his head in acknowledgment, but did not take his eyes away from the girl that danced next to him. “You will not engage in the festivities, Master Sorin?”

Sorin held out his hand to Alexandreina. She took it hesitantly and stood on shaky legs. “I will take my festivities to a more private venue.”

Rica laughed heartily then glanced at Alexandreina. “She will do you well, I am sure.”

Alexandreina blushed under Sorin’s intense scrutiny.

“I am sure as well. *Bun Seara*, Lord Rica.”

“*Bun Seara*? Is that not an inane Roma parting?”

“Yes, I apologize. We use it often in Constanta.”

Rica waved away his apology and set his avid attention back on the voluptuous woman swaying her ample buttocks in his face.

Sorin took Alexandreina’s hand and led her out of the dining hall. She was fully aware of more than one set of eyes on her as she retreated.

When they were out of the hall, Alexandreina noticed the large bulge in Master Sorin's pants. She blushed and averted her eyes.

Sorin glanced down to where she had looked. "I am Draconian. Food and naked flesh arouse me. I will not apologize for it."

"I did not ask you to." She winced the moment the brash words escaped her lips.

"You did not have to say the words; I can see what you think in your eyes." The guards at the door bristled and shifted their weight on their feet. Sorin ignored them and offered his arm. "Shall we retire to my chambers and discuss this in privacy?"

Alexandreina took his arm, but did not risk looking up at him. Certain of her punishment, she swallowed down the bile rising in her throat. He just wanted a more private place to do it. At least, she thought, he had the decency to allow her some solitude to accept his inflictions.

Chapter Three

They strolled through the halls of the keep to Sorin's guest chamber. He asked many questions about the various artwork and wall hangings. When she answered, he seemed genuinely interested. Alexandreina found that very perplexing.

Sorin opened the doors to his chambers and gestured for Alexandreina to go in. She hesitated but entered, her chin lifted. She would not show her fear. He could have her blood but she was certain he could never have her soul.

He shut and secured the doors behind him. Alexandreina jumped at the sound of the lock clicking. She stood in the center of the sitting room, uncertain of her actions.

Sorin swept by her regally, his long, dark cloak flowing behind him. "Shall we have a drink?" He poured two glasses of brandy from the provided decanter set on the table. He handed her one.

She nodded as she accepted it. Sorin watched her over the rim of his glass as she took a small sip.

"This is your first time," he stated without question.

She nodded, afraid her voice would shake.

"I thought as much. Rica is cleverer than I had expected."

"I'm sorry, my lord? I do not understand."

"No, I know you don't." He smiled. "Do not mind my ramblings. I often speak before I think."

She grinned back. "As do I."

"Then we have much in common I suspect, my lady."

Alexandreina's smile faded. She did not want to have anything in common with him. He was a Draconian. No matter what pretty words escaped his sensuous lips, she must not forget that.

Setting his drink down on the table with an audible clink, he spoke, "My lady, I release you from your service to me. I will have a guard escort you back to your rooms."

Alexandreina flinched back in shock. "Why would you do such a thing?"

"I have my reasons, and they need not concern you."

She set her brandy on the table and stood defiantly in front of him. "Well, they do concern me. Because when Lord Rica sees that I have no marks, he will question why. And no matter the reason, it will be my fault and I will be the one that suffers the consequences, not you."

"I will explain to him that I had no need of a blood-servant this eve. That my needs are already taken care of."

"He will be insulted if you refuse his gifts. You know this is part of the courts."

His brow lifted as he stared at her. She could tell he pondered her remarks. Maybe he was as perplexed about her as she was about him.

"Why do you argue so, when it is clear that you despise being a servant of any kind?"

"Because I fear Lord Rica's wrath more than your sexual appetites."

Alexandreina swallowed as she witnessed his face harden. A twinge deep in her belly flared like a flame while he stared at her. He unnerved her in more ways than she ever thought possible.

"If you truly knew my appetites, my lady, you would not be so sure in your fear."

Taking a step back from him, she could still feel waves of heat swell off his body. It enveloped her in a warm embrace. Shivering from the contact, she thought it was not entirely unpleasant.

Alexandreina raised her head and bared her neck. "Take me quick and we will both be at ease in Lord Rica's court."

Moving swiftly, he stepped in close behind her. She could feel his presence at her back, molding intimately into her. As she felt a sigh of hot air on the side of her neck, she clamped her eyes closed, expecting the pain to be extreme.

Her eyes fluttered open when she felt a feathery touch on her throat. Sorin trailed his fingers over her flesh, gently caressing each spot.

"There is much pain when blood is taken from the neck. We could find a more pleasant spot."

Alexandreina swung around and brought up her arm. Pushing back the sleeve of her gown, she bared her wrist to him. "From the wrist then."

Sorin took her offered hand and raised it to his mouth. He pressed a gentle kiss to her wrist where her pulse thumped painfully against her skin. She could feel the slight dampness of his tongue as he licked her there. Ripples of pleasure surged over her unexpectedly. Her knees trembled and she feared she would swoon.

"It is far more pleasant in a more intimate place. The sensitive, soft spot on the top of your inner thigh is the most enjoyable way to be served."

Her body quaked with his words. She did not want to feel desire. But she did. It raged over her, nestling deep within her sex. She blushed as her thighs tightened and quivered at the thought of him between them.

"I want it over with quickly. Enjoying it is not necessary. I can handle a lot of pain."

"Indulge me, my lady. You did agree to serve me, did you not?" He smiled slyly.

She nodded, knowing he had the upper hand. Although he seemed civil and polite, he still lorded over her. He could easily turn on her, and report to Lord Rica her disobedience. She would do just about anything to avoid that.

Taking her hand in his, he led her into the bedchamber. She could feel her heart pounding as they neared the massive bed. He guided her to the side, and sat her on the edge. Alexandreina scrambled back onto the fur cover and lay down, her hands fisted at her sides.

She watched, fear and desire strumming her nerves, as Sorin knelt on the bed at her feet. He took a foot in his hands, his touch gentle, and unlaced her satin shoe. He dropped it to the floor then undid the other. As Sorin took the hem of her skirt and began to raise it, Alexandreina clamped her eyes shut.

A cool breeze ruffled over her stocking clad legs as her skirt rose past her knees to her waist. She bit on her lip as the soft, refreshing air swirled around her exposed undergarments. Did he stare at them, wondering what treasure lay beneath? She slowly opened her eyes, too curious in her desire not to peek.

He was gazing down at her. However, she could not tell from his black eyes what he hungered for. Was he only thinking of her blood, or did he crave more from her?

He caressed her leg, feeling the silk of her stocking under his palm. He trailed his hands up to the edge of the fabric until he reached the soft amber skin of her thighs.

Alexandreina sucked in a ragged breath as he rubbed his hands over her flesh, his fingertips just brushing against the plain cotton of her underpants. Suddenly, she wished that she owned more luxurious lingerie. There were undergarments made from lace that molded to a woman's form. She had seen some of the Roma servants in the keep wearing such things. Gifts from their blood-masters. Hand designed and imported from far away lands. However, she only had the plain and unappealing cotton garments that peasant Roma women wore.

"You are beautiful."

Alexandreina blushed. "I am sorry that I am not wearing something more appealing."

His hands stilled on her thighs, thumbs resting just below the secret place between them. He gazed up at her. "You would have dressed for me, if you had known of my differences?"

She wanted to say no. That she would never have dressed to impress any Draconian. That his opinion did not matter to her. But she couldn't. The way he looked at her did matter. In some small part of her, she did want to please this man. Draconian or not.

"Yes," she breathed huskily, unable to lie.

"That pleases me greatly, Alexandreina." Trailing his hands back down her thighs, he placed a hand on each knee and pushed them back, spreading her legs.

Vibrating with desire, she watched as Sorin nestled his body on the bed, between her open legs. She had never had a man so intimately before. When she was seventeen, she had intercourse with one of the local boys, both needing to fulfill some want they felt they had for each other. After the deed, they realized it had been nothing more than raging hormones. They remained friends.

But to have a man so close to her secret spot where he could touch, taste and smell her, more than fueled the lustful feelings she never knew she harbored.

Looking down the length of her body, she could only see the top of his moonlit head over the gathering of her skirt. But she could feel him. Oh yes, she could feel him touching her.

He trailed his fingers over her flesh lightly, delicately, as if touching fine silk. She sucked in a ragged breath when his mouth replaced his fingers. Pressing his lips to her sensitive skin, he licked her. She wanted to clamp her legs shut against the waves of pleasure washing over her, but Sorin held her apart with his hands nestled under her thighs, his thumbs pressing into her flesh.

He continued to lick at her thigh, making lazy circles with the tip of his tongue. Moving his head over, he nudged into her sex, rubbing his

nose against the fabric of her underpants. Alexandreina jerked at the new sensations. The sensitive nub of her sex jolted awake sending flashes of delight up her body. She gasped at its treacherous response to him.

Sorin moaned into her. His voice produced tiny vibrations that moved through the constricting fabric and over the soft folds of her sex. She clenched her teeth against the shocks of rapture surging over her. The new pleasure she felt building deep within liberated her. She uncurled her hands and brought them up to her breasts to squeeze herself through the bodice of her gown. Even through the thick material, she could feel her erect nipples pushing out, begging to be touched. She tugged at the neckline, affording enough room for her hand to slip into the valley of her bosom to mold her breast, pinching her nipple between her fingers.

Sorin continued to rub his face over the crotch of her pants. With each stroke, her clit was prodded, sending fiery swells up her body. Alexandreina squeezed her eyes shut as an intense buildup fluttered at her center.

It was then that she felt the pain, sharp and immediate. She cried out as Sorin sunk his teeth into the soft flesh of her thigh. Jolts of pain radiated up her body, but soon it turned into fervent pleasure. Colors flashed behind her eyes. Feeling as though she were soaring through the sky, her stomach and sex tumbled over like falling rocks. Again, she cried out as if plunging to the ground. Soon, it stopped and she imagined herself floating on a big, soft, fluffy cloud and all around her were stars made of colorful light. Red, blue and green swirled above and under her.

She opened her eyes. They were heavy from sex and slumber as the soft, warm folds of sleep tried to drag her under. She blinked and tried to focus, as if drugged from too much wine.

From between her legs, Sorin stared down at her, blood on his lips, a thin red line trailing down his chin. The sight of her blood made her want

to cry out. But it was no use, as she was pulled under the euphoric waves of bliss.

“Sleep now, my lady.” His words followed her into the dark depths of sleep.



Struggling from the dark embrace, Alexandreina was finally able to open her eyes. She stared up at the dark canopy of a bed. But it was not her bed. She was still in Sorin’s bed. Turning her head, she saw that he was not lying next to her, as she feared. The bed was empty save for her. She brought a hand up to her bosom and found she was also still, thankfully, dressed.

Her arm sagged back to her side. She felt heavy with sleep, or even drugged with alcohol. Since she had not drunk much, it was something else that benumbed her. She tried to move her legs, but found they also were too leaden. But she did feel a slight twinge of pain on her upper thigh.

Sorin’s bite had sedated her and the saliva from his mouth had cauterized the wound almost immediately.

She had no idea that blood-serving could feel so intense. Pleasurable. The servants often whispered that it could be, but she had not known any experiencing such euphoria. She supposed she would not have listened even if there had been such talk. Her hatred of the Draconians deafened her ears.

Turning her head again, she searched for Sorin. She glanced around the dark room and spied a shadow moving in the corner by the open window. Beams of moonlight streamed into the room. Sorin stepped into one, his hair flashing off the light. As the pale luminance played over the angular plains of his serene face, she sighed in wonder. In that one

moment, she thought he looked like a god. Zamolixis himself coming to fetch her to the Underworld.

In silence, she watched as he knelt on a small dark pillow on the floor, facing the open window, his face tilted up to the moon. Closing his eyes, he placed his hands palm down on his thighs. He took in deep breaths and let them out in slow measures.

“Zamolixis, grant me the wisdom and the strength to choose the right passage. I fear I may have stepped off the righteous path and into my doom.”

Alexandreina wondered what could be troubling him. He was praying to Zamolixis. The Draconians believed they descended from this god. Roma’s also believed in Zamolixis but not in the same, self-serving way. Just one more difference between them.

As he bowed his head, he mumbled more words in some language she had never heard before. She wondered what he meant by his doom. Could she be his doom? Nonsense, she thought. How could she ever influence a Draconian? They were much too powerful to affect. How could she, one single Roma, ever affect the course of any action?

The thought swam in her mind as she tumbled back into the dark recesses of sleep.

Chapter Four

Alexandreina strolled along the empty halls with her marketing basket slung over her arm. It was a seasonally warm day and she would enjoy the short walk into the village to visit her people and administer good tidings to them. She was allowed to market once every seven days, and to attend religious and traditional ceremonies. It was Lord Rica's way of keeping the relative peace among the Roma people by monitoring contact with their only tie to a lost monarchy. It was a small pity, but she grasped it tight, afraid that he would one day take the privilege away.

As she walked past the guest wing, her thoughts strayed to Master Sorin. When she had woken in the early morning, feeling refreshed and elated, he had been absent from the chambers. Embarrassment from being seen by the servants spurned her quick return to her rooms. She did not think she could face them after her taking. That had been the one thing they had looked to her for, rebellion against the ritual blood-service. They had all been secretly proud she had been spared that particular chore.

But she could boast that no more.

Alexandreina bristled at the thought, but she could not stop the pleasant shivers that ran up and down her spine as she remembered Sorin between her legs and the exquisite pleasure she had felt from his bite. Her face reddened as more carnal notions raced through her mind.

Wound up in her prurient daydream, she did not notice that Lord Rica and his usual followers, General Cezar, Valerica, Vanda and Doru

de c'Alb marched down the hall toward her. She nearly stumbled when Rica's voice thundered around her.

"Where are you going?"

"To the village, where I always go on this day."

Narrowing his eyes, Rica grabbed her upper arm with a brutal grip. "Do not sass me, girl. I am in no mood for your disobedience."

Alexandreina cringed inside from the strained violence in his voice. Rica was in one of his vicious moods and she made the mistake of running right into it. "I am sorry, my lord, I meant no disrespect."

He squeezed her arm tightly and leered down into her face. The tang of fresh blood drifted to her nose.

"Did Sorin take you last night?"

"Yes, my lord."

Putting his hand around her neck, he tilted her head side to side searching for the marks. "I see nothing."

"He did not take me there, my lord." Alexandreina could not stop the blush reddening her face.

Rica grinned and looked down her body, drinking in his fill of her full, lush curves accentuated in her plain gown. "Show me."

Alexandreina pulled back and glanced around at the others. They watched with cruel amusement on their sharp faces. Vanda was the only one who looked away, uncomfortable with her father's actions. Alexandreina could clearly see the excitement on Doru's face, as his blue eyes flashed with arousal at her torment. Because he was Roma, one of her own, his amusement hurt the most.

"I will in a more private setting."

Reaching for her, Rica gripped her around the throat. "You will show me now." Pushing back, he released her.

Alexandreina ground her teeth and grabbed the fabric of her skirt. She slowly raised it, revealing her bare legs. The eager group watched in delight as she pulled her skirt up to her waist, bearing all to them.

Rica reached out and touched her thigh. He ran a finger over the healing bite marks in the flesh of her leg. Alexandreina flinched at his cold touch.

He smiled. "Good. This will make you ready for when Sorin leaves, and you will gladly come to my bedchambers."

Stepping back, she stared vehemently at her captor. She would die before allowing him to do the same thing to her.

Rica's smile faded as he straightened up. He raised his hand and slapped her across the face. The blow sent her tumbling to the cold stone floor.

"You will learn to accept my touch, Roma. In time you will beg me for it."

Alexandreina heard the threat and warning in his voice. Now she understood Sorin's remark about Rica. He had sent her to Sorin for training and nothing more. Once she grew accustomed to the serving, she would be thrust into Rica's arms and taught the more sadistic ways of the Draconians. Something she would endure for the rest of her days.

Waves of nausea swept over her at that thought. She clamped her eyes shut, afraid to look up at her tormentors. The sharp clicks of their leather boots as they marched to their daily meeting in the war room released some pressure on her chest.

Alexandreina took in a deep breath and opened her eyes to look around. They were gone. She gained her feet and stood, but wobbled slightly as her knees shook with fear and head spun from the blow to her face.

As she picked up her marketing bag, she noticed movement in the far corner of the main room. Narrowing her eyes, she spied the Priestess of the Temple, Cami de c'Intunecos standing in the corner like an alabaster statue, dressed in her white robes signifying her extreme power in the Draconian ranks.

Unmoving she watched as Alexandreina smoothed down her skirt. The woman always made her nervous, uncomfortable. She was always watching her, observing her. Alexandreina had never spoken to her as it was forbidden to speak to a Temple Priestess. Revered like a goddess herself, only Lord Rica had her ear.

Alexandreina lowered her eyes and continued her walk down the hall to the main doors. She glanced over her shoulder once before turning the corner. The priestess had moved out into the hall and keenly watched her with a strange smile on her thin pale face. Alexandreina swiveled back around and ran the rest of the way.

The sweet smell of honey cakes brought a soft smile to Alexandreina's lips as she wandered through the narrow streets in the village. The marketplace was brimming with people peddling their wares and socializing among one another. Villagers smiled as they passed her, some touching her arm as they walked by, in respect for her heritage and her plight.

Alexandreina stopped at the bread cart and bought the tempting pastries. She knew they would just add to her already blossoming waistline but she could not resist the sweet, homey flavor. They always reminded her of her mother.

"Are you to share those sweets?"

Alexandreina turned and smiled at her friend and surrogate uncle. Anghel du c'Alb was an elder in the village and had known her parents and grandparents. They had entrusted him with her care.

When the Draconians came down from the Dragon Mounts to invade the central city, he was a small boy. Of all of the people in the village, he knew what hell had been truly unleashed.

She went to him with open arms and kissed his right cheek then his left, in the traditional greeting for close friends and family.

"Of course, *Mag*. But only if you have tea to go with them."

His eyes narrowed as he scrutinized her face. A brief moment later, he smiled warmly, and offered his arm to her. They walked down the dirt street to the central garden where many people took their tea and enjoyed a day of social community.

They sat at a small wooden table, while the young garden server poured their tea.

"You have exercised your brash tongue again, I see." Anghel motioned to her swelling cheek. She could feel the flesh throb with the fresh bruising.

She brought a hand up to her face and cradled her wound. "I can not help my mouth. Lord Rica brings out the worst in me."

Anghel chuckled. "Yes, he brings out the worse in all of us, I think." He set his cup down and took her hand. "Take care with your words, Reina. We could not stand to lose you."

"Rica will not kill me, Anghel. He wants to possess me. A much worse fate, I think."

Nodding, he picked up his tea again. She could feel his intense gaze on her as she sipped her drink. Uncomfortable with his scrutiny, she wriggled in her seat. She feared he could see the marks on her.

"Something has happened," he remarked.

"What do you mean?"

"I can see in your face, and in the way you carry yourself, that something has changed. Do not be afraid to tell me child."

Alexandreina set down her tea and bowed her head. "I have been served. I possess the marks."

"I thought as much. It was only a matter of time."

"I am so ashamed." Tears welled in her eyes. She tried to hold them in, but when Anghel touched her hand, they fell unhindered onto the table.

"Do not be, my child. There is no shame. You could not refuse."

Alexandreina would never confess that her shame came from the enjoyment of her service. That she secretly wished Sorin would call her again to serve him. That he would use more than his fingers to entice the pleasure from her.

“Have you been used before, Anghel?”

“Yes,” he stated coolly. “I was once a servant of Lord Rica himself.”

Blinking back tears, she stared at him in shock. She had no idea that he had been in service. Not one time had he mentioned it or ever gave a notion that he had suffered. But she supposed he had been a young man and had been witness to the initial taking of the city. He had known Lord Rica for thirty-five sun turns. Too long not to have been enslaved at least once.

“I did not know, *Mag*.”

“I was a young man then. Strong, independent, a leader to the remaining people. I suppose that was why he took me. To prove to everyone that no one was safe, that even our leaders could be forced into servitude. He comes to me for advice now and then on how to handle the Roma problem.” He smirked without humor.

Alexandreina nodded, more tears brimming for the young man he was. He cradled her hand in both his, and looked at her with earnest.

“I believe he wants you for the same reason.”

“I know.”

“You are a great hope to our people, Alexandreina.”

“What do you mean? Hope for what?”

Did not Nicoletta say the same thing to me only last eve?

Anghel patted her hand and released it to stand. “There are wheels in motion that will turn the tide, my dear.”

“You speak in riddles, Anghel. I do not know what you mean.”

“In due time, it will be your position to know.” He bowed to her and smiled. “I must take my leave, my dear. Much work to be done this day.”

“But, Anghel...”

Leaning down, he whispered in her ear. "Have faith, Alexandreina, and all will be revealed." He kissed her cheek and straightened, gathering his gray robe about him.

Alexandreina watched as he strode across the market square. His words had baffled her. He spoke in riddles that had no meaning to her. She could only guess at his reasoning. Surely, he did not speak of rebellion. Anghel knew too well the power that the Draconians wielded. The Romas were no match in battle. They did not possess the weapons to beat such supremacy. The Draconians long ago destroyed the silver mines when they first conquered the land. Now the Romas had no way to make the metal blade that could inflict a serious wound on their oppressors.

Resigned to her confusion and determined to finish her tea, she picked up her cup and took a sip. Over the rim, a flash of movement caught her eye. She set her cup down as a sense of malevolence washed over her. She turned to her left then her right, searching for the source of her discomfort.

Standing across the street among a throng of guards, was Priestess Cami. She stood rigidly, scrutinizing Alexandreina's movements.

Alexandreina picked up her bag, and rushed out of the garden square. She continued her path back to the keep without glancing back. While she made her way back to the castle walls, she was aware of being watched with each stride she took.

Chapter Five

The war room was bustling with people as Sorin entered. He glanced around as soldiers sharpened weapons and pounded out armor. Once the rooms had been the nurseries for the Roma ruling family he was told, but now a forge sat in the corner by the window instead of the rocking chair and footstool used for comforting the wee babes.

A large stone table was erected in the corner where there was once a crib. Large maps of Draconia were spread out upon it. Lord Rica, General Cezar and Sorin stood around the table looking down at the map.

General Cezar used his finger to trace an area that bordered the Dark Clan lands and the Black Clan lands, near the Dragon Mounts.

“He moves his men here.” He trailed his finger down the border. “And here.”

“Gogu is very conniving. He knows we are weak here.” Rica pointed to a spot on the map in the lower quadrant of his land. “He must have spies in our ranks.”

Sorin shook his head. “He could just be doing training maneuvers. Because he moves his men west does not mean he plans invasion.”

“Training for what? Do not be fooled. He plans invasion. Gogu has always wanted this ruling seat in Sinaia. He has waited thirty-five sun turns. He has waited long enough.”

“That may be true, Lord Rica, but I still do not see clear evidence of this invasion you claim to see.”

Sorin watched intently as Rica’s face hardened. His intent was not to insult the Overlord, but he had seen too many years of war and

destruction, that he was not so easily lulled into it once more. There were far more constructive ways to deal with dissension in the ranks.

“Are you telling me you will not commit the Moon Clan to my campaign?”

“No, Lord Rica that is not my intent. I wish for more evidence before I can commit.”

“Why do you hesitate? It is not as if it will be our blood that is spilled on the field of battle. The Romas are expendable and in an abundant supply.” He glanced at General Cezar and chuckled. “They breed like rabbits. For every man that dies two are born.”

“Yes, if only we had that ability to procreate so easily. Then we would not need to use them to fight our battles.”

Both Cezar’s and Rica’s smiles faded. Rica stepped closer to Sorin and put a hand on his shoulder. “You have a fondness for the Roma I see. I too have a sort of affection for them. Like pets. You care for them, love them, but in the end they really aren’t important are they?”

Sorin could not agree. He did not feel that way about the Roma people. He had spent enough time in their company to know more than Rica would ever want to learn. He learned of their culture and their religion and the traditions that held them together. He had even spent considerable time with their conquered monarch before his death. He had learned things about them no other Draconian cared to learn, and he had managed to learn about himself. Before Lord Emil de cu Soare’s untimely death, Sorin had considered him a friend.

“You have a look of great contemplation on your face, Sorin. You think too much. It is most unlike a Draconian to be so pensive.”

Sorin nodded his head. “I must consult with Lord Vali. I will not commit any troops without his consent.”

“It is only but a small time before Lord Vali passes to the Underworld. It is common knowledge of his fading, and everyone knows who will be named successor, Lord Sorin. Why do you think I have invited you here?”

General Cezar nodded his head in agreement and watched Sorin curiously from across the table.

“Yes, your intent was well known before I agreed to your summons. You are not the only one with ulterior motives.”

Rica bellowed with laughter, slapping Sorin on the back. “Ah, so you do have a backbone, Sorin. I was beginning to wonder.”

“You need not wonder about me, Lord Rica. I know perfectly well who I am and where my priorities lie.”

Rica nodded in respect and went back to looking at the map. “I will get you the proof you seek.” He looked up at Sorin, his eyes wide and empty. “Then I want an answer one way or another.”

Sorin bowed and made his leave of the war room. As he went through the doors and they shut behind him, Sorin felt a great pressure lift off his shoulders. He did not like war and did not want to be a part of it. But if Lord Gogu did invade, Sorin would commit his troops to the battle. He did not like Lord Rica, found him cruel, fallacious and arrogant, but Gogu was ten times worse. Sorin had learned that the hard way. He had trained under Gogu for the first five sun-turns of his soldiering term. He still had the scars from the man’s silver tipped whip on his back.

Too restless to retire to his chambers, Sorin wandered around the keep. He found himself on the highest tower on the high walk overlooking the splendid gardens of the castle enclosure.

The gardens reminded him of the ones back home in Constanta, where things were quite different from the hardened ways of the Dark Clan. He leaned on the stone trellis and gazed down at the soothing colors of the trees and flowers. The garden was empty save for the remarkable fountain chiseled from marble that stood proudly in center court. The Romas were fine craftsmen. He had not seen their equal in any Draconian attempt. The Draconians were not known for their appreciation of art or literature, preferring to practice their

marksmanship with a steel crossbow, then to stretch lazily in the afternoon shade to read a book.

Sorin found he wished to be able to indulge in such a luxury as that.

He was about to turn away when movement in the courtyard caught his eye. The Lady Alexandreina walked into the gardens and sat in the sun by the bubbling fountain. He leaned back on the trellis and watched her. She was earthly beautiful, full of round curves and soft flesh, skin the color of amber and eyes the color of spring leaves.

He found Roma woman to be very enticing. Had found pleasure on more than one occasion between their legs and in their arms. With Alexandreina, he found he was fascinated with how her mind worked. He wanted to know what she thought and felt. He could feel the fight in her and the desire to be free of her servitude. He wanted to know where that came from, what she would do with that freedom if she could possess it. She beguiled him to no end.

Three Draconian children ran out into the gardens toward Alexandreina. Sorin drew back in shock when she smiled at them as they approached. They circled her and touched her on the arms, trying to gain her attention. Enthralled, he watched as she went into her bag and came away with sweets for them. She gave them each a small pastry. As they ate, she laughed with them.

Sorin watched with wide-eyed amazement. Although the Romas and the Draconians were more integrated in his city, he had never seen Draconian children laugh so freely with a Roma. Actually, he was unsure if he ever saw Draconian children laugh much at all. Draconians were not known for their sense of fun or delight except in others' misfortune. They were taught at a young age to hate their Roma counterparts and use them for their own purposes.

Obviously, Alexandreina de cu Soare of the last Roma monarchy had enchanted them as well.



Alexandreina knew she was being watched as she rationed out honey cakes to the children. She had glanced up and saw Sorin standing on the keep wall watching her. She could feel his heated gaze even from the vast distance. The man had an imposing presence.

When she had glanced again, he was gone. A deep, odd feeling of disappointment swept over her. Out of all the Draconians, she did not mind his hungry gaze. She found that she welcomed it.

The children's disappointed sighs jolted Alexandreina from her thoughts as their teacher rounded them back up for their midday lessons.

"I told you what I thought about you playing with the servants," their teacher scolded, glaring disapprovingly at Alexandreina.

Alexandreina stared back at her with the same disapproval. She would most likely hear about it later in the form of a slap from Rica's hand or the removal of her books as punishment, but at that moment, she did not care. The children's laughter and interest in her was worth a few hours of pain and discomfort.

"Come. You are late for your lessons." The teacher herded them toward the castle.

Alexandreina watched them go, sadness squeezing her heart. If only it were different, and she could be their teacher along with the Roma children who belonged to the servants that haunted the keep.

Before they got to the castle entrance, the littlest boy, Serban, turned and ran back to Alexandreina. He wrapped his little arms around her and hugged her. Alexandreina hugged him back, knowing he would be punished for his transgression.

"Serban!" the teacher bellowed.

Alexandreina pulled him off and looked down into his ghostly little face. "You must go," she whispered. "And you must not do that again." His face fell. "You know why, Serban."

He nodded but pressed a kiss to her cheek. Alexandreina pulled back, surprised at his gall. He smiled at her. "I'm in trouble anyway." He ran to his group and the teacher. She grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and roughly pushed him forward into the castle.

Alexandreina watched them go, tears welling in her eyes. She would not let them fall, for she knew that in a few sun-turns time that little boy would be ordering her around without a burden because all the caring, compassion and love would have been beaten and programmed out of him. She had seen it before, and would see it again.

She wiped at her eyes as a large shadow fell over her. She glanced up to see what blocked her sun.

Sorin stared down at her, a soft smile on his face. "You have a way with the children."

She turned away from him and gazed down at her feet. "I am merely a pet to them, like a dog. They will soon learn not to play with their food."

"I wish you would not think such things."

She looked back up at him unable to stop the angry glare or the bite in her voice. "How should I think, Master Sorin? You just wish not to hear it. The truth sounds so brutal and barbaric."

She expected him to get angry, to scold her and punish her even. What she did not expect was the forlorn look that crossed his face. Unexpectedly, it pulled at her heart.

"I apologize for my brash tongue, my lord." She bowed her head.

"But you are right, my lady. I do not wish to hear it. There are many things of late that I wish not to hear."

She frowned at him. He was not like other Draconians at all. He seemed to possess emotions she knew the others did not have. Emotions like compassion and conscience.

Sorin glanced around the gardens discreetly, and then offered his hand. "Will you walk with me?"

She nodded, taking his hand to stand. He held it tightly and placed it on his arm. He smiled down at her as they began their stroll. Alexandreina felt confused and conflicted as they wandered down the winding cobbled path. If she closed her eyes, she could almost imagine that she was on a leisurely stroll with a fine gentleman caller who was courting her. It was a pleasant fiction, but a fiction nonetheless.

"I knew your Grandfather Emil."

Her head snapped up. "You did? How?" she blurted. She closed her eyes on a sigh after her outburst. "I apologize again, my master. My mouth has betrayed me again."

Sorin chuckled. "Do not apologize. I prefer your mouth to most others."

Her stomach churned over as he smiled down at her. Pleasant quivers erupted in her thighs while heat blossomed in her center.

"It is refreshing to have someone speak so freely. Please continue. Do not fear retribution from me. And please, call me Sorin."

Fearful that her voice would quiver if she spoke, Alexandreina nodded.

"When I was a Casa Guard in the army. I was Emil's guard after the invasion."

"I don't know much of my grandfather as he died before I was born. My father spoke of him a few times before he too was killed. Since then no one has been allowed to speak to me of such things."

"I am sorry to hear this. He was a great man."

"How can you say this? You are a Draconian, he a Roma."

"Over the years he was imprisoned, we developed a sort of bond. Friendship is the word I think in your culture."

She stilled her walk and gaped openly at him. "You were friends? Ha! Like a wolf is friends with the sheep he silently stalks."

“No, it was not like that. No harm came to him during his imprisonment. He was well fed and clothed. He was given his books, parchment and ink with which to write.”

“A man without freedom is harming enough.” Her voice boomed.

Sorin glanced around cautiously at their surroundings. He pulled her close and murmured, “Let us continue our walk along the walls, where there are less ears to hear.”

He led her along the path to the stone keep walls. A dirt path followed the long line of stone.

“I am sorry for my obtrusive words, but I find it hard to believe what you tell me.”

“He was a prisoner of war and treated fairly, my lady. It was a merciful thing that Lord Rica was in position to take lordship and not Gogu. No one would have been spared under his rule.”

“I hear he is marching on Sinaia. That he challenges Lord Rica’s reign.”

He stopped and stared down at her, his face still and stoic like stone. “You hear this from your own people?”

She nodded. “Many servants have masters that talk openly in their beds.”

“Yes, too many, obviously.”

“Is it true?” She squeezed his arm to implore an answer. “Will my people be soon marching to their deaths?”

Sorin gazed down at her. She felt like he was memorizing her every feature. He brought a finger up to her face and traced it over her cheek. He caught a stray length of her hair between his fingers and tucked it behind her ear.

“Do not worry about things that have not come to pass.”

“But I must, if to warn my own.”

He cradled her cheek in his hand. Instead of the cool touch she had come to expect, his skin was warm and inviting.

“Their warning will not change the events.”

She knew he was right. The knowing of it would not change the outcome. Her people would march to their doom regardless. They had no way of revolting, not when the Draconians could slice them in half with a flick of their wrists.

He dropped his hand and they continued their walk around the garden. Alexandreina felt surprisingly comfortable with Sorin. She had the notion that he felt something for her. More than lust, more than hunger perhaps. Possibly, he felt a connection with her. A connection to something he desperately yearned for. Humanity.

“Tell me more of Emil. Did you speak with him?”

“Yes, often. I would take my meal with him in his cell. He was an intelligent being. I learned many things from him. About your people, your culture. We shared many stories about each other and our ways.” He smiled wistfully. “I learned to laugh in those three sun-turns.” He looked up into the brilliant blue sky, squinting against the glare of the sun.

“How did he die?”

“One beautiful, sunny day, much like this one, he escaped from his cell. He made it to the keep walls before he was ambushed. He managed to injure a couple of guards before they overpowered him.” He stared off toward the far stone walls as if reliving the event. “Lord Rica beheaded him in the city square that day. His head remained on a stake in the center of the square for a sun-turn to remind the people of the consequences of rebellion.”

Alexandreina stopped by a nearby stone bench. She lowered herself onto it. Tears ran from her eyes, dripping off her chin.

Sorin sat beside her without touching. “I have made you sad.”

“No. It’s just I’ve no real knowledge of him or my grandmother. Only vague memories of my mother telling me some bedtime stories. I have nothing of them to remember.”

Sorin took her hand in his. He brought it up to her chest, turned it and pressed it against her heart.

“They are here, and in the blood that pumps through your veins. I see many things in you that were in Emil. Your eyes speak to me in the same way.”

Alexandreina stared up at him. She did not understand this man. She could see the concern on his face. The concern for her well-being. Were those of the Moon Clan really that different? Or was it just him? A Draconian born with benevolence.

She pulled her hand out from his and set it in her lap. She could feel it itch from his heated touch. “Thank you for telling me about Emil. It has given me a little more sense of myself.”

Sorin stood and bowed his head to her. “You will dine with me this eve?”

“It is Lord Rica’s joining this eve.”

He sighed. “Oh yes, his joining.” He rubbed a hand over his face and smiled. “Then you will be my mate for the *Dragoste*?”

Alexandreina was taken aback. She remembered the ritual dance from Rica’s last joining. As a little girl of ten hanging onto her mother’s hand tightly as the ritual started, she had been shocked and enthralled at the seductive dance the Draconian’s engaged in. She thought it was the closest thing to love that she had ever seen them express.

“You can choose your mate?”

“Yes, it is my right.”

“Valerica has her eye for you. Lord Rica would be very pleased at that matching.”

“I am sure. It would be a very advantageous pairing, but my eye is for you, Lady Alexandreina.”

He bowed and turned on his booted heel. She watched as he strolled down the path and back into the castle keep. Conflicted emotions swam in her head and washed over her body as he disappeared from sight. She

wanted to despise him for who he was. A Draconian Master. However, she could not. He was surprisingly warm and interesting to talk to. He had shared more with her than any Draconian before. She found, to her surprise, that she was beginning to like him.

Her body, on the other hand, reacted to him on a purely sexual level. She could not stop the ache in her sex when he was near. She remembered all too well the glorious way he had serviced her. Her body ached for another opportunity to experience those sensations again. It was like a drug. She now knew why some Roma servants were eager to please their blood-masters. The promise of such a thing was addicting.

Alexandreina sighed and glanced around the gardens. The sun was setting, and it would be time to go in and start her preparations for Lord Rica's ceremony. She startled back when she noticed that Priestess Cami sat on the edge of the fountain where she had been sitting before. The priestess was staring at her with a slant-eyed knowing.

Alexandreina bowed her head and looked around her, wondering what she should do. It was obvious the priestess was following her, or had some interest in her. She could not fathom what it could be. She had not broken any law. Only then did most Roma's garnish the attention of the priestess and her temple servants. A person did not come back from the temple summoning. It was said that they tortured a violator for days then killed them, dumping the body in the nearby river. She had seen firsthand what the priestess had done to her brother before he was tossed into the water.

Alexandreina gathered her bag and stood. She needed to get back to her chambers where she could feel safe and secure. She felt very uncomfortable sitting outside with the temple priestess and chief Roma inquisitor only mere feet away watching her with keen interest. Could her indiscretions with Sorin be of notice? Would she be punished for being with him? It would be just like Lord Rica to trick her into betraying him.

She kept her head down as she walked the path. It wound right past the fountain. There was no other way to go to get back into the castle keep. Walking on the soft grass could be met with five lashes of the whip.

Alexandreina could feel the intense gaze on her as she passed. It was as if the priestess could see right through her flesh into her very soul.

“Master Sorin is very charming, is he not?”

Alexandreina gasped as the priestess spoke. Her voice was lilting and enchanting. She had never heard it this close before. Alexandreina kept her head down, afraid to risk looking at her. She nodded her head in answer to her question.

“I have been watching you, Alexandreina. Soon, we will speak together.”

Alexandreina could feel the bile rise in her throat and her head felt faint. She gathered her bag to her chest and rushed off down the path. She could hardly breathe until she was safe inside the keep walls. Leaning against the hallway wall, she took in some ragged breaths. She did not know what the priestess spoke of. She had not broken any rule. Why would she want to speak with her? Was this Rica’s way to get her into his bed? Scare her into his arms for protection?

She did not know, but she’d be damned if she’d let him win. If she had to, she would go to the keep dungeons and endure her pain. She was not afraid to die. If it were her end, she would meet it head-on, with her head high and her heart pure. Rica would not win this war.

Chapter Six

From where Alexandreina stood in the receiving hall, she could clearly see the binding ceremony taking place on the dais. Lord Rica and Lizuca knelt before the priestess as she incited the ritual binding words of the Draconians. She placed her hand on each of their heads and blessed them with the power of Zamolixis. The binding was similar to a Roma marriage ceremony except for one glaring difference...the sharing of blood.

Priestess Cami took the ceremonial gold goblet from the provided gold tray and held it in front of her. As she closed her eyes and prayed to the gods, Lord Rica held out his wrist over the cup. One of the temple servants held his wrist and drew a sharp steel knife across his skin, slicing it open. Blood dribbled into the cup. When enough was bled, the servant wrapped Rica's wrist in a red silk scarf. In a few hours, his wound would be healed.

After Rica had lowered his arm to his side, Lizuca held her arm up over the cup. The servant did the same to her, wrapping her wrist up after enough blood was harvested.

Cami opened her eyes and held the goblet high above her, as she intoned the sacred words of joining.

"We witness now in force of mind; These hands, these loins, these bonds that bind; Blood will flow to give you power; Stronger in your veins each hour; From the hunger of your being; Unite, and seize your darkest feeling."

She brought the cup down and to Rica's lips. He parted them as she tilted the rim. He drank down a swallow of their mixed blood. She brought the cup to Lizuca's mouth, which opened eagerly and drank a healthy swallow. A dribble escaped her lips, and ran down her chin. She zealously licked it off.

Alexandreina's stomach rolled over as she did. As long as she had lived among the Draconians, she could still not suffer the blood. It was an integral part of their species and their culture, but Alexandreina abhorred its barbarity.

She glanced around as the last words of binding echoed throughout the lofty room. With only about thirty people in attendance, it proved that courtiers were of small significance in a society of warriors. Vanda and Valerica stood in the front closest to the dais. Behind them were General Cezar and his mate Raluca, Doru, Lord Mihai and Sorin. Alexandreina could not take her eyes off him.

He was dressed in jewel-toned finery and his hair was in a tight braid down his back. As she watched him, he flinched slightly. He turned his head and locked eyes with her. She nearly lost her breath as he stared. With his hair pulled back, he was an alabaster god. She'd never witnessed such beauty in a man before. Her head started to swim. She turned away from his intensity.

When she was able to focus again, she caught sight of Anghel standing in the back of the crowd. He was eyeing her like a hawk. She smiled softly and bowed her head in respect to him. He nodded back, but did not smile.

The ceremony ended. Rica and Lizuca joined hands and walked down the three steps from the dais. As they passed, the attendees bowed deeply to their lord and new lady. Alexandreina went to her knee as they passed. The attendees joined the procession behind them and followed them out of the receiving hall and into the grand dining hall where the Dragoste would commence and the feast and entertainment would follow.

Alexandreina waited until Sorin had passed before stepping into the procession line. She did not want to be seen with him. She did not want the others to see the eagerness on her flushed face when she gazed at him. They would know she was attracted to him. Attracted in more than the sexual sense. Like the way she would be attracted to a possible suitor. She did not want the Draconians, especially Lord Rica, to know that she had this weakness. They would somehow capitalize on it and push her farther into servitude and eventually to her doom.

Once assembled in the dining hall, slow, seductive music with drums and a hammered string instrument called a tambal, started. Rica and Lizuca faced each other in the middle of the room. They bowed to one another then turned, Lizuca placing her hand on top of Rica's outstretched arm. They walked down the middle between the attendees, dragging each foot as they stepped. When they reached the end of the floor, they faced each other again and moved their hands up to cup each other around the back of the head. As the music swayed so did they. Back and forth they rocked, molding each other with their bodies sinuously.

As they moved sensuously together, some of the attending courtiers called out. They shouted "*Dragoste*" as the music swelled around them. *Dragoste* in the Roma tongue meant love, but in Draconian it meant, lust, hunger and desire.

Rica and Lizuca stopped their sway then turned to walk down the procession aisle in the same manner they had started. They stopped in the middle and clapped their hands, once to the right, then to the left. This was the signal for the other courtiers to follow in the ritual dance.

Couples filed into the middle of the halls. Sorin walked down the aisle. All eyes watched him intently as he bypassed Valerica and went to Alexandreina. Some gasped as he held out his hand to her.

She did not look around at the others. All she could see was Sorin. He was smiling at her, inviting her in. She took his hand and walked

with him into the middle of the room. They faced each other and bowed as the music commenced with its sensual charms. As they walked down the aisle, Alexandreina glanced around at the others. Valerica was dancing with Doru, and even Anghel had paired up with Vanda.

As they reached the end and faced each other again, Alexandreina felt like everyone was watching them. Sorin buried his hand in her hair and cupped the back of her head. When she reached up and placed her hand around his neck, he bent forward, brushing his body against hers. As she closed her eyes, she bowed her back to feel his hot breath on her neck while they undulated back and forth. Pleasant shivers cascaded over her like droplets of water from a fall. Her whole body quivered with delight as they continued the dance.

When they were swaying into each other again, Sorin pulled her in closer. She could feel his heart beat against her chest. She moaned as he pressed his lips to her bare throat when he bent her over. She closed her eyes wishing he would trail his tongue lower over the swell of her breasts. That he would take her aching nipples into his mouth and play his tongue over them repeatedly.

As the music and the dance reached its crescendo, Alexandreina was panting for release. She knew her moans had turned fevered, audible to all. However, she didn't care. All she wanted was Sorin. His perfect sculpted face and long hard body. She wanted him rooted deeply between her legs. She could feel her lust lubricating her undergarments and the insides of her thighs. The heat in her sex was nearly unbearable, scorching and painful.

Alexandreina pressed her mouth against his ear as he bent over her once more. She groaned loudly. "Oh by the gods, take me, Sorin."

The music had stopped and her voice echoed through the dining hall. The other courtiers turned toward them, snide grins on their faces. Valerica started to laugh.

“Your pet is in heat, Master Sorin. You should collar and leash her before she starts to fuck the other guests.”

Others joined in her laughter. Rica and Lizuca laughed the loudest.

Blushing, Alexandreina pushed away from Sorin. He held her arm, gripping her tightly so she could not flee.

“I believe the *Dragoste* is too much of a dance for a gentle Roma,” Sorin answered. He smiled and looked around at the other courtiers.

“Too true, Master Sorin.” Rica walked up to him and clapped him on the shoulder. “They are too weak to handle the hungers of our race. Why in an earlier time, by the end of the dance, we would all be rutting like wild savage animals on the floor. But we have softened since our integration with the Romas.” He glanced at Alexandreina with violent desire. “Too bad really, because I’ve certainly worked up an appetite.” He turned to the other attendees and shouted. “Who’s hungry?”

There was a loud cheer as the courtiers voiced their answer. The dining hall door opened and several servants rushed into the room carrying two very large wooden trays, six feet long. They were set down on the long wooden table.

“Let’s eat!” Rica bellowed.

Alexandreina gasped but could not turn away from the ghastly scene on the table.

Two female Roma servants were naked and tied out, arms and legs spread, on the wooden platters. Alexandreina watched in horror as the courtiers gathered around the table in preparation to feed.

Rica knelt by the leg of a young robust woman. He stroked her thigh with his hand, tracing lazy circles near her sex. He turned and looked back at Sorin and Alexandreina.

“Come, Sorin. Take the first bite with me in commemoration of the continued alliance between our mighty clans.”

Alexandreina glanced up at Sorin’s face. He smiled and nodded to Rica. She wanted to run away, but he held her firmly. She could not

handle seeing him feasting on anyone but her. She struggled against him as he dragged her with him to join Rica.

He knelt down beside Rica, pulling her with him. Wide-eyed, she watched as he bent forward and pressed his mouth on the woman's thigh. Side by side, Sorin and Rica bit into her flesh. The woman cried out, but Alexandreina knew it was not because of the pain.

As Sorin lifted his head, she could see a thin rivulet of blood over his chin. He picked up a napkin and dabbed at his face. Alexandreina could stand no more. She jerked away from his grip and stood. Putting a hand over her mouth to stop the sob, she turned on her heel and ran out of the dining hall.

Rica watched her retreat, a smile of triumph on his thin, cruel face. Sorin set the napkin down and stood. With a slight bow to Rica, he said, "May Zamolixis bless your union, Lord Rica."

"Are you leaving us so soon, Sorin?"

"Yes, it seems my main course has run out on me." He chuckled.

Rica and the others joined in with him. He could see on their faces the sadistic glee they got from Alexandreina's suffering. He had to get away and find her before it was too late.

He turned on his heel and walked confidently out of the dining hall. He could not let them see how he quivered inside. How he ached for Alexandreina and her suffering. He would find her and console her in any way he could.

When he walked out into the hall, he saw her leaning against the stone wall. Her face pale, her eyes vacant. He rushed to her, gathering her into his arms.

"Alexandreina?"

She looked up at him, as if truly seeing him for the first time. She struggled against his embrace.

"Let me go! You are a barbarian."

"Yes, I am. I am truly sorry if you thought otherwise."

“You are just like Rica. Cruel and heartless.”

He held her closer, cradling her into him. He could feel her shivers. “I’m not, Alexandreina. I may be Draconian, but you know that I’m not like Rica. Feel my heart beat Alexandreina. It beats for you, my lady.”

“It only beats because you want my blood. You want to feast on it.”

“No. This time I want more than that. I hunger for all of you, Alexandreina. I want to be deep inside you, my lady. I want to feel every inch of you.”

Alexandreina looked up at him. He could see the conflicted emotions on her face, in her eyes. She was aroused, but fearful. He could not blame her when fear radiated through him too, but for many other reasons. He had never felt this way for anyone before. Emotions he had clearly dismissed years ago welled up inside. He felt a hunger not only for her flesh but also for her soul. He wanted to possess her completely.

She raised her hand and slapped him hard across the face.

“You can’t have me.”

Sorin grabbed her by the hair, tilted her head up and crushed his mouth to hers. She tasted like golden water. Fresh and sweet.

She shoved against him, trying to pull away from his lips. She slapped him again, harder. “I will not succumb to you.” Her voice quaked.

Sorin pushed her up against the wall and kissed her again. Her body strummed with nerves and desire under his hands. He could smell her lust. It was cloying and heavy, clinging seductively to his skin. Hard as steel, he throbbed for release. He pressed his groin up against her belly, willing her to feel his desire for her. Desire that meant more than just the joining of their bodies.

Alexandreina closed her eyes as Sorin kissed her. She did not want to crave him. Every fiber of her conscience and cultural upbringing raged against her passion for him. It was against all she held dear to her moral heart but her body was alive for him. It wept and roared for his touch.

She could not resist him any longer. She would go mad if she had to push him away. Her body would wither and die without his heated embrace and liquid mouth. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she moaned into his luscious mouth in surrender.

She cried out as his hands moved over her, possessing her body with his fervent touch. Pressing kisses to her chin and neck, he molded her breasts with his hands squeezing them with delicious pressure. She wanted his hands on her skin, to feel him pull and pinch her nipples. The fabric of her bodice was too heavy, too constricting; she needed it off, away from the insipid ache of her breasts.

“Tear it away,” she begged. “Tear the fabric away. I will not live without your hands on my flesh.”

Sorin nestled his fingers into the dip of her bodice, pushing his fingers against the plump swell of her bosom. She closed her eyes, as he pulled. The fabric ripped under the power of his arm, freeing her breasts. She groaned aloud as the cool, crisp air blew across her naked skin.

He growled low in his throat as he gazed down upon her. Looking up at him, she could see a ring of soft pale light glow in his black eyes. It looked like a lunar eclipse in the deep, dark depths. She gasped as the glow brightened.

“Your eyes. They glow.”

Sorin closed them and rested his head against hers. “It is because something inside of me recognizes you. Your smell, your taste. The feel of you under my hand.”

Alexandreina sighed as his words ignited her lust. She knew he spoke from his heart, which surprised her to no end that he was able to. The Draconians she knew had no heart. But here was this glorious man in front of her, declaring himself to her.

“Open them. I want to see what I can do to you.”

He opened them and gazed into her face. She smiled and brought her hand up to his cheek to touch him gently, to trail her finger over his skin down to his mouth. When his lips parted, he sucked in her fingers.

Alexandreina groaned at the feel of his wet tongue on her skin. She desperately wanted that tongue on other parts of her body.

"I can't wait any longer, my lady. My need is too great," he growled low in his throat.

She was reminded of a wolf as his voice vibrated over her with passionate fury. The hungry gaze he set upon her also reminded her of an animal. One she gladly wanted inside.

"Then take me," she whispered against his mouth.

Fisting a hand in her hair, Sorin deepened the kiss as his other hand moved down her body. He gathered the heavy fabric of her skirt and yanked it up, bunching it at her waist. He moved his hand under and cupped her at the sultry center of her desire. She was soaked through the cotton of her garments. The fragrant odor of her lust clouded his senses and he was nearly delirious. He could hold on no longer.

He slid his fingers under the fabric, gripping it tightly. With one swift pull, he ripped the crotch out of her underpants. Now, she was gloriously bare to his touch. Nothing could stop him from possessing all of her. Slowly, he inched his fingers forward, running them through the coarse curls on her pubic mound.

She dug her nails into his shoulders as he slid his fingers along her slick folds to find her opening. Inching one then two fingers into her, he delighted in the fact that she was already so hot and wet. She couldn't deny her hunger for him when her body was so responsive.

Wrapping her hands in his hair, Alexandreina kissed him again. She swept her tongue over his frantically, as if she couldn't get enough of his flavor. Sorin reveled in the way she had surrendered to him.

She broke the kiss as he pushed another finger into her. Panting, she gasped once then twice as he thrust into her repeatedly.

"I can't hold on much longer, Sorin," she cried. "Take me completely."

His restraint broke at her plea. Sliding his fingers out of her, he grabbed her buttocks with both hands and lifted her up. Instinctively she wrapped her legs around him as he pushed her against the stone wall. Reaching down between them, he unbuckled his belt and freed his cock. With one hand he held her up, while he guided himself to her opening.

He watched her face as he pressed into her. She flinched and gasped as he slid inch by inch into her slick channel. He could hardly breathe as her muscles clenched around him.

"You're so tight," he groaned. "Relax and open for me, Reina, I promise you only pleasure."

Moving his hands down, he gripped her around the thighs and pulled her forward, tilting her pelvis up to him. The movement gained him room to move and he was able to slide the rest of the way into her. He nearly came from the way she molded around his cock. So hot, so wet, so deliciously tight. Gritting his teeth to stop from ramming into her, Sorin started to slide in and out.

He couldn't control the pace for long. Not when her little gasps of pleasure echoed in his ears. He concentrated on her face as he moved but soon found the way her mouth gaped open and the way her eyes glossed over drove him insane with desire. She was so beautiful and so responsive to him that he wanted to give her as much as he could. As much as she could handle.

His pace quickened and he was pulling her down just as he was pushing up with his cock. Each thrust went in deeper, harder, until he swore he could feel the end of her on the tip of his cock. He continued to pump into her, again and again. Sweat poured down his face and trickled down his back. Pants and moans echoed in his ears. So mingled, he couldn't decipher between them. Groans turned into whimpers. Whimpers into cries. Scents and sounds swirled around him until he was delirious with pleasure.

Every nerve ending in his body fired at once. He couldn't distinguish his flesh from hers. All the while, he kept moving, kept thrusting, until his legs ached and his stomach burned with the exertion. Pumping and thrusting, until he could handle no more. With one last violent thrust, he buried his cock as deep as he could, and pulled her down to him, wrapping his arms around her and nuzzling his face into the side of her neck.

"Oh gods!" she screamed as she yanked on his hair and arched her back.

Sensation after sensation bombarded him as he emptied his seed inside her. He could barely think past the way his body pulsed and vibrated with rapture. As long as he lived, he'd never experienced a bonding like this. It was like the waves that crashed on the seashore of his home. Intense, powerful and overwhelming, but so pure and natural.

The feelings frightened him to the core.

Catching his breath, he looked into her face. Her eyes fluttered open and she met his gaze. He saw twin emotions in her eyes. She was as scared as he was at what had happened between them.

Wriggling, she brought her legs down, forcing him to slip out of her. He pushed away from her and allowed her skirt to fall back into place, covering her.

Without a word, Alexandreina pulled the pieces of her bodice together and brushed by him to move down the hall. In silence, he watched as her strides turned fierce and she started to run.

He didn't move as he watched her disappear around the corner. He was helpless to do anything else. For the first time in his life, he had no clue how to handle the situation. She had thrown him for a surprise and completely turned his life upside down.

Within two days, this woman had altered his life, and he had no idea how to fix it, or if he even wanted to.

Chapter Seven

The clouds from the previous night dissipated, granting the sun free rein to beam like a proud parent down on the village giving the air a warm and inviting feel. Alexandreina lifted her face to the heated glow as she moved through the village streets toward the temple. She wished the clouds around her heart would also dissipate. Maybe praying at the holy temple would lessen the weight around it.

It was a holy day for the Romas. All the villagers gathered in the vast temple to make their homage to Zamolixis. Each came with an offering of meat or fruit, laying it at the base of the altar in hopes that he would grant them their most intimate prayers. Alexandreina prayed every holy day for deliverance from the Draconians.

However, this day, she did not feel the urgent need for that prayer.

As she passed through the open wooden doors of the temple, most of the pews were already packed with worshippers. She was glad of it, as she did not feel right among her people. Lifting the hood on her cloak to cover her head, she slipped into one of the back pews along the aisle, in hopes that she would go unrecognized and forgotten. She did not think she could handle her clan's well wishes with the remnants of Draconian seed still in her body.

When she had arrived back to her room last eve, she had filled up a basin of water and scrubbed at her body, especially between her legs. She still felt raw and sore from her harsh cleansing, but she did not think it was all her doing. Sometimes, she could still feel Sorin deep

within her sex. When she did, it made her squirm with desire all over again.

Even now, sitting in this temple of holy worship, she could feel the echo of his rigid length pulsing inside her. She bent her head down in shame at the carnal thoughts and prayed no one could see her face or the hot flush that spread across it.

A hush fell over the villagers as their holy man stepped up on the dais of the wooden altar. He spread his arms out wide as if cradling the people in the church and began his sermon.

The priest's words were only faint mumbles in her ears as he commenced the prayers. She could not concentrate on his words as image after image of Sorin and their joining crashed through her mind. She kept her head bowed as if to join the congregation in their devotions, but it was only to hide the shame she was sure her people could clearly see upon her face.

Finally, the sermon ended and Alexandreina was able to make her leave. She kissed her thumb, touched her heart then her forehead in subjection to her God and stood to exit out the doors before she could be spotted.

But as she filed into the aisle, members of her clan soon reached out to her in recognition. She smiled and kissed cheeks and shook hands as she moved down the aisle with the crowd to the main doors.

Just as soon as she stepped out of the door, Anghel grabbed her arm and steered her out to the side of the church.

"Anghel, you are hurting my arm."

"We need to talk."

Before she could comment, her eyes set upon an unexpected sight.

All the Romas had stopped just outside the doors to stare. A group of Draconian guards stood in a circle near the temple. In the center was a man sitting atop a glorious warhorse. Sorin mounted the black stallion looking down at them.

His gaze set upon Alexandreina.

She could feel her face go hot with embarrassment, as the others soon realized for whom the Draconian lord sought.

“Excuse me, my lady, for disturbing you on your holy day, but I was wondering if you would care to ride with me?” Sorin gestured to the other beautiful horse he held the reins to.

Anghel dropped his hand from her arm, and stepped back. Alexandreina crept toward Sorin, conscious of the eyes that followed her.

“What do you do here? It is not right that you have come,” she said with bite and shame in her voice.

“It is a beautiful day, and I thought you would like a chance to ride.”

As she neared him, she shook her head vehemently. “You should go. You cross too many boundaries coming here.”

One of the guards stepped forward, his hand pulling on the hilt of his sword. “I would watch your mouth, Roma, or I will cut out your tongue.”

Quicker than Alexandreina could draw her next breath, Sorin had his sword drawn and at the guard’s throat.

“And you will hold yours, inferior slug, or I will do more than cut it out.”

The guard flinched and stuttered with shock. “But, my master...”

“Sheath your sword and be gone. I do not need your services any longer.”

The guard sheathed his sword and stepped back. He glanced up at Sorin. “But, my master, we are here for your protection. Lord Rica was insistent on that.”

Sorin glanced at the Romas that crowded around him, watching with shocked interest.

“I do not need your protection. Tell Lord Rica that you have done your service to me, but I do not require your presence any longer.”

The guard stared up at Sorin with a defiant gaze. Alexandreina did not think he would bow to Sorin’s demands. Finally, he nodded his head

and turned to the others. The guards assembled bowed to Sorin then marched single file away from the temple and back to the keep.

When they were gone, Sorin dismounted and approached Alexandreina. She was aware of several gasps in the crowd as Sorin neared her, a gentle smile on his face, and his hand out to her.

“My lady, you would do me an honor by accompanying me on my ride, this glorious day.”

Swallowing, she glanced around at the others. They watched her with intent awe. Anghel's face was a stern mask of interest, which chided her more than words. She turned from his gaze and looked back at Sorin.

He offered her his hand.

Without another thought, she took it and let him lead her to the horse.

A young man pushed through the crowd. “Reina! What are you doing?”

Anghel grabbed his arm before he could step into the circle and close in on her.

Sorin helped her mount the horse. Once she was up, reins in hand, he mounted his own. He glanced around at the murmuring crowd and inclined his head.

“You do me a great honor to allow your lady to ride with me. You have my thanks.”

A collective gasp spread through the crowd at his words.

Alexandreina did not look at anyone as she followed Sorin toward the village gates. She could not bear to see the looks of betrayal and hurt she was certain were on their faces as they watched their last link to Roma rule slink after a Draconian lord like a healed dog.

Anghel watched her go, his jaw clenched in anxiousness.

The young man beside him, grunted. “What is she doing? Is she under a spell? Reina hates the Draconians.”

Anghel patted his companion on the back. "I do not think this is a spell, Ovidiu. I dare say this Draconian is different."

Ovidiu stared at the old man. "You of all people know that they are all the same. Violent and savage."

"I have said that more times than I can count, but I do believe that this one is very different indeed."

Ovidiu turned toward the main gates, Alexandreina long gone through them. "Have we lost her, do you think?"

"No, I believe this might work out for us better than we ever thought possible."

Ovidiu nodded to Anghel in deference. Scratching his head, he wandered off with the dispersing crowd. Anghel did not watch him go, but continued to stare toward the village gates.

Another Draconian procession passed him, meandering down the village streets. Anghel turned and watched it go by. Priestess Cami walked amid a throng of guards. As their eyes met, Anghel nodded to her. She bowed back, a knowing curve on her lips.

Chapter Eight

Alexandreina took in a deep breath of fresh fragrant air as they cantered across the green field. She could not remember the last time she had been out from the confines of the village walls or the keep's stone. It had perhaps been with her mother many years ago. Lord Rica had allowed them to leave unescorted for the first time, and they had spent the day wandering the green fields and had a picnic in the soft tall grass. She had been happy then.

"You smile. What is it you think of?"

Alexandreina looked over at Sorin. He was watching her intently from his perch on his horse. "The last time I was allowed to leave the village without an escort."

"It was a pleasant time?"

She nodded, unable to express her feelings without tears. "I had a picnic with my mother."

Sorin patted his saddlebags. "I have some food for such a thing. We could have a picnic."

"If you like."

"Pick a spot anywhere, and that is where we will go."

She nodded. "I know of a place by the river. My mother and I spent time there."

"Take me there, then. I will follow." He smiled.

Alexandreina kicked her horse and took the lead. She pressed the horse more, pushing him into a gallop. She heard Sorin's low chuckle behind her as they sped across the field.

A short ride later and they were at the river. Trees lined the bank, and carpets of emerald green grass covered the shore. Alexandreina brought her horse to a stop by a thick clumping of trees. She dismounted and wrapped the reins loosely around a low branch. The horse whinnied as if in approval and lowered his head to munch on the tall grass.

Standing on the shore, she closed her eyes and raised her head to the sun. The rays warmed her skin and she smiled. It had been a similar type of day, when she had been here with her mother.

Her eyes snapped open, when she heard Sorin approach her from behind. She stiffened when he stepped up next to her to gaze across the clear water of the slow-moving river.

“It is a beautiful place.”

She nodded, unable to look at him. She could feel his gaze on her. Her skin warmed from his look.

“But not nearly as beautiful as you.” He raised his hand and touched her cheek.

Alexandreina flinched and turned around, putting her back to him.

“You pull back from my touch today, my lady. But last eve you could not get enough.”

“That was...our joining was a mistake.”

“Who are you trying to convince, Alexandreina?” Sorin stepped up behind her and buried his hand in her hair, turning her around to face him.

She did not want to look at him. Did not want to see longing and desire on his face. Desire for her...not as food, or blood, but as a woman.

Her eyes downcast, she tried to pull away from him. However, he held her firmly, his hand on the back of her neck, pulling her even closer to him. She could feel the heat of his body wrapping around her. Already, her legs quivered with want, and her heart pounded with anticipation.

She put her hand up to his chest to try to push him away, but instead she could feel his heart hammer under her palm. She looked up

then, into his face, and saw something she never thought possible. She saw fear. Fear that she would reject him? Fear that she did not really want him...as a man?

“If you truly do not want me, Alexandreina, I will let you go. I am a man of honor, and will not force myself on you. Not now, not ever.”

A tear slipped from her eye, as the truth of his words sunk into her. He was truly honorable, and nothing like the Draconians of Sinaia. Here in his arms she thought him a real man and not a Draconian.

She let him pull her close. On a sigh, she pressed her head against his chest. “We can never be, Sorin. Not here, not now.”

He pressed his lips to the top of her head. “I do not care about Rica’s politics. I want you like no one else.” Sorin placed his hands on either side of her head and tilted it up so she was looking at him. “I want you. Do you understand that?”

She nodded and parted her lips in invitation. She could not fight the attraction. It was impossible when the heat they made enveloped her in a tight, heady grip.

Sorin lowered his head and pressed his mouth to hers. In a slow, lazy circle, he parted her lips with his tongue. Her hands wrapped around his neck as they kissed slowly and gently like a waltz.

Breaking from her lips, he pressed quick, hot kisses to her chin, and over to her ear. She shivered with each touch of his mouth.

“You are the most enchanting woman I have ever known,” he breathed into her ear, then licked her lobe with the tip of his tongue.

As her knees went weak, she surrendered to him. He caught her and eased her down to the soft carpet of green grass. He gazed at her while he held himself on his arms over her body. Bringing a hand up, he brushed the stray hair from her brow then trailed a finger over her temple and down to her mouth. Lightly, he traced her lips.

“So soft, so inviting.” He bent down and covered her mouth with his.

Sighing, she opened for him, allowing his tongue to sweep over hers in a long liquid dance. She'd never been kissed like this before, as if he could barely breathe without her lips on his. She felt utterly desired in that one glorious kiss.

While he continued to feast on her lips, his hand swept over her and began to unlace the tie at the bodice of her dress. With deft fingers, it didn't take him long to have her unlaced.

Sucking in a ragged breath, Alexandreina writhed under his touch as he pulled the pieces of her bodice apart, revealing her aching breasts. The warm breeze blew over her skin and pebbled her flesh. She closed her eyes as he circled his fingers around and over one tight nipple. Bowing her back in pleasure, she pushed her flesh up into his hand, taunting him to take more. He didn't disappoint as he molded his palm around her breast and teased her nipple with hard deft strokes of his thumb.

She couldn't believe the sensations sweeping over her, through her, as Sorin nibbled on her chin and squeezed her breast. The man could illicit more feelings from a single touch of his hand than she'd experienced in her entire lifetime. To think that it took a Draconian to make her feel so desired, so wanted.

"I feel so alive when I touch you, Reina." He made a wet trail down her neck with his tongue to end at her breast. "It's like I've not truly lived until I met you."

Words left her as he covered one aching nub with his mouth, sweeping his tongue over it again and again. Sweet torture. She'd never felt anything so delectable before. His delicious, talented tongue and lips worked at one nipple then delivered the same wonderful attention to the other. Pleasure rippled over her body. Clenching her jaw tight, she knew it wouldn't be long before those ripples turned to waves crashing down on her, taking her under into complete and utter ecstasy.

She held on to him as he made his way down her body, licking and tasting. At her navel, he pressed a soft wet kiss to her flesh, and then went lower still. Gasping, she pulled on his hair as he trailed his way through the soft curls of her mound and into the slick folds of her sex, parting her with the tip of his tongue.

She must've yanked too hard, because his head came up and he looked at her, brow raised.

"I want to taste you. Trust me. I won't hurt you."

She relinquished her hold on him a little, but didn't completely let go.

Lifting up, Sorin nudged her legs apart. She resisted a little. Fear swirled around her. Not that he would hurt her. No, she was afraid that he would make her feel so good she wouldn't be able to go on without his touch again. That he would become an addiction to her with no cure.

Once her legs were spread, Sorin settled between them. With one finger, he ran a line down her cleft, feeling her slick wetness. She arched her back as he settled a finger at her entrance, easing in then out, whirling it around.

When he slid it in all the way, she cried out. Starting at her sex and ending at the top of her head, a hot flow of pleasure washed over her body. She wanted to tell him to stop, that it was too much, that she couldn't handle it, but he didn't stop. He continued his delicious torment on her sex, now using his tongue and his fingers all at once. While the tip of his tongue swirled around her little bundle of nerves at the top of her slit, his fingers were busy thrusting in and out of her channel. First one, then two. And as he flicked her clit even quicker, he slipped in a third finger.

She was very close to climax. She could feel it churning like a wheel deep within her belly. Sorin must've sensed her pounding need because he wrapped his lips around her clit and began to suckle on it. That was all it took for that wheel of pleasure to start spinning like a top and she came, hard.

“Ah, Sorin!” she cried, pulling on his hair, crushing him between her legs.

As her orgasm sent her reeling, Sorin continued to suck on her clit and slide his fingers back and forth, prolonging the explosive sensations rushing over her. She thought she’d go mad for it. Light flashed behind her eyes and her heart felt like it had burst from her chest.

Finally, Sorin relinquished his hold on her sex, and sat up and watched her. “I love to watch you come. It is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.”

Smiling, she reached for him and brought him down over her body to kiss him. As their lips met, she could discern her own lust on his tongue. The desire she had for him tasted like ambrosia in her mouth.

“I want you inside me,” she breathed.

Within moments, Sorin undid his trousers, pulled them down and nuzzled his cock at the juncture of her legs. She opened for him, wrapping her legs around his waist. With one hard thrust, he was fully sheathed inside her sex. Already soft and liquid from her last orgasm, she was able to accommodate his wide girth. But she felt stuffed, deliciously snug. And when he started moving, thrusting, she could feel another orgasm building. A stronger one.

Wrapping his hands around her, Sorin increased his tempo. As he pushed between her legs, he pulled her down to meet his body with every thrust.

“You feel so incredible, I can’t hold on to my desire,” he panted into the side of her neck.

After one, two more quick thrusts, Sorin buried himself deep. Biting down on her shoulder, he grunted and came in an explosion of liquid heat.

Alexandreina’s own orgasm was not far behind. Digging her nails into his back, she squeezed her thighs hard around his waist and came in a delicious rush of rapture. This orgasm was even more powerful than the

first. And she thought she'd lost all thought and reason. All she could do was feel as glorious swell after swell of pure delight rolled over her, carrying her under.

After several minutes, Sorin indicated that he was still alive and rolled off her onto his back. He rubbed a hand over his sweaty face and started to chuckle.

"I didn't think dying could feel so damn good."

Alexandreina turned over and draped her arm across his chest to snuggle into the crook of his arm. "Me either."

Rubbing her hand up and down his chest, she studied his face. He was so incredibly beautiful. Pale and perfect like a granite statue. Yet, there was nothing stone about him. He was gentle and kind, and more passionate than anyone she'd known before. Desire, fresh and strong, flared inside her again, licking at her sex.

"Do you think we can do that again?" she asked, while she moved her hand down to his cock. It jerked to life at her touch.

Opening one eye, he smiled at her. "Give me a moment, and I'll see what we can do."

With a laugh, he moved on top of her again, and pressed his lips to hers in a hot hungry kiss.

Chapter Nine

Slowly, Alexandreina opened her eyes. She was still by the river on the soft carpet of lush grass, and she was still in Sorin's arms. Rolling onto her back and turning her head, she gazed at his sleeping face. He looked peaceful and relaxed, and human. Without the darkness of his eyes, she could almost pretend Sorin was a Roma man, and she his one true love. A woman who he would one day ask to marry. And one day, to be the father of her children.

With one finger, she lightly traced his full lips. He was ethereally beautiful, like a fallen angel. While she continued to trace the planes of his face, his eyes fluttered open. As Alexandreina stared into the black pools of his eyes, the spell broke and her heart squeezed tightly in her chest.

Those dreams and hopes would never be hers.

"Why does the light fade from your eyes?" Sorin lifted his hand and placed it on her cheek as she tried to turn her head.

"A dream can never be real," she murmured.

"Sometimes you have to change your dreams. But they can still come true, if you really want them to."

She sniffed, and shook her head. "How can you say that, when you see what it is like here for me, for my people? The only thing we can wish for is to die peacefully in our beds." She pushed up and sat. "With a war so close, even that is too much to ask."

Sorin sat up beside her, grabbing her hand in his. "Come to Constanta with me."

“What?”

“It is so different in my city. Romas sit next to Draconians. We live together harmoniously. You would feel free there. You would not ever fear for your life again.”

“Rica would never let me go.”

“He would if I bartered for your release.”

“You mean, you could buy me?” She could not stop the bite in her voice. She was shocked that he would offer such a thing.

“Yes, I suppose that is what would happen.”

Shaking her head, Alexandreina sighed. “Then I would be nothing but a servant to you.”

Sorin gathered her in his arms and pressed his mouth to her lips. “No, that is not how I think of you. You would be my...companion, my woman. No one would dare treat you with disrespect.”

To be his woman. She wondered what that would mean. To be cherished, to be loved? She thought not. Although Sorin was vastly different, she was sure his kind was incapable of such emotions. But she wanted them nonetheless. Her parents had a loving, passionate union, and she wanted no less for herself.

Closing her eyes, she allowed him to kiss her. She wrapped her hands in his hair and held on as he took her. When their lips parted, she put a hand to his cheek.

“It is a good offer, Sorin, but I cannot take it. What of my people? Will you buy them as well?”

Sighing, he dropped his hands to his side, and shook his head. “You know that is impossible.”

“Then you know that I cannot leave them to die. Rica would surely seek his revenge as soon as I was gone. Because of his desire for me, I am the only thing stopping him from completely destroying my kin.”

Sorin lifted his head and gazed at her with power and conviction. “If only...”

He paused.

Alexandreina searched his face. She could see for what he wished. But she knew just as well as he that it would not be possible. It was high treason just to think it.

She raised her hand to his cheek and rubbed the pad of her thumb over his lips. "Yes, if only."

The sound of approaching horses stilled their conversation. As a keep guard stepped through the foliage into the clearing, Alexandreina fumbled for her clothing to cover herself. She managed to cover her breasts, but she still felt his eyes on her, scrutinizing her body with distaste. "Why do you disturb us?" Sorin demanded as he stood. Even naked, he was commanding. She marveled at how his back and legs rippled as he advanced toward the guard.

When the guard took a step back, Alexandreina smiled to herself.

"Lord Rica requests your presence in the war room immediately."

"I will return to the keep when my business is concluded here."

The guard's gaze flickered briefly over Alexandreina then back to Sorin. Licking his lips, he said, "Our orders are to escort you back to the keep immediately." Another three guards stepped through the trees to stand beside him.

Sorin nodded. "Very well." Turning, he picked up his trousers and tunic from the ground. He glanced at Alexandreina as he dressed. "Make your way back to the keep when you are ready. I will come for you this eve."

The guard stepped forward again. "I will wait for her, and take her back."

Turning, Sorin buckled up his scabbard and touched the hilt of his sword in passing. Alexandreina understood the gesture, as she was sure did the guards.

"No you will not. As you commented, you will escort me back to the keep."

“But, she will escape,” the guard sputtered.

In two long strides, Sorin stood right in front of the guard, towering over him with his powerful frame. “Are you deaf? I said you would escort me back to the keep and leave the lady to make her own way. If I hear that any of you have gone against my demands, you will pay dearly.”

All the guards nodded.

Sorin turned back around and walked to Alexandreina. He crouched down and cradled her face in his hands. “Stay as long as you like. Enjoy the day.”

“I already have. I will return as soon as you leave.”

He nodded, and pressed his lips to hers. It was a soft gentle kiss. He then straightened and mounted his horse. Without another word, he followed the guards back to the keep leaving Alexandreina alone.

Breathing a sigh of relief, she sunk back down to the grass. She glanced around her at the pristine river shore, realizing that she was alone, truly alone for the first time in her life. Sorin had taken many liberties leaving her here. The guard was right. She could escape. But to where? To what? Escaping now would be the worse thing she could ever do to her people. Worse than leaving them for Sorin and his promise of her freedom.

She would never do it. She knew the costs would be too great for them all. If she escaped, even Sorin would be punished, as it was at his insistence she’d been left by herself.

Closing her eyes to stem the flow of tears, Alexandreina quickly dressed and mounted her waiting horse. She would return without pause. Her place was back at the keep to embrace the hope for her people’s future. Without her, she knew that hope would not survive.



As Sorin neared the large wood doors of the war room, two armed guards pulled them open. Anger at the summons lengthened his stride as he marched into the room and up to the wooden table that Rica, Cezar and Mihai were standing around. None of the three men glanced at Sorin as he approached.

“Gogu moves his men.” Rica pointed to the map, the border between his lands and Gogu’s.

“He is still within his boundaries,” Sorin commented, tired of constantly abiding the Overlord’s fears. However, he supposed that the man’s paranoia was one of the reasons he was still in power.

Rica looked up at him and grinned. “But not for long. I have word that he plans to move over the border in a sennight.”

“You know this for sure?”

“No, but I will.” He turned and nodded to the two guards standing off to one side. They turned and marched through the small obscure door in the corner.

“Why have I been summoned, Lord Rica? You have had many strategy meetings without my presence, so why is this one so different?”

“To bear witness.”

Back through the small door, marched the two guards. Between them, they held another Draconian. He was bloody and bruised, naked from the waist up, his long black hair hanging haphazardly in his face. They dragged him across the room, and strapped him to the opposite wall against a wood board. When Sorin first entered, he hadn’t noticed the leather restraints, or the wood board to which they were attached. He looked at them now with a dreadful familiarity. In his years of training, he had been witness to several interrogations. Most of them turning into sadistic games of torture. By the glee-filled look on Rica’s face, he suspected that this one would be no different.

When the prisoner had been securely fastened to the board, Rica approached him. “He’s one of Gogu’s scouts. He was discovered just

outside our city with maps and such detailing the roads here.” Rica stood in front of the prisoner and smiled. “My guards were able to subdue him before he could swallow the devil’s weed.”

Devil’s weed was like poison to Draconians. Once ingested, it took a matter of minutes before the person fell into a coma-like sleep, never to be woken. The person didn’t die, their body kept on working, but their mind was gone. All scouts and guards carried the plant in their packs, in case of capture. Even Sorin carried it from time to time. He wondered how Rica’s guards were able to get the jump on the scout before he could ingest the poison. Learning to eat the weed quickly was part of all Draconian’s training.

“He was feeding on a deer when they caught him,” Rica continued, answering Sorin’s unasked question. He reached out and grabbed the man’s face. Pinching him brutally, his longish nails poking into his skin, Rica lifted his head to look into his eyes. “*Prost!*” Stupid fool. “He must have forgotten that he cannot hear when his prey’s blood is pounding in his ears.”

“I will tell you nothing.” The prisoner spat at Rica.

Laughing, Rica wiped the spittle from his face. “I suspect that you will tell me everything I want to know.” Turning, Rica brought his hand down to his leg, and unsheathed the dagger he had strapped to his thigh. The polished blade glinted in the firelight. Sparkled like silver.

Gasping, Sorin took a step back as Rica lifted the knife high and brandished it to the others in the room. Silver. It was the one thing that Draconians feared. Their one true weakness. A wound from a silver blade took many moons to heal. Sorin knew this too well. The scars on his back were a testament to that fact. It took three months for his cuts to close fully. In that time, he had lost a lot of blood and nearly faded from this world. Lord Gogu’s silver tinged whip was legendary.

However, to see a silver blade was monumental. Especially in the hands of a Draconian.

When the Draconians first invaded the Roma lands, one of the first things they had done was destroy the silver mines. To Sorin's knowledge, there had not been a silver weapon in existence for nearly forty sun turns. Steel and iron were now the metals of use.

"A silver dagger? How did you come by this?" Lord Mihai asked, his voice wavering as his hands gripped the edge of the table.

Sorin could see the fear in the man's face, and hear it in his voice. He had a right to his fear. As did they all. The only one in the room who seemed at ease was Lord Rica. He looked overly pleased with himself, like a petulant child. Sorin knew of Rica's cruelty but never thought it would be this debasing. The Overlord was more unstable than Sorin originally thought. And that made the man doubly dangerous.

"I thought all silver weapons had been destroyed." Sorin took a step forward, showing Rica that he was not afraid of him. "That our laws state to possess one would be punishable by death."

"I'm fully aware of the laws, Sorin, as I'm the one that declared them. But surely you don't think that law applies to me, do you?" Smiling, Rica dragged the flat of the knife across his hand. "I'm aware you have had contact with silver, Master Sorin. Do you wish to again?"

Swallowing down his anger, Sorin clenched his hands into tight fists. He wanted to charge across the room and jam that dagger into Rica's skinny neck. Nothing would be more appealing than watching the Overlord die by his hands. But Sorin knew he could not and would not be the hand that felled him.

"No."

"I thought not." Turning, Rica waved the dagger in front of the prisoner. "Now, do you want to tell me when Gogu is planning to invade?"

The prisoner tried to pull back from the blade, but had nowhere to go. He shook his head, his long hair falling into his face.

Rica struck out with the knife, slicing the prisoner across the cheek. With an audible hiss and tendrils of smoke, his skin split open like a rare piece of meat, and blood erupted from the wound. Sorin wanted to turn away, but knew he couldn't. As a Draconian lord, it was his duty to watch the torment. Even though he knew the agony of the silver was now just creeping its way across the prisoner's skin like fire across a burning field, he was forced to witness his pain.

"Now, do I have your attention?" Rica chuckled.

"Ah, *ticalos!*" Bastard.

Rica swiped at him again, this time nicking him across the chin. The prisoner cried out in pain as blood dribbled down his throat to drip onto the stone floor.

"For every question you do not answer I will cut you. Do you understand?"

The prisoner closed his eyes, but did not nod.

Rica cut him again, this time across his biceps.

Whimpering, he finally nodded. "Yes. Yes, I understand."

"Good." Rica took a step back. "When is Gogu planning to invade?"

"In a sennight."

Sorin sighed. The war was indeed coming. He had hoped it was merely the paranoia of the Overlord. Reluctantly, he would have to commit his army to the campaign. Once again, he would have to give the order to send thousands to their deaths.

Turning slightly, Rica glanced at Sorin. "Now do you see?"

Sorin nodded, too weary to speak.

"How many men does he command?" Rica asked the prisoner.

"A thousand."

With a low growl, Rica sliced the dagger across the man's chest. He howled in pain as his flesh peeled open.

"How many?" Rica screamed in his face.

"Four thousand," he whimpered between shallow gasps of breath.

“And from what direction does he come?”

“The northwest, through the pass of Harrowing,” he gasped before he slumped against his restraints, overcome with the agony of the burning metal.

Smiling, Rica wiped the man’s blood on his trousers. “We prepare for war.”

Tipping his head, Sorin said, “I will send a messenger right away to Lord Vali to amass our army.”

“You do not ride out yourself?”

Sorin matched Rica’s gaze. It was obvious the Overlord knew why he didn’t wish to leave. “No, because of my familiarity with Gogu’s military style, it would be prudent that I stay and aid you in your strategy against him. Would this not be the wisest course of action, my lord?”

After glancing at the others in the room, his general and Lord Mihai, Rica nodded. “Just what I was thinking, Master Sorin.” Turning back, he stared at Sorin. “*One day*, I should think you would make a fine warlord.”

Sorin inclined his head, acknowledging the compliment, however forced and contrived it seemed to be. There was no way that Rica wished him to stay. His presence threatened Rica. Threatened how he ruled, and whom he ruled. Now more than ever, Sorin needed to watch his step. His presence in Sinaia was tenuous at best. Before long, Rica would reveal his intentions, and Sorin would find himself drawn and quartered, his head on a stake sticking into the ground just outside the keep, welcoming each visitor with a macabre grin.

And he was certain, that if Alexandreina did not watch herself, she would be his companion on a similar wooden stake.

Chapter Ten

After Sorin had left the clearing by the river, Alexandreina made her way back to the keep without pause. However much she had wanted to languish by the shore in the relaxing afternoon sun, she knew that to do so would mean Rica's wrath. Sorin had threatened the guards not to bother with her, but his threats would mean little to the Overlord.

Rica was not a man to trifle with. She had learned that a long time ago. He had killed her father, her mother and her brother. It would not take much more of her rebellious nature to end her life.

Thankfully, she had made it through the keep to her chamber without running into any problems. It was obvious that most of her tormentors were occupied in the Overlord's war room planning Zamolix's knows what. Something of uttermost importance must have happened for Sorin to be summoned so abruptly. She prayed that didn't mean they would be going to war soon. Watching her people march into someone else's battle angered her to no end. However, there was absolutely nothing she could do about it.

"What do you think of?"

Alexandreina glanced over at Nicoletta who lounged beside her on the bed. Her maid was relishing her short reprieve from Rica's bed by snuggling in with Alexandreina while she napped.

The girl still had a look of innocence about her. She was petite like a doll, with a beautiful oval face and a sparkling smile. Her eyes told the true story. One knew just how much she'd seen and suffered through by the darkness in them.

"The war. I'm afraid it's here at last."

"How do you know?"

"Master Sorin was urgently requested to the war room this afternoon. If not war, then what?" Alexandreina sat up on the bed and leaned back against the pillows. "It's the only thing that they live for. To fight against others. To inflict pain and suffering."

Nicoletta shrugged. "Master Sorin doesn't seem that way."

Alexandreina couldn't help the smile that blossomed to her face. No, Sorin wasn't like that. He was so different from the others. And that frightened her to the core. Soon, Rica and the others would come to realize this, too. Surely, the Overlord wouldn't tolerate Sorin's obvious distaste for the way he ruled. Something would be done. And when that happened, she feared she would be swept along with it.

"You're right, Nicoletta. Master Sorin is very different." She turned to her maid and grabbed her arm tightly. "And you mustn't tell anyone. It must be kept a secret."

Nicoletta sat up too beside Alexandreina. "Why? If he is like this, then maybe there are others like him. This is the hope we need. Maybe, if we find more, they can help us. Free us."

Raising her hand, Alexandreina slapped Nicoletta across the face. "Do not speak of such things. Do not think them. There is no freedom for us, Nicoletta. Don't you see that?"

Her heart ached as she watched tears form in Nicoletta's eyes. She ached for the girl, and for her. For the thoughts that raced through the maid's mind. Because those same thoughts raced through hers. She had thought more than once that Sorin could free her, free her people. That if she had the courage to ask, then maybe there could be hope once more. However, she was too afraid that he would say yes. And she would have to trust him, a Draconian. Something she swore she would never do.

Alexandreina slid off the bed, keeping her back to Nicoletta, too ashamed to face her. "I'm sorry. But you must keep those thoughts to

yourself. It's too dangerous to be speaking like that. Someone will overhear, and down to the dungeons you will go. The priestess will not show you any mercy."

When she felt a hand on her shoulder, Alexandreina sighed and placed hers on top of it.

"You're right, my lady. I will stop wagging my tongue. The last place I'd wish to go is into that hell."

The clear ringing bells of the clock tower rang through the air, announcing the approaching evening.

Alexandreina patted Nicoletta's hand then stood. "I must get ready for dinner. Master Sorin will be here soon." But before she could walk to her dressing table, the door to the chamber opened.

Rica strolled in with two guards trailing in his wake.

Instantly, Alexandreina's stomach rolled over with loathing. She knew that the guards wouldn't keep their mouths shut about her tryst outside the township walls. She was foolish to think she would go unpunished, and have the opportunity to enjoy her dinner with Sorin.

Rica took his time crossing the room.

He stopped by her small wood table near the hearth and poured himself a glass of tuica. Sipping it, he smiled at Alexandreina and continued his arrogant stroll toward her.

She put a hand to her tumultuous belly, fearing she was to retch any moment. She hated when Rica smiled. It meant only one thing; someone was to suffer by his hands. And that someone was certainly to be her.

He turned his venomous gaze toward Nicoletta, who stood cowering by the bed. "You may leave."

She glanced hesitantly at Alexandreina.

"I said you may leave." His voice rose in pitch sending icy shivers over Alexandreina.

Alex nodded to Nicoletta. The girl curtsied. Keeping her head bowed, she raced from the room.

"I hear you had a little outing today." Rica sat on her stool at the dressing table and set down his drink. He picked up her hairbrush and began to fiddle with it.

She had to swallow down the bile in her throat. "Yes, my lord. Master Sorin asked that I accompany him on a ride out in the countryside."

He turned the brush over in his hand repeatedly. "Mm, and you had sex with him."

His blunt statement startled her and she had to bite her tongue to stop from protesting. "Yes," she bit out, lowering her eyes. She didn't want him to see the contempt for him in her gaze.

"Come here," he demanded.

Without lifting her head, she took the last few steps separating them. She now stood directly in front of him. She could feel his cold stare on her form.

"Did you enjoy having sex with Sorin?"

She didn't want to answer. Any comment she made would bring her retribution. Rica was a master of manipulation.

"Answer me!" He brought the flat side of the brush down sharply across her leg.

The pain was immediate and biting. Luckily, the fabric from her skirt cushioned the blow somewhat. If he had hit bare skin, the pain would've been so much more.

"Yes!" she blurted. "Yes, I enjoyed it."

"Did you come like a whore?" He leaned forward, his nose an inch away from her sex, and inhaled deeply. "It smells like you did."

Grinding her teeth, Alexandreina answered. "Yes, I came like a whore."

Setting down the brush, he gripped the hem of her skirt and began to lift it. "One day you will come for me, I guarantee it. You will scream my name over and over again until you have lost your voice."

Alexandreina dug her nails into her palms and held her breath as he raised her skirt. The cool breeze in the room blew over her skin, as inch by inch her bare legs were uncovered. When he reached her waist, she bit down on her lip to stop from crying out. She knew he was staring at her undergarments. Trying to see through the fabric and into her soul. She could feel his gaze like an insect's legs crawling and squirming over her.

"Sorin will not be here much longer, my lady. You'd do well to remember that." Letting go of her skirt with one hand, he trailed his finger over her flesh, nearing her sex with each slow circle. "And when he's gone, you will be mine. Primed and ready for me. Willing to do anything I demand of you."

She squeezed her eyes shut and bit down on her lip again. Bile rose in her throat. She was very close to retching.

Someone cleared his or her throat. "Excuse me, Lord Rica. I didn't realize you were entertaining *my gift* this evening."

Alexandreina opened her eyes and nearly sighed with relief. Sorin stood just inside the doorway, his hands clenched at his sides. She could see the anger plainly. And if she could see it, she was sure Rica could as well.

Rica dropped her skirt and turned on the stool. "Ah, Sorin, I should've known you would come."

He stood and wiped his hand on his trousers as if wiping away something foul. Sorin flinched. A reaction she was sure Rica had been hoping for.

"I know how difficult it is to stay away from something so succulent and sweet."

Sorin took a step forward. "Yes, and as I've stated before, I appreciate that you've gifted her to *me*."

With her heart hammering in her throat, Alexandreina watched the exchange between the two men. She could feel the distaste and the

distrust from across the room. Sorin was very bold in his actions toward Rica. She wondered how much longer the Overlord would put up with it without consequences. She knew Draconian customs enough to know that visiting emissaries were immune to some local laws, but Sorin was definitely pushing the boundaries.

Her heart swelled thinking he was doing it for her.

Chuckling, Rica approached Sorin. He set his hand on Sorin's shoulder and squeezed. "Enjoy yourself, my friend. I am thankful that you have broken the lady's will so to speak. She will be a delicious addition to my plate when you are gone and fighting in the war."

He clapped Sorin hard on the back and strolled toward the door. Once through, the two guards followed him out and closed the door. She could hear their mocking laughter even through the thick oak wood.

Crossing the room in two strides, Sorin had her gathered in his arms before she could even take in her next breath. "Did he hurt you?"

She shook her head, too distraught to do anything else.

He ran his hands up and down her back and nuzzled his lips into her neck as if seeking her life force. The action reminded her that Sorin was a Draconian. And she was delusional to think anything else. He couldn't help her. He was bound just as she was to the way of things, to the harsh laws governing this land.

They were both prisoners.

Lifting her hands, she braced them against his chest and pushed him away. "Please go."

"What have I done?" He reached for her.

She turned, giving him her back and walked away. "It is not what you have done, Master Sorin, but what you are."

"Let me help you, Reina."

She whirled around and sputtered, "You can't help me! You are only making things worse. Before you came, Rica left me alone. Now, now he wants to bed me because you have. And he will stop at nothing to have

his way. I know. I have watched him time and time again have his way with Roma women, with my people. People I was born by blood to protect. I promised my mother before her death that I would do what I could to keep my people safe. I can't do that in your arms."

Sorin took a step back and bowed his head. "I will leave. But no matter what, Alexandreina, I will not let Rica hurt you. You have to trust me."

With a wan smile, she shook her head. "I can't."

After a brief tip of his head, he turned on his heel, marched toward her chamber door, opened it, went through and shut it behind him.

Alexandreina stared at the closed door, wishing Sorin would turn back around and take her into his arms. To her surprise, she felt safe there. Like their two worlds didn't matter.

But they did.

As long as the Draconians ruled the land, Alexandreina would never feel secure. She could never let down her guard and feel anything but contempt for them. She certainly could never love one. To do that would be the ultimate betrayal of her people.

Turning to her bed, she flung herself onto the mattress, gathered the blankets around her and purged herself of all her feelings. They would only bring her pain and suffering in the end.



Sorin marched back to the guest chamber. Servants and others jumped out of his way as he strode down each hallway to the south wing of the keep.

Once inside his room, he paced back and forth, too restless to do much else. He paused once to pour a glass of tuica, tossed it back and reveled in the way it burned his throat on the way down. Then he resumed his pacing.

Anger and frustration swirled around him like a storm cloud. He wasn't angry with Alexandreina for rejecting him. No, he understood why perfectly. Rica was the one who enraged him.

The Overlord was much more brutal and callous than he once thought. He was more of a threat to Sorin and his plans than he predicted. And he was dangerous to Alexandreina. That much was very clear.

When Sorin came to Sinaia, his intent was to align himself politically with Lord Rica. Lord Vali would soon pass and it would be Sorin who took his place as ruler of the Moon Clan. What he had not intended was meeting Alexandreina, the last remaining Roma princess.

She had enchanted him. Bewitched him like no other woman before her. So much, he was unsure if he could leave the Dark Clan city without her at his side.

Despite her protests, Sorin couldn't allow Alexandreina to remain in the city for much longer. Knowing that Rica would have his way with her after he was gone was too much to stomach.

Sorin poured another glass of tuica and tossed it back. Tomorrow, he would meet with the Overlord and barter for Alexandreina. Rica would ask an exorbitant amount he was sure. The man knew how to manipulate and coerce.

Whatever was demanded, Sorin vowed he would pay. No matter what the cost.

Chapter Eleven

It wasn't the tolling bells that woke Alexandreina from her slumber, but something far more quiet and unassuming. Something sinister.

Twisting her head, she peered around the dark room searching for the reason for the dread creeping over her. She rolled onto her back and listened to the night noises.

Barely able to take in her next breath, Alexandreina felt someone on top of her pressing her hard into the mattress.

A hand clamped over her mouth before she could scream. And before she could struggle, a hood was pulled over her head and she was dragged unmercifully from her bed.

She didn't need to see to know exactly where she was going.

Her two assailants led her through the keep and down several sets of stone steps. She needn't her eyes to comprehend that the last door they pulled her through was to the dungeons.

They yanked her roughly across the room and bound her wrists in metal clamps hanging down from chains fastened to the ceiling. Then they left, or stood back, because she couldn't hear their labored breathing any longer. In fact, she couldn't hear anything. Only the sound of her own fear echoed in her ears.

"Do you know why you are here?"

Tears welled in her eyes when she heard the priestess's voice. She knew she was in the dungeons but she had hoped beyond hope that it was Rica who had kidnapped her to teach her a lesson. Obviously, the

Overlord had designated his administrations to his most ruthless inquisitor, Priestess Cami de c'Intunecos.

Consumed with panic, Alexandreina shook her head. "I have done nothing wrong. I've broken no rule."

"Is that what you really believe?"

Her voice was closer, echoing all around her. Alexandreina shivered violently and her breath came out in shallow gasps. She was close to hyperventilating.

Finally, someone yanked the hood off, and she was able to take in a deep, cleansing breath. Now she stood staring into the unflinching gaze of the priestess. She almost preferred the suffocating black of the hood than the dark stare of the Draconians' chief torturer.

"I think you know exactly why you are here, Alexandreina."

"I have broken no rule."

Cami smiled, and clasped her hands behind her back. Horror surged over Alexandreina. She was doomed. Once in the dungeons, no one ever came back whole.

"I know what you've been discussing with your maid."

Heart hammering in her chest, Alexandreina swallowed and tried to keep the priestess's gaze. She had to stay strong. She couldn't give anything away and risk Rica's wrath on Nicoletta. She would rather suffer at Cami's hand than know that what she confessed to would bring a worse punishment onto her loyal maid.

"I have broken no rule," she sputtered.

The priestess raised one brow and began to pace in front of her, likely watching her sweat and waiting for her to break.

"You have guts, Roma, I will give you that." Cami paused in front of her and tapped her face right under her eye. "I have been watching you for some time now. I see what it is you think, what you plan."

Alexandreina grit her teeth against the urge to scream.

“What do you talk about when lying underneath Master Sorin’s body? What secrets do you speak to him when he fucks you?”

Alexandreina flinched at the priestess’s questions. What did Sorin have to do with this? “I have broken no rule,” she announced again.

The sharp blow across Alexandreina’s face nearly knocked her sideways. Pain pierced her flesh like a thousand needles.

“Shut up!” Cami wrapped her hand around Alexandreina’s chin. Squeezing, she lifted Alexandreina’s face to meet hers. “You can’t hide things from me, girl. I know everything that goes on in this keep and outside it. I have eyes and ears everywhere.”

Alexandreina couldn’t stop the tears that sprang to her eyes and streamed down her face. Fear squeezed her. She could hardly breathe because of its tight, icy grip. Already she could feel her death slowly creeping up on her like a shadow in the waning afternoon light.

“Maybe if I brought the young Nicoletta down here and cut off her fingers one by one, you might remember a thing or two. Maybe then you would tell me the truth.”

Alexandreina shook her head. “I have—”

Cami squeezed off Alexandreina’s next words and added her own. “If you confess to me now, I will spare her. If not, I swear to you I will cut out her eyes and eat them in front of you.”

A sob stuck in her throat and she clamped her eyes shut. She choked with the intensity of it.

“Maybe you would talk if your old friend, Anghel, became one of my guests. Hmm, how would that be? I bet his flesh would taste just as good.”

Eyes springing open, Alexandreina struggled against her restraints. Crying hard, she wanted to break free and scratch the priestess’s face. She didn’t care then what rules she would be breaking. All she could feel was rage and fury at what was happening to her, and the threats that

Cami made. She swore she would come back from the Underworld to kill the priestess if she harmed Nicoletta or Anghel.

“Answer me, you Roma whore!” Cami screamed into her face, spittle flying from her mouth.

“I have broken no rule!” Alexandreina shrieked back then slumped forward, too drained to care what blow would come next.

Seconds ticked by without any retaliation. Alexandreina raised her head and stared at the priestess. She stood back and nodded her head, a small smile on her pale face.

“She’s ready.”

Alexandreina looked on in confusion. What was going on? Whom was she talking to?

The door to the dungeon opened and a man stepped in. He rushed to Alexandreina’s side and touched her brow. “I’m so sorry, my child, but it had to be done.”

Her body quaked in confusion and bile rose in her throat. How could this be? Was she still back in her bed, quivering from night terrors?

“Anghel?” she rasped.

The old man ran a hand over her hair. “Yes. It’s Anghel, Reina.”

She shook her head trying to clear her mind. “What is going on? Why am I a prisoner? Why are you in league with her?”

“The priestess and I have come to the same conclusion, Reina. This impending civil war between Lord Rica and Lord Gogu will doom us all.”

She turned to stare at Cami. “Why have you been watching me? What do you want?” Alexandreina looked at Anghel again. “I don’t understand Anghel...you of all people.”

“And why do you lay with Master Sorin?” The priestess took a step forward. “He is also Draconian, a savage barbarian...”

Alexandreina blurted, “He is different. He has feelings for...us. The Roma people.”

Anghel stepped closer to Cami and put his hand on her shoulder. The move was one of familiarity, one of...friendship. "As does Priestess Cami."

"But...but you are our interrogator, our executioner. Hundreds have died by your hand."

Cami shook her head. "No, child, hundreds have been set free."

"But Sandu, my brother. I saw his body before he was tossed in the river."

Anghel returned to her side and stroked his hand over her hair. A familiar touch he often made when trying to calm her, or to give her disturbing news. Five years ago, he had done the same when he told her that her brother had been sent down the river. "There is a drug called moonshade, that can slow a man's heart but he does not die. After a few hours he can be revived with no lasting side effects."

"But the marks on his body, the signs of torture..."

Cami sobered. "Necessary to keep up the ruse. Rica would never believe it otherwise."

Tears welled in her eyes and trickled down her cheeks. "My brother, my baby brother..."

"Yes, Reina, Sandu is alive," Anghel announced. "He is hiding in an encampment along the Moon Clan border, along with more of our people."

The room began to spin, and air seemed to be impossible to take in. Alexandreina sagged into Anghel. He held her and patted her back.

"Why did you not tell me? Why have you let me suffer all these years?" she whispered into his shoulder.

"You were not ready to know, Reina. We were not ready to tell you. But now you are ready to fulfill your destiny."

Her head came up, tears still sparkling in her eyes. "What destiny? For pity's sake, what are you saying?"

"You need to stay calm, Alexandreina, if you are to lead this fight." Cami clenched her hands tight at her waist. "You are useless to us if you are hysterical."

She glared at Cami, not ready to trust so easily. "What fight?"

"The one that will bring down the Draconian rule."

Alexandreina couldn't stop the laughter that bubbled out of her. It all was so absurd, so unreal. "You're mad. Both of you. We have no way to defeat the Draconian army, let alone fight them."

Anghel reached under his gray cloak and came away with a long, deadly-looking dagger. It glinted even in the low light of the dungeon.

Her eyes widened when she saw it. "It can't be. A silver dagger?"

"Yes, and there are more." He slid it over his arm, careful not to slice his skin. "This is what your brother has been doing for the past five years."

"But how? I thought all the silver mines were destroyed when the Draconians took power."

"An old silver mine that was demolished thirty-five years ago along the Moon Clan border. It took them two years to dig to the old tunnels and another year to mine the silver. But now...now there is enough."

She took in some breaths, trying to digest what she had been told. It was overwhelming. She had no idea how to handle the news of her brother's existence and the conspiracy between Anghel and the priestess. How could it be?

She eyed Cami, trying to discern her reasons for helping them. "Why do you do this? What gain is it for you?"

Cami turned her fierce gaze to Anghel. It instantly softened. "Because I will gain my freedom as well."

Something passed between them. Something she never thought to see between a Roma and a Draconian. Affection. Anghel and the priestess? Together? It couldn't be possible. Anghel hated the Draconians. He had so many reasons to want to see them dead,

destroyed, eradicated from their lands. He had seen many of his loved ones slaughtered and Lord Rica had used him viciously. How could he bear to touch her?

Like the way you touch Sorin?

She shook the thought from her mind and eyed Cami once more. "Why now? Why come to me now?"

"Because you see that we are not all alike. That we do not all force servitude upon you. That we wish to live together in harmony."

A dawning light emerged in her mind. They spoke of Sorin. That was why the priestess had been watching Alexandreina so closely these past few days.

"You speak of Master Sorin."

Anghel nodded. "Yes, he is the lock, Reina. And you are the key."

"We need him to turn. We need his alliance to fight against the other clans. The Moon Clan has always been more reasonable than most. And they are strong in numbers and in force," Cami added.

"What makes you think he would ever turn?"

Cami tilted her head and eyed Alexandreina intensely. "Because I suspect he has strong feelings for you, and I suspect that you are falling in love with him."

Alexandreina opened her mouth to protest. To rage that the notion was absurd and preposterous, but the words would not form. She lowered her head and closed her eyes. It was the truth.

"Your love can't be realized if the Dark Clan continues to rule under the Draconian order."

"What do you want me to do?"

Cami took a step forward, her stare fierce. "You need to convince him to kill Rica. You must do whatever it takes to get him to turn."

She closed her eyes and sighed. How could she do this? They were expecting too much. She didn't have the courage to do what they asked. It was too much of a risk. What if she misjudged Sorin and risked

treason by soliciting him into their plans? What if he betrayed her confidence to Rica to gain power? Was she certain of his true motives? Was she sure of his feelings for her? There were so many questions that she couldn't answer.

"But what if I can't? What if he betrays me to Lord Rica?"

Cami shook her head. "He won't. I am sure of it. I can feel his hatred of Rica, and his self-loathing. He is one Draconian I am sure that wishes he were human. Those of the Moon Clan are strong yet reasonable. It would not surprise me in the least to know that Master Sorin is already here to do what we wish."

Alexandreina looked from Cami to Anghel. They watched her with expectation and eagerness. Could this be her chance to free her people? To do the one thing she secretly dreamed about.

She would try. She couldn't walk away now. They had told her too much. And that was likely their intention to begin with.

She now knew too much to turn her back.

Sighing, she nodded. "I will do what I can to convince Sorin to aid us."

Anghel dropped his tensed shoulders and smiled. He bent over and pressed a kiss to her head. "I knew you would agree, Reina. You are a strong, formidable woman, just as your mother was. Your parents would be proud of you for doing what you have to, to free your people from servitude."

"Can I see Sandu?" she asked, hopeful.

Anghel shook his head. "In due time, Reina. If all goes well, it will be the two of you that rule these lands in the end."

She opened her mouth again to argue, but Anghel put his hand up to stop her words. "We will talk again, but for now your goal is to turn Sorin."

"You have seven days to convince him," Cami instructed.

"Seven days? Why?" she sputtered.

“Because after that, war will be upon us, and nothing will be able to stop the Overlord.”

Sighing, Alexandreina nodded. “I will do what I must.” She jiggled the chains her hands were bound with. “Now, could you please release me?”

Anghel looked to Cami, his face a mask of concern. The priestess walked toward a wooden cabinet mounted on the wall. Reaching out, she plucked a leather strap from its nail.

“I’m sorry, Reina, but not just yet.” Anghel cringed. “We have to keep up the façade. No one must ever know that Cami is involved with us. No one must ever know that you were down here for any other reason but to be punished for your insolence with Lord Rica.”

The priestess neared Alexandreina, the leather wound tightly in her fist. “Lord Rica has sent down an order to teach you your place...I am sorry for what I must do. He must never know of my betrayal.”

“I can give you something for the pain,” Anghel offered.

Tears welled in her eyes, but she nodded. Anghel rushed to her and raised a small glass vial to her lips. She drank down the bitter brown liquid, trying not to gag on its horrid aftertaste.

“I will leave your nightgown on. The fabric will somewhat soften the blows.” Cami let the strap fall to her side, the end gripped tightly in her hand.

Squeezing her eyes shut, Alexandreina sucked in a ragged breath, trying hard not to cry out as the first blow seared her flesh. But by the third, she was screaming...

Chapter Twelve

While he gazed down at Alexandreina as she slept, Sorin thought she looked so small and fragile in the large bed.

Nicoletta had let him in after some very insistent pounding on the door. At first, she had tried to close the door on him, spouting that Alexandreina suffered from a sickness and she didn't want him to catch it. When he reminded her that Draconians didn't get sick, the maid had reluctantly opened the door to him.

And as he stared down at Alexandreina, he knew there was no sickness of her body. The bandages on her back peeking out from the neckline of her nightshirt proved that quite glaringly.

She had been whipped. Punished because of Rica's jealous nature and unfathomable rage.

Careful not to disturb her sleep, Sorin sat on the edge of the bed and reached out to touch her. His hand shook as he placed it on her shoulder. He hadn't realized until this moment how much Alexandreina truly affected him. She had wriggled inside a place he never thought to ever fill. His heart.

Her eyelids fluttered open and she turned her head over her shoulder to look at him. A small smile lifted the corners of her mouth.

"How long have you been here?" Her voice was barely a whisper.

"Long enough to feel responsible for your pain."

Her smile faded and she struggled to sit. Sorin held her arm and helped her move, careful not to touch her back. He pushed a pillow under her side, allowing her to be upright without lying on her wounds.

“You didn’t order my punishment, Sorin.”

He squeezed his hand into a tight fist, desperately wishing he could use it on the Overlord. “If we were in Constanta...”

“But we aren’t. This is Sinaia and as long as Lord Rica rules here, there is nothing anyone, Roma or Draconian, can do about it. If the Overlord wanted me dead, it would be so.”

He didn’t want to hear her speak like this. It seemed so brutally harsh and truthfully cold, and not something he wished to heed from her beautiful mouth. However, he couldn’t deny her words.

“I will not allow him to hurt you any further.” He ran his hand over her blanketed leg, trying to comfort. For her sake or his, he couldn’t be sure. “I’m going to barter for your release. I will pay any price he demands.”

She placed her hand on top of his. He reveled in the feel of her flesh next to his. “He will not let me go, Sorin. Nothing you can offer him will be enough. It would cost him too much to allow me to leave now. He knows my people will not stay quiet for long.” She squeezed his hand then let it slide off, back onto the mattress.

He suddenly felt cold. Colder than he’d been in more years than he could recollect. Alexandreina was a source of warmth to him. A source of passion and affection. The one person who could make him complete.

Her sun to his moon.

“I think it would be best to not see each other any more,” she murmured, not able to meet his gaze.

He shook his head and tightened his grip on her leg. “I will not let Rica keep us apart. By law, you are mine until I leave the keep. He can’t recant his gift to me.”

“Yes, but at what cost to me?” Her voice hardened as she raised her head to meet his gaze. “He will continually punish me for taking pleasure with you.”

“And is it pleasurable to you, Reina? Do you enjoy being with me?” He hated that he sounded so eager, so desperate for her. But he couldn’t keep it from his voice. His emotions seemed to whirl around him violently when he was near her.

She closed her eyes and licked her lips. “More than I can risk saying.”

Oh, how he wanted to lean forward and press his lips to hers. To take her mouth and her body under him. His body shook with the hunger for her. “I too, feel the same. I need you more than I need to eat, Reina. More than I need to breathe.” He put his hand to his chest to indicate where his pain came from. “My chest constantly aches when I’m near you. My heart desires you as much as my body.”

She dropped her gaze but not before he saw the tears glistening in the deep pools of her eyes. “There is nothing you can do about it, Sorin. As long as Lord Rica is...in power, we can never be together.”

“Reina—”

She shook her head. “Please go.”

He stretched out onto the bed, nuzzling next to her and cupped her face with his hands. “I can’t leave. It will hurt too much.” Tilting her head up, he leaned forward and pressed his lips to hers.

At first, she resisted his kiss, bracing her hand up against his chest. But she didn’t push him away. Instead, she wrapped her hand in the fabric of his shirt and surrendered her mouth to his. Parting her lips, she met his tongue with hers in a slow liquid dance.

He sank a hand into the full lushness of her hair and pulled her tight so he could feast on her lips, and her tongue. She tasted like ambrosia. Nothing had ever tasted as delectable to him. Not even the sweet syrup of blood could compare to her spiced essence.

He wanted to wrap himself over her, and nestle between her legs. To find his salvation deep inside her. However, he knew to do so would bring her too much pain. The wounds on her back were much too fresh and deep for what he wanted.

Instead, he rolled onto his back, pulling her with him to settle her body on top of his. A look of surprise crossed her face as he cupped her cheeks with his palms and claimed her mouth once again. He could die a happy man with her draped over him, kissing him like she did.

She had no idea how much she controlled him. How every look she gave him made his pulse pound and his breath quicken. Her whole life she had served others, been bound to the wishes of those in power. If only she knew how he served her, how much power she possessed with a word from her lips, or a touch of her hand.

He was her servant forever.

Parting the kiss, she stared down at him, seeming to stare right into him. He could see conflicted emotions swimming in her expressive eyes.

"I should send you away," she murmured while she explored his face with her hand, tracing the outline of his mouth.

"But you won't," he assured, kissing the tips of her fingers.

She smiled. "But I won't."

He cupped her cheek in his palm and rubbed his thumb over her full, sensuous lips. "You are so beautiful. Enchanting. You have captured me, Alexandreina. I am your slave."

Something passed over her face. An emotion he couldn't decipher.

She shook her head. "Just words."

"It is the truth of my heart." He held her face tight in his hands and forced her to look right at him. Urging her to see the feelings that raged inside him. "I would do whatever you asked of me. You have only to speak."

With tears sliding down her cheeks, she took his mouth with hers in a frenzied possession. Wrapping her hands in his hair, she darted her tongue in and out between his lips, a sudden eagerness seeming to consume her.

He didn't complain as she nipped and tugged at his lips while they kissed. He matched her pull for pull, reveling in the way she feasted on

him. His body ignited with desire. He wanted her desperately. No other woman would be able to satisfy him. It had to be Alexandreina. He needed her with a fierce desire he'd never possessed before.

Running his hands down her arms, he moved them over to the neckline of her nightshirt. With one tug, he rendered the garment in half, freeing her golden breasts.

She gasped.

"Did I hurt you?" In his desperation to feel her flesh, he'd forgotten about her injuries.

She shook her head and kissed him again, pressing her breasts against him. But it wasn't enough. He couldn't feel her skin pressed to his chest with the fabric barrier of his shirt.

He pushed her back, and tore at his own shirt until he was bare-chested. He pulled her back down, eager to feel her flesh rubbing against his. Feel her heat mingling with his.

Her skin was like silk. Beautiful, sun-kissed silk. Soft against his hard flesh. Moving his hands down, he brushed his fingers over her taut nipples. Delighting in the way they grew harder, tighter from his touch.

"Sit up and straddle me. I wish to see you. I wish to see how hungry you are for me."

She moved back onto her knees. Her torn nightshirt pulled apart, revealing all of her delicious, ripe body. Saliva pooled in his mouth as she lifted up her leg and straddled his waist. When she was on top of him, he stared at her, taking in every curve of her body, every sweep of her flesh. She was breathtaking gazing down at him, her cheeks flush, her breasts heaving with each intake of breath. She was everything he'd ever secretly wished for, and he was claiming her whether she acknowledged it or not.



The way Sorin was looking at her made Alexandreina quake with insatiable desire. He was the only man she'd known who made her feel sensual, desirable, wanted. For more than the life-sustaining liquid pumping through her veins. He wanted *her*. Alexandreina the woman.

Running her hands over his chest, delighting in the feel of his hard flesh, she watched his face. She reveled in the way he flinched and gasped when she found a sensitive spot. Circling his nipples with her fingers, she was especially pleased when he moaned in pleasure.

Tears sprang to her eyes as she thought of his willingness to free her, his declaration of servitude. He had declared himself to her so easily. Guilt swam around in her heart as she pushed and pulled him, manipulated him to her will. She was doing what she needed to do. However, it hurt her to use him in this way.

Over the past few days, she had indeed developed feelings for Sorin. Love? Possibly. She didn't know as she'd never felt it before. What she did know was she'd never felt this way for anyone. Her heart clenched when she thought of him, and when he was near it was like butterflies fluttering in her belly.

Now, as she perched on top of his body, tendrils of intense desire floated around her thighs, tickling her between the legs. A great ball of heat built at her center, and she wanted desperately to stoke the fire into a raging inferno.

Be damned her mission, she would enjoy this moment. She would enjoy him for as long as she could.

"You are so beautiful," he groaned as he trailed his hands over her, brushing his fingers over her breasts.

Arching her back, she pushed her flesh into his hands, reveling in the way he rolled her nipples into rigid, throbbing peaks.

"As are you." Smiling, she pinched and pulled on his nipples.

Growling, he trailed his fingers lower down her body. Once at the tight curls between her legs, he slid two fingers into her hot, wet folds.

Gasping as he circled her clit, Alexandreina arched her back again and ground her sex down onto his hand. The way he touched her, eager to give her pleasure, tugged at her heart. She couldn't hold her desire in check any longer. She needed him inside her, to fill her, to complete her.

Running her hands down, she untied the sash to his trousers. He groaned as she brushed her fingers over his straining erection.

"I need you inside, now."

She pulled at his pants, frantic to see him, to feel him in her hand, in her. Once the fabric was yanked away, his cock sprang free, the tip already glistening with lust. She wrapped her hand around the shaft and stroked it along the length of him. He was like silk-wrapped steel in her hand.

"By the moon, woman, do not torment me."

Suddenly bold, she glanced down at him while she stroked his cock. "And what do you wish of me, Master Sorin?"

"Everything," he growled in return, his face flinching with barely controlled restraint.

"Hmm, not good enough." She licked her lips and smiled. "What do you want? I demand you tell me."

"I want you."

"Yes, I can see that." She gripped him harder. "But what do you want to do to me?"

Biting his lip, Sorin ran his hands up her thighs and dug his fingers into her flesh. "I want my cock in you."

Moaning at his words, she continued to stroke his cock, faster, harder.

He slid his fingers into her sex, down to her core. "I want to fuck you." He thrust both fingers into her. "Hard."

Slipping his fingers out, Sorin gripped her around the hips and lifted her up. Steadying his cock, she allowed him to guide her back down onto

him. She gasped when he filled her, so full, so tightly. Only when she was completely impaled on him did he release his hold on her hips.

She didn't move at first, content just to feel him inside her. Feel every hard ridge of his cock throbbing against her velvety muscles. She clenched around him, reveling in the power she had to give him pleasure and to take her own.

He had no idea what a gift he had granted her in his surrender.

Bracing her hands on his chest, she began to undulate, moving her hips back and forth and pushing up with her legs. All the while, she squeezed him with her inner muscles, sucking every sensation she could from him.

Groaning loudly, Sorin molded her breasts with his hands, flicking his thumbs over her aching peaks as she rocked back and forth. His eyes started to glow like eclipsed moons.

The way he looked beneath her, flinching and twitching in pleasure, filled her with power. She loved how she was in control. That he let her set the pace although she could tell by the savage need in his face he was barely holding on to his animal hunger.

She wondered how long it would take until that dam burst and he took her savagely.

Her body quivered at the thought. Her sex burned with need.

Leaning forward and moving her hands up his body, Alexandreina started to move faster, increasing her tempo. Little bursts of heat flared deep inside. It would not be long before she found her release.

"By Zamolixis, woman, you're killing me."

Sorin trailed his hands down to her hips again. Gripping tight, he helped her slide up and down, forcing her to go faster, slamming her down hard. Flesh against flesh. The sound of their lovemaking echoed around her, until she could hear nothing but the wetness of their mating and the blood roaring in her ears.

Gritting her teeth, she dug her nails into his shoulders as he pulled and pushed her up and down on his cock. He was so strong; she could do nothing but hold on as he fucked her hard, mercilessly.

Each time he yanked her down, he drove up with his pelvis, meeting each thrust with his own. The impact inside her sex was doubled. She could barely breathe, barely think as he rammed his cock into her again and again.

Sensations bombarded her. She wanted to beg him to stop, and plead with him to hurry all at the same time. Her body felt on fire. She was a shivering mass of nerves as he pounded into her, as if intent to bury himself inside as deep as he could.

Panting, barely able to function, Alexandreina clamped her eyes shut as release exploded inside her. As if a million starbursts exploded all over her body, she could not feel anything past the ripples of pleasure surging through her inside and out.

“Sorin! Oh gods, Sorin!” She cried out as she fell forward on top of him, burying her hands in his hair, holding on as her orgasm yanked her hard under the waves of ecstasy.

With one final thrust, Sorin drove his cock deep and came. He wrapped his arms around her, pushing on her wounds, and nuzzling his face into the side of her neck. He bit down on her flesh as his seed surged into her.

However, she didn’t feel any pain, only the pleasure of having him completely.

Chapter Thirteen

After making love to Alexandreina, Sorin left her sound asleep in her chamber and returned to his own for the rest of the day. He had worried that he had hurt her at the last when he came, but she had assured him she didn't feel any pain only the pleasure of him. He knew she lied to ease his guilt.

He smiled now, just thinking of her words. She was an amazing woman and his heart ached for her.

It astounded him to think that he could possess such a strong emotion. But he did. And it was for her and no one else.

So lost in his thoughts of Alexandreina, Sorin didn't see as Rica stepped out from another room blocking him from continuing his way down the hallway back toward Alexandreina's chamber.

"Having a good day, my friend?"

Sorin stopped himself before he jumped. It would be a sign of weakness if he allowed Rica to know that he, indeed, had startled him.

Sorin nodded but didn't falter. He stood tall and straight, lifting his chin in a show of bravado. "I am."

Rica smiled. "Hmm, then I am sure to ruin it, I'm afraid."

Something about the way Rica grinned made Sorin's stomach roil in horror. "What has happened? Is Gogu invading?"

"Nothing as grand as that, but something equally as sinister." Rica lost his smile and narrowed his eyes. "It's best that you come with me."

Straightening his shoulders in an effort to appear unaffected, Sorin followed Rica down the hall and into the war room.

A crowd had amassed there. He recognized all the faces. General Cezar, Lord Mihai, Rica's daughters, Doru and other various Draconian dignitaries and guards.

His gaze swept the room taking everything in, but when it settled in the corner, he lost his breath. It was as if someone had swung a heavy mallet into his gut.

Alexandreina stood in the corner flanked by two armed guards. She still wore her dressing gown and her hair looked in disarray as if she had been roughly handled.

Tears streamed down her face when their eyes met. She looked frightened and horror-stricken.

Sorin swung around and glared at Rica. "What is the meaning of this?"

"Do you question my rule, Sorin? Do you question me?"

Taking in a deep breath, Sorin averted his gaze. "Of course not, my lord. Seeing the lady in your war room has just taken me aback."

Rica paced the room leisurely, a coy look on his face. Sorin knew he did it deliberately for effect. To rattle him. Unfortunately, it was working.

"That lady," Rica growled, pointing his finger at Alexandreina, "is charged with treason."

"No!" Alexandreina leaped forward, but the guards at her sides grabbed her arms and tugged her backwards. She would've fallen if they hadn't held onto her.

Suddenly, the room became claustrophobic. Sorin had trouble breathing. Sweat trickled down his forehead and into his eyes, stinging them.

He shook his head. "I don't believe it."

Rica moved toward Sorin with two long strides, his face contorted in anger. "Are you calling me a liar?"

Sorin met his gaze and knew he couldn't hide his outrage. "No. However, to accuse someone of treason is a serious allegation. One I would hope that is validated with proof."

Raising a brow, Rica circled Sorin. "Oh, I have proof." As he passed Doru, the Roma handed him a leather bound book, a journal.

Looking quite amused, he thumbed through the pages, opening up to the middle of the book. "The 34th Sun Turn of the Dark Clan Rule, 'Overlord Rica has taken Nicoletta. I tried to stop him but I was too weak. He laughed in my face as he broke my wrist. I fear for her, my dear Nicoletta. Blood-serving him would be like serving a demon from hell. And that is where I wish to send him, if I had the means to.'"

Shaken, Sorin tried to hide his emotions, by moving about the room. "Certainly disturbing, but clearly written under duress. She was upset. Have we not said things under similar circumstances?"

Rica eyed Sorin. "I haven't, Master Sorin. Have you lately?"

Caught off guard, Sorin sputtered, "Of course not. I'm merely stating that Romas think differently than we do. They are ruled by their emotions." He waved his hand toward Alexandreina, not wanting to look into her face and witness the despair in her eyes. "The lady is clearly an emotional being. I have witnessed this myself on several occasions. She can't be at fault for something that clearly she can't control."

Rica sniffed then continued to flip pages of the journal. "Hmm, how about this entry. 'I was served by Master Sorin last eve. Although he believes himself to be different, he is the same as every other Draconian. Heartless, cruel and depraved. I found a small amount of pleasure in the serving, but afterwards I scrubbed myself clean of his vile presence. If I have to do that again while he continues to stay in the keep, I think I would rather throw myself off the highest turret to smash into a thousand pieces on the hard stone below.'" He snapped the book closed and smiled. "Very emotional indeed."

Sorin turned to look at Alexandreina. Tears streaked her cheeks and her eyes were wide, imploring him. She shook her head in earnest. Was this how she truly felt? That his touch caused her such revulsion that she'd rather kill herself.

Stealing his gaze away, he swallowed down the emotions rising to the surface and pinned his eyes back on Rica. "That can't be all of your proof. It is circumstantial at best."

Tossing the book onto the map table, Rica shook his head. "No, I have more." He turned toward the guard at the door and nodded to him.

The guard opened the small door in the corner. Another guard came through, dragging a dirty and disheveled looking older woman. Sorin had seen her around the keep. She was a servant.

Once in the room, the woman looked up and Sorin could see the blood streaking her cheeks, neck and arms. It was obvious she'd been tortured.

Alexandreina tried to break free of the guards' hold on her arms. "Mirela!" she screamed.

The woman glanced over at Alexandreina then started to sob uncontrollably, shaking her head back and forth, mumbling under her breath.

Rica neared the servant and touched her head. She cringed from him, keening low in her throat like an injured animal. "Mirela confessed to many things. One of them was that she overheard Lady Alexandreina on several occasions talking about rebellion. About leading her people in a revolution and overthrowing my rule."

"That's a lie!" Alexandreina shouted. "You made her say that. You tortured her until she'd say anything you wanted."

Rica chuckled. "What an imagination you have, my lady."

Sorin watched Alexandreina, his heart heavy with her pain. She was deftly caught in Rica's manipulations with nowhere to go. Nothing she

said would make a difference to Rica or anyone else in the room. Except for him. Everything she said and did mattered to him.

"I have all the proof I need, Master Sorin." Rica moved across the room and stood in front of Alexandreina. He eyed her maliciously and clucked his tongue as if addressing a child. "There is only one punishment for treason. But because the holiday is almost upon us, I propose that she be given a chance to be useful and redeem her crimes." Turning theatrically, he cocked his head at Sorin. "She will be our vessel to Zamolixis in the Messenger Ceremony, just like her mother."

"No!" Sorin and Vanda blurted simultaneously.

Surprise lifted Rica's brow as he glanced at his daughter. "I expected an outburst from Master Sorin, but from you...this is very surprising indeed."

Vanda's face grew red and she lowered her head. "I'm sorry, my lord. I...I was overwhelmed for a moment."

He nodded his head as if he understood completely. "Your human side sometimes surprises me, daughter. See that you control yourself."

She bowed her head and said no more.

Sorin watched the exchange curiously. Maybe he had an ally in the keep after all. He filed that information away, hoping for a better time to use it.

Rica turned his gaze to him. "And you, Sorin. Is there something you want to say about this matter?"

"I think using Alexandreina in the ceremony is a mistake, my lord."

"A mistake?"

"Yes, she'd end up a martyr to her people. Others may take her death as a sign to rise up and fight. They might think that you killed her because she was somehow a threat to you. To your rule."

Sorin had to clench his hands at his sides to stop them from shaking. He wanted to run to Alexandreina's side, gather her in his arms and whisk her away. However, he couldn't. He had to portray an air of

indifference. That he didn't care one way or the other whether she lived or died.

It was killing him inside to do it, but he had to, to have any hope of saving her.

Rica stared at him then began to pace the room. He had a look of contemplation on his face. At least Sorin hoped that it was that, and not one of complete incredulousness.

Rica nodded. "Hmm, you may be on to something, Sorin. I wouldn't want the lady made into a martyr. But what would you suggest then? Someone must be made to pay for this."

Swallowing down the bile that rose in his throat for what he had to do, Sorin gestured with his hand as if he had no care in the world. "A substitute, maybe. A villager perhaps."

It was then that Alexandreina looked at him.

He could see the light in her beautiful green eyes fade. The hope that he would save her slowly ebbed into something else. An emotion he never wanted to see from her. Scorn. Hate.

Rica smiled and clapped Sorin on the shoulder. "Excellent idea, Master Sorin. A villager picked at random to take her place, knowing that they will die because of her." He swiveled toward Alexandreina, a look of glee on his face. "And my dear lady may live on knowing that she killed this person. One of her own." He laughed gaily. "That's perfect." Turning back around, he grinned at Sorin. "And I owe it all to you, Sorin. Here I thought you wanted to keep her alive for yourself. As if you truly cared for her."

Sorin shrugged his shoulders. "I admit to have enjoyed her immensely, my lord, but she is a Roma servant and nothing more to me."

He had to grit his teeth to stop from screaming. To stop from crossing the room, wrapping his hands around Rica's throat and squeezing until the Overlord's face turned blue. He kept from looking at Alexandreina. He

couldn't bear to see the look in her eyes. Couldn't bear to see her eye him with contempt. She remained alive and that was all that mattered to him.

Rica waved his hand toward the guards. "Take her to her room. Keep guard. No one enters, no one leaves."

She remained quiet and motionless as they carried her out. Sorin watched with his heart in his throat as they dragged her out the door. Pain deep and tearing rooted inside him. He'd never felt so completely conflicted before. Devastated.

Rica put his arm around Sorin's shoulders. "I was worried about you, Sorin. However, you've redeemed yourself to me. You are truly and utterly a Draconian after my own heart." He clapped him on the back and swiveled in a circle, obviously completely pleased with himself. "We'll reconvene in two days for the ceremony. I predict that it will be a grand time."

Sorin bowed his head and made his leave. Outside the war room, he strode down the hallway to his chamber. He needed to be alone, needed to be able to release his pain or he'd explode.

Once inside his room, he shut and locked the door. He moved to the open window and leaned his head out. Taking in a deep breath of cool night air, he was able to think and plan.

He couldn't allow Rica to get away with what he did. Somehow, there had to be something Sorin could do. Before Alexandreina slipped away from him. Rica had done a tremendous job of splitting them apart, or causing anger and suspicion to enter both their minds.

However, Sorin vowed it would not keep them apart. He would do whatever he had to, to make sure they could be together.

Chapter Fourteen

For two days, Alexandreina sat in her room and wept.

Nicoletta had been allowed entry to her room twice a day for only a few allotted minutes, to deliver and take away any food plates. The rest of the time, she was alone.

If Sorin had tried to see her, she didn't know and if he had, she wasn't quite sure how she'd feel about his visit. Some of the things he had said in the war room had hurt her. Deep down, she knew he said those things to keep her from being executed, but it was her heart that ached. It felt as if a knife had pierced her flesh and bled her out.

By the time the sun set on the second day, Alexandreina's throat throbbed from the effort of her sobbing and her eyes were sore and raw from her tears. She felt like she'd shed enough tears to fill the fountain outside in the garden. She felt empty and devoid of all her emotions. Having bled them for the past two days.

When they came for her, she didn't struggle. She made not a sound as the two guards ushered her out of her room, through the keep to the courtyard where the crowd was forming for the scheduled ceremony. Gathering by force and not by choice.

Eyes downcast, Alexandreina took her place on top of the makeshift dais behind and off to the side of Rica and Lizuca, Priestess Cami and the other Draconian dignitaries. She sat in the provided chair, folded her hands on her lap and tried desperately not to sob uncontrollably. She couldn't stand to look up and watch as her fellow Roma, her charge by

blood, be cast down into the pit of spikes used for the barbaric Messenger ceremony.

Rica stood and held up his hand to silence the murmuring gathering of both Draconian and Roma citizens. "It is with great honor that we witness this evening. The Messenger Ceremony is one of great importance and tradition that we Draconians have honored for a thousand years." He took a few steps forward on the dais and glanced down at the crowd of people. "Ever since Zamolixis breathed life into us and set us forth from the Dragon Mounts, we have been time-honored to perform this ceremony to send back our thanks to the Underworld and our great god."

Risking a peek, Alexandreina raised her head. Her gaze found Sorin almost instantly. He stood off to the side on the ground in front of the dais. He was looking off in the distance, as if watching some other ceremony going on someplace else. She watched as his face flinched, then he turned and met her look. His blank stare rattled her but she kept his gaze.

She wanted to run to him. Let him wrap her in the warmth of his embrace. But she sat motionless and allowed one tear to escape her eye.

"Bring forth the volunteers." Rica waved his hand toward the crowd.

The throng of Romas parted. Two Draconian guards stepped toward the dais, three Roma citizens in their wake. Alexandreina watched in horror as a young boy and an old woman she knew as Clara, were ushered to the front. She held her breath as the third person was pushed ahead. Several people in the crowd bowed their heads in respect.

When she saw whom it was that her fellow Romas bowed to, she could no longer remain stoic and she couldn't hold her tongue. Her heart felt like it had shattered like glass.

She was off her chair in moments. "No!" She rushed to the edge of the dais, but a guard grabbed her arm before she could jump off.

Anghel looked up at her and shook his head. Gathering his robe about him, he took his spot next to the others chosen to be executed in the ceremony.

“Does the lady protest?” Rica scoffed.

Alexandreina turned to him, her hands fisted at her sides. “You can’t do this.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Priestess Cami looking on, agony searing her face. Her hands fisted at her sides, and it looked like her entire body was quaking with either anger or sorrow. Alexandreina couldn’t be sure which. Maybe both.

Rica took a step toward Alexandreina, a half-smile on his face. “I can and I have, my lady. This is your punishment for breaking the law.” He swung toward the crowd. “The laws are here for a reason. Over the past thirty-five sun turns have we not had order and peace in the community? Your dear lady,” he pointed to her, “broke these laws and this is how it is to be repaid. Know this, people of Sinaia, one of your people will die here today because of what Lady Alexandreina de cu Soare has done, not because I wish it so.”

Alexandreina tried to break free of the guard’s hold, but it was useless, he was much too strong. He took hold of her hair and dragged her backwards toward her chair, but not before she saw Sorin turn to jump onto the dais and aid her.

Rica saw it too.

“Master Sorin,” he boomed. “You will do the honor of choosing the messenger.”

Sorin paused in his actions, his body vibrating with fury. He was sick to his stomach at the proceedings. His control trembled on the edge of reason. It would not take much more to push him off. However, to do so would mean his death. Was he ready to die knowing he could still keep Alexandreina safe with his presence?

Taking a deep breath, Sorin looked up at Rica. “I’m sorry, my lord?”

“I said you may have the privilege of choosing our messenger. As the visiting emissary, I would think that it would be a great honor for you and for the entire Moon Clan.” Rica glanced at all the other Draconians on the dais.

They all turned their gazes to Sorin and regarded him expectantly.

His stomach rolled over in revulsion. He couldn’t do it, not in front of Alexandreina. It would be his hand that would send one of her own to their death. And that was exactly what Rica had planned from the beginning. He wanted to punish Alexandreina and kill any chance of a relationship between her and Sorin with this one act.

Sorin suspected it worked. No matter what he did, their relationship was doomed.

He bowed his head, not out of reverence to Rica but out of shame for what he must do. “Yes, my lord. It would be a great honor.”

Without looking at Alexandreina, he turned and walked toward the three Romas lined up along the side of the dais.

He looked first at the young boy no older than seven. He was barely out of diapers and just learning to make his way in the world. Sorin couldn’t send him to his death.

The old woman was next. She looked to be around seventy. Lines of age crinkled her sagging face. She had lived a long life. Maybe not a good one by the looks of her, but long. Could he send her to an early grave regardless?

Then there was Anghel.

Clenching his jaw, Sorin met the old man’s steady gaze. Alexandreina’s friend and closest thing to family. It would destroy her to lose him. He couldn’t send him to his doom.

However, before he could turn back, Anghel took a step forward, gripped Sorin’s arm and pulled him near. The old man leaned close to his ear.

“You must keep her alive, no matter what. I entrust you with this.” Sorin recognized the look in Anghel’s eyes. Cold determination and acceptance.

“I see you have made your choice, Master Sorin,” Rica interjected from atop the dais.

Everything became a blur after that. He felt like he was dreaming. Two guards dressed in ceremonial black armor took hold of Anghel and pried him off Sorin. He didn’t protest. He just turned and stared at the old man as they dragged him across the courtyard toward the pit.

Alexandreina’s screams of outrage lifted his head. But he just stared at her, unable to act, unable to speak. He was paralyzed with his own inability to stop the events transpiring. He was helpless, impotent to do anything but watch how the grim scene played out.

Rica continued to speak atop the dais, but his words were only muddled mumbles in Sorin’s ears. He turned as the crowd did toward Anghel being prepped to be sent into the pit as a messenger to Zamolixis. But as he moved, it felt like he was moving in water. His legs and arms felt heavy, his lungs compressed with pressure. He wanted to run to the old man’s rescue but his body wouldn’t respond.

Rica descended the dais and walked to Anghel. As he stood in front of the man, Rica drew a blade across his thumb. Blood beaded to the surface and he pressed it to Anghel’s forehead. It was his stamp of rule, so Zamolixis would know who had sent the messenger to him.

The crowd around them grew silent as Rica’s words grew in pitch. Sorin swiveled around, searching for a source of power. Anything to push him into action. His gaze locked on Alexandreina. She lay in a curled heap on the wood platform of the dais, her body wracked with sobs. Slowly, she opened her eyes and met his gaze.

Green. The emerald green of summer, is what he thought as he looked into them. So beautiful, so full of sorrow...

His heart broke. He could actually hear it in his head. The sound alone spurred him to turn and run toward the ceremony. His legs pumped hard, and he reached out in vain with his hand, reaching, searching...

A woman in white stopped him. He looked down into the priestess's face as she held his arm tightly, with more strength than he ever imagined in such a slight person. However, it was the look in her eye that halted him. Pain. Sorrow. Longing. The things that mirrored his own soul stared back at him.

"Not yet," she mumbled under her breath.

He stared past her and watched in abject horror as Anghel ran toward the pit. Jumping into the air, he flung himself into it, his fist in the air. "For Romania!"

Several people in the crowd screamed as he plummeted to his death.

Sorin closed his eyes and bent his head, knowing what lay at the bottom of that pit. Several wooden spikes, sharpened into flesh-piercing spears. That was how Anghel would get to the Underworld.

Silence encased the courtyard. Opening his eyes, Sorin raised his head and met Rica's gaze. The Overlord was staring at him with a look of amusement on his pinched face. For several seconds, as their eyes met, the whole world disappeared. It was just the two of them, standing toe to toe in combat.

Rica knew he had won the round. He had successfully driven Sorin and Alexandreina apart, killed a revered leader in the Roma community and made Sorin tip his hand. There was now no question where Sorin's feelings lay. He could no longer deny his affinity to the Roma plight. And that was a dangerous thing to reveal, especially at a time of war.

Now, it was Sorin's turn to fall back and plan. His turn to strategize a way to bring Rica down, to end his tyrannical rule. Because no matter what, he would. For Anghel, for the Roma people and especially for Alexandreina.

Rica may have thought he got the better of Sorin but in fact, he helped Sorin to decide just what side of the war he was fighting for. There was no longer question in Sorin's mind where his loyalties lay.

The spell was broken and, with a nod, Rica turned and stepped back up onto the dais.

Sorin took a step back and shook his head clear. The priestess had already moved away from him and was walking back toward the keep's doors. He wondered why she had stopped him, but the look in her eyes told him more than he thought possible. Maybe the situation was not as hopeless as it seemed.

Then all his reasoning left him as he watched two guards drag Alexandreina across the dais and back toward the keep. She made no effort to stop them. In fact, she looked like a lifeless rag doll.

Right then, he realized that he loved her. He'd never loved anyone before. Not even his own parents. This Roma woman brought out his real emotions. True, honest emotions that he had no idea he could feel. However, he felt them, intensely. He would do anything for her, and he had a hope that she would hang on. That when the time came she could trust him. He needed that trust more than anything, if he was going to save both of their lives.

Chapter Fifteen

“You must eat something, my lady.”

Too weary to push the bowl of hot stew away, Alexandreina resigned just to shake her head. She was numb. She had no interest in anything around her. For the past twenty-four hours she hadn’t wanted to do anything but sleep. Maybe then, the pain would recede. Maybe then, she could stop the voices in her head. The ones that continually told her it was her fault Anghel had died.

Nicoletta sighed and ran a hand over Alexandreina’s head. “Don’t let this destroy you. Can’t you see that is what the Overlord wants?”

“I’m already dead. There’s nothing more he can do to me,” she murmured.

Picking up the spoon in the stew bowl, Nicoletta shoveled some onto the tip and brought it to Alexandreina’s mouth. “Eat.”

She shook her head.

Nicoletta pushed it against her lips. “Eat.”

Alexandreina raised her hand and knocked the spoon away. It slid on the stone floor dumping its contents. “I don’t want to eat.” She pushed out of her chair and rushed to the window, throwing herself against the wall. “I don’t want to do anything. Just leave me be.” Turning her head, she glanced over her shoulder at her maid. “Can’t you see how I suffer?”

Nicoletta picked the spoon up off the floor and set it on the tray with a loud clink. “Yes, I see, quite clearly. Anghel would be ashamed of you.”

Alexandreina wheeled around and pointed her finger at Nicoletta. “Don’t say his name! And don’t you ever speak to me of shame.”

Dropping her shaking hand, she glared at her maid. "Get out. I wish to be left alone."

Nicoletta gathered the tray and walked toward the door. Before she got there, she turned back around. "You may be alone in this room, Alexandreina, but remember you are not alone in this fight. We can't win if you have already given up. Your mother and father didn't suffer as they did so you could give up. It is your destiny to fight." She gave a brief curtsy, then left, shutting the door behind her.

The moment she heard the loud click of the door, Alexandreina turned back to the open window and leaned against the sill. Leaning her head out, she reveled in the cool night air. Closing her eyes, she tried to quiet her mind as the fresh breeze blew over her face. It didn't work. She still heard the voices of guilt in her head.

She pushed away from the window and wandered back to her bed. Lying down, she gathered a pillow to her body, wrapping herself around it. The semi-solidness next to her brought her little relief. It just reminded her of what was missing, another reason her heart ached so painfully.

Sorin.

As her thoughts swirled toward him, she squeezed her eyes shut. The pain of knowing he had been the one to choose Anghel sliced her into ribbons. Even though she knew Rica had manipulated the situation and forced it upon him, the agony of it still would not abate. He had sent her dear friend and guardian to his death. The same death that claimed her mother.

Now she was completely and utterly alone.

Nicoletta's departing words echoed back in her ears. They had hurt, cut her to the core. How she wanted to ignore them. Toss them aside as inconsiderate ramblings of a cold, heartless woman. However, Nicoletta was anything but heartless. Alexandreina knew her to be caring and

compassionate. Not once had she spoken to Alexandreina with anything but thoughtful intentions.

But with her pain so fresh, Alexandreina couldn't think past herself. She hurt too much to consider what all this meant to her people, to what Anghel and Priestess Cami had entrusted her to do.

And Cami? She wondered how the priestess grieved this eve. Or if she did? Did the Draconian have the capacity to feel this much?

Rolling onto her back, she hugged the pillow tightly. A tear slipped from her eye to drip onto the bed covers. Yes, she could imagine how the priestess must feel. Alexandreina had been witness to the feelings between her and Anghel. She knew them to be real. She saw it in both their faces. There were no lies there.

And what of Sorin? Were there lies there? The last time they made love, did he not proclaim himself? More tears fell as she thought of what they had lost. A chance at a relationship? Possibly. A chance at love?

She turned onto her side again and squeezed the pillow tighter, pushing her face into the side to stem the sob threatening to erupt. So much loss, in a span of moments. Her whole world had been destroyed, and she could never get it back.

If Anghel were here, he would tell her that the only good thing in life was change. That change afforded a person another chance. To do what, was up to them.

Squeezing her eyes shut, trying to push out the pain, Alexandreina let his words swirl in her mind. What chance did she possibly have?



Eventually sleep claimed her. And she dreamed of Sorin.

He stood over her as she lounged on the green grass near the river. He was gloriously naked and smiling down at her. She could feel the prickles of the greenery on her skin and the breeze on her arm as she

reached up to him. He took her hand in his. Then he squeezed. It felt like he was crushing her bones one by one.

Gasping for breath, Alexandreina bolted awake and tried to sit up. It was then that she realized someone had her hand and was pushing it up against her throat so she couldn't cry out.

Panicked, she tried to struggle, but whoever held her was much too strong.

"Be still," a voice rasped into her ear.

Alexandreina stilled her movements and turned her head to the side. She came face to face with the priestess, dressed entirely in black. She seemed like a living shadow pressed up against Alexandreina's body.

"I don't have much time. Rica will be looking for me soon."

"What do you want?" Alexandreina whispered, her voice ragged and hoarse from her grief.

"It's time to finish it. Rica must not be allowed to continue."

Alexandreina shook her head. "I can't turn Sorin—"

"It's too late for that now. Matters have progressed. Gogu's army marches forward. Rica must die within two days."

"But—"

"You must kill him."

Alexandreina pushed Cami's hand away and sat up. "What? I can't. That's impossible."

"You can and you must. You are the only one that can." Sitting up, Cami reached under her dark cloak and came away with a thin, wrapped bundle. Setting it in one hand, she gently pulled back the fabric. A silver dagger lay in wait. "Take this and strike him down."

Shaking her head, Alexandreina pushed herself away from Cami and the knife. "Impossible. I won't be able to get near him. Not now. Not after what he's done."

"It's the perfect time. He's made a huge effort to break you and Sorin apart. You can use that to our advantage. Feign hatred toward Sorin. For

choosing Anghel to die. It was his fault that this happened. Rica made sure that it looked that way.” She set the dagger down on the bed and slid it over to Alexandreina. “Go to Rica claiming your subservience. Denounce any feelings you have for Sorin and set the blame and loathing on his shoulders. Rica will lap it up. That is exactly what he wants to happen. The reason he planned it so. Let it happen that way.”

Alexandreina stared down at the knife. Could it be so easy? To go to Rica and plunge the dagger into his black heart, ending so many years of tyranny and brutality.

“You will have to let him seduce you, Alexandreina.”

Her head came up and she cringed back in horror. “I can’t. I won’t be able to stand it if he touches me.”

Cami grabbed her hand and squeezed it tight. “You must. That is the only way. Once he has served you, he will be vulnerable. As the blood races through his system, he will not be aware of what is going on around him. This is when he will be at his weakest. No other time. This is when you will take the knife and plunge it into his neck. He will die this way and only this way. The silver will not allow him to heal the wound.”

“I can’t do it.”

Cami released her hold on Alexandreina’s hand and sat back. Her face was a stoic mask. However, Alexandreina could see the emotion even in the black of her eyes. “You are the only one, Alexandreina. It is your destiny to do this. If you refuse, then there is no hope for any of us. And Anghel will have died in vain. For nothing.”

Without another word, Cami stood, wrapped her black cloak about her and stepped back into the shadows. It wasn’t long before Alexandreina couldn’t see her as she glanced around the room. It was as if the priestess had vanished.

Her attention swung back to the dagger. Reaching out, she picked it up and tested the weight of it in her hand. With a finger, she ran the

length of the blade, feeling the sharp sting of the silver. Pulling her finger back, she looked down at it and saw blood bead to the surface.

Could she do what the priestess asked? She knew without a doubt that she could plunge the lethal blade into Rica's neck, but it was the means she was unsure of. To allow Rica to touch her. To put his mouth on her. She knew he wouldn't make it easy for her. Most likely, he would make it as painful as possible.

That she could handle. The pain would be welcome, knowing she suffered only to slay him in the end. If her body betrayed her and she felt pleasure, that would be difficult to stomach. That, she was unsure, if she could handle. That would be the ultimate betrayal of all. To her people, to Anghel, to Sorin, and most of all, to herself.

Gripping the dagger tight, she brought it to her chest and pressed the length of it against her. Closing her eyes, she prayed to Zamolixis to grant her the strength and wits to do what she was asked. To finally end her people's suffering and her own.

Chapter Sixteen

The past day had been hell for Sorin. Unable to see Alexandreina or feel safe in his room, he had resorted to pacing on the top of the keep's walls for all the night and most of the day. He told the guards atop that he wanted to make sure they were not ambushed. Not a far cry from the truth, as rumor was, Gogu's troops were on the move. It wouldn't be long before they crossed over into Dark Clan lands.

Rica was diligently preparing troops to move out by the next day's eve. He wanted to meet Gogu head-on before they were able to encroach any further to Sinaia.

His own troops would be arriving soon. A messenger had arrived just this morn from Constanta, saying that the Moon Clan was on the move. Another two days, three at the most, and he would be organizing his men to prepare for battle. Then he would be gone from Sinaia. And likely would never see Alexandreina again.

That, he could not handle.

Leaning on the trellis, Sorin gazed down into the garden. He remembered not long ago watching Alexandreina play with the children near the fountain, and how she had astounded him. Since then, he had fallen in love with her. A seemingly impossible feat for a Draconian. But he had. He couldn't deny it.

However, Rica had successfully driven them apart.

She refused to see him. He was sent away from her room when he last attempted to see her. The guards at her door had direct orders from her not to allow him entrance. Somehow, he had doubted it. He knew the

order had in fact come down from the Overlord and not from Alexandreina.

But when he had sought out Nicoletta in the servant quarters, she too confessed that Alexandreina didn't want to see him. Too devastated by Anghel's loss, she didn't want to be reminded of why he died and who had sent him to his death.

Overwhelmed with sorrow, Sorin had begged the maid to pass on a message to Alexandreina. That he didn't pick Anghel. Anghel had picked himself. For whatever reasons, the old man had volunteered to be cast into the pit and transcend to the Underworld. After almost being crushed in his arms, Nicoletta had reluctantly agreed to pass on the message.

His desperation and odd behavior were raising many eyebrows in the keep. Guards avoided him, and others smirked. He could imagine what Rica was telling those in his trusted circle. That Sorin was losing it, and would never take the ruling seat of the Moon Clan.

Sorin figured the Overlord was right on both counts.

Too many things had changed for him here. He couldn't go back to his life and continue as before. Too much had happened. Alexandreina had come into his life. And he couldn't get her out of it. He found he didn't want to.

As if conjured from his thoughts, Sorin watched as she wandered into the garden and sat at the stone fountain, a basket over her arm and her maid at her side. Smiling at something Nicoletta said, she raised her head to the sun.

Sunbeams danced off her rich dark hair. His heart raced at the sight of her. He couldn't let this moment pass without talking with her.

Turning, he raced down the stone steps, taking them two at a time, and came out into the garden below. He saw her tense the moment he appeared in the garden as if she could sense him. She avoided his gaze as he approached.

"*Bun zi*, my lady." He bowed to her.

She nodded, but did not look up. "*Bun zi*, Master Sorin."

"May I sit and speak with you?"

Suddenly, she stood and grabbed Nicoletta's arm. "I don't think that would be best." She started to walk, dragging her maid behind her. "If you'll excuse me. I must go in and tend to my duties."

He didn't budge from where he stood. He refused to move for her because he couldn't let her go. Grabbing her arms, he pulled her close. She struggled against him but he remained determined to keep her to him.

"Don't do this. Do not let Rica win."

"Please, let me go."

She vibrated underneath his hands. Out of fear? He didn't know. He liked to think that it was because she still desired him. Still held strong feelings for him despite what had transpired.

Leaning forward, he murmured against her ear. "I'm...I'm in love with you, Reina. Please, do not scorn me."

Her head snapped up the moment the words left his lips. He could see a cascade of emotions swimming in her eyes. Fear, anger, loss and, what he had been hoping for, love.

A tear slipped her eye. "If what you say is true, then you must let me go. For both our sakes."

"Is there a problem here?"

Rica's voice penetrated Sorin's calm. Stifling his anger, he let his hands drop from Alexandreina's arms, and turned on his heel.

Alexandreina brushed past him and curtsied to Rica. "There is no problem, my lord."

"Master Sorin?"

"No problem. I asked the lady if she wished to sit and talk with me, but it seems she does not," Sorin replied, his voice quivering with anger.

That made Rica smile.

Eye-brow raised, Rica looked at Alexandreina. “Hmm, maybe the lady would like to sit and talk with me, then?”

She bowed her head. “If you wish, my lord.”

“I do wish it.” Rica waved his arm toward the keep. “But in my chambers would be better. I can’t stand this blasted sun.” He tipped his head arrogantly toward Sorin then led the way back into the keep.

Without a word or a glance his way, Alexandreina followed demurely behind Rica.

As Sorin watched her go, his stomach rolled over in revulsion. The thought of Rica’s hands on her made him sick with fury.

How could she go with him so easily? There had to be something more going on than was obvious. Sorin knew she possessed feelings for him. He could see it, feel it thrumming off her body. So why did she so casually dismiss him and eagerly go with Rica?

He had to find out what was going on. For he feared Alexandreina was headed down a path she would never emerge from.



Nicoletta left her at the door to Rica’s private rooms after a fierce hug and kiss on the cheek.

If her maid knew what she was planning, she never indicated it. However, by the concerned look in her eyes, Alexandreina knew that Nicoletta feared the worse, as did she.

Alexandreina followed Rica through the double doors and into his opulent sitting room. As she looked around, she pictured candles burning on the mantle and flowers in various vases around the room. In another time, these rooms had been her mother’s. Now, there were no candles or flowers, no sweet smell of her mother’s perfume. Just a testament to Rica’s predilection for gold. Gold cups and trinkets were

placed everywhere around the room, leaving no room for such simple things as flowers.

He waved his hand toward one of the high-backed ornate chairs. "You may sit."

She did, primly, with her hands folded on her lap. Looking down at them, she willed them not to shake, not to betray her intentions. Wrapped snugly against her chest, between her breasts, the silver dagger waited patiently for her revenge.

Rica brought two cups of tuica to the table. Setting one in front of her, he sat in the other chair and took a sip of his own. He eyed her over the rim, as a predator watches its prey.

"Your behavior surprises me, Alexandreina." He set his cup on the table. "I thought you to be enjoying Master Sorin's attentions."

Swallowing down the bile in her throat, she chose her words carefully. "Shamefully, I admit to enjoying some aspects of my service to Master Sorin, but since the past events, I've not the stomach to please him any longer."

His brow furrowed as he watched her. She feared she had said the wrong thing. Maybe, he didn't believe her and knew that she was planning to assassinate him.

"I could have him drawn and quartered, if he has offended you in any way."

Sitting forward, she shook her head vehemently. "No!" She bit her tongue and tried to calm herself. "I mean to say, that he hasn't done me any wrong, my lord. He will be leaving soon so it is not a bother. He would serve you better out on the battlefield, would he not?"

Chuckling, Rica stood and wandered to the fireplace mantle. "True." He picked up one of his many gold bracelets and rubbed his fingers over it. "I'm not as brutal as you think I am, Alexandreina." The bracelet between his fingers, he wandered back to where she sat. Reaching down, he grabbed one of her hands and slid the bracelet over it onto her wrist.

"I can be gentle." Bringing her hand up all the way, he pressed his lips to the back and pierced her with his dark gaze. "You've never given me a chance to show you."

It took everything within her not to retch as his cold, dead lips touched her skin. Shivers of dread rushed up and down her spine and she couldn't stop quivering while he held her hand. She hoped he mistook her revulsion for desire.

Now that she was here, Alexandreina could not go back. The opportunity had risen and she needed to follow through with it, because she knew deep down that if she left now, she'd never be able to force herself back.

"I'd like to show you, my lady, just how generous I can be." Keeping her hand wrapped in his, he pulled her to a stand and led her to an open door.

Alexandreina knew where it led. She'd been through it countless times when her mother had occupied the quarters. Taking a deep breath, she let him pull her through the entranceway and into his bedroom.

He led her across the room and sat her on the edge of his king-sized bed. Kneeling on the floor, he placed his hands on her knees and pushed her legs apart roughly. He slid in between them and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her body to him.

Biting down on her lip to stop from screaming, Alexandreina closed her eyes and let him take her. The press of his lips on her throat had her gorge rising, but she kept it down by digging her fingers brutally into his shoulders. That must have ignited a fresh wave of desire in Rica because he ran his hands up and down her back then settled them in her hair, yanking hard to expose her neck.

He growled against her skin. "Your scent drives me mad. I want to feast on you."

"Yes, yes. That is what I want too," she said in rush.

Chuckling, he lapped at her skin. “Mm, I think you are lying to me, Roma.” He trailed his tongue along the side of her neck then up to her ear. “I think you are very afraid to be here. I can smell your fear like a perfume.” He bit down on her lobe.

Clamping her eyes shut, she ground her teeth to stop the cry that bubbled in her throat.

“Tell me you’re afraid. Tell me how much you don’t want to be here,” he growled into her ear.

Squirming in his hold, she tried to move her hands in between their bodies. She wanted to reach for the knife and plunge it into Rica. Wanted to watch as he bled like a stuck pig.

“I’m afraid! I think you’re a disgusting barbarian and I loathe being touched by you!”

“That’s better.” Pulling her head back, he nuzzled his mouth against her skin.

She could feel his extended teeth scraping against her flesh. The pain would be terrible she knew. Taking in a deep breath, she fisted her hands on his chest as the first pinch of agony seared her flesh.

He bit into her, hard, brutally. There was no foreplay, no gentling as Sorin had done. No, this was fierce and vicious. There was no disguising Rica’s true nature in the way he savaged her throat.

She tried to scream as he sucked at her flesh, siphoning her blood. However, no sound would come. Only the wet slurping sounds of Rica feasting sounded in her ears like ear-piercing thunder. Hardly able to think, let alone breathe, Alexandreina tore at her breast. She needed to free the dagger now, while Rica was occupied.

Pushing her fingers down into the bodice of her dress, her fingers brushed against the hilt of the knife. She fumbled at it but could not pull it from its sheath. Panic surged over her as her head began to swim from blood loss. If she didn’t do it now, she would never get another chance.

Pushing her hand in farther down, she was able to secure the dagger between her fingers. She started to pull it up.

Soon, black spots formed in her eyesight. It would not be long before she passed out. Rica was taking more than his fair share of her blood. Finally, she could feel the knife advance out of her bodice and she was able to wrap her hand around the hilt. Slipping it completely out, Alexandreina raised the dagger and brought it down swiftly.

Too anxious to strike, Alexandreina missed her mark. The blade sliced across Rica's shoulder, missing his neck completely.

With a blood-curdling roar, Rica pushed her back and sprang up to his feet. Blood cascaded down his arm and chest, a curl of smoke emanating from the wound.

Alexandreina gained her feet and struck again. But this time, he was prepared.

Bringing his hand down, he knocked the blade from her hand, and with his other hand, he was able to knock her back onto the bed. The blow to her sternum hammered the breath from her lungs. Struggling for air, she writhed on the mattress, clutching at her throat. However, it was too late. She could see the light of the day fade from her eyes. Everything was getting dark and closing in, like being locked in a tight space.

She had failed. There would be no second chance for her.

As she lost consciousness, her last thought was of her mother. She wondered if she would find her in the Underworld.

Chapter Seventeen

The bells of the clock tower rang loudly, but not to any set time. Sorin's heart leapt into his throat when the meaning of the sudden call became clear. It was a town warning. An alarm. Something had happened to the Overlord.

From his perch on top of the keep wall, Sorin raced along the parapet to the stairs. He descended them two at a time. Guards followed him down, their swords at the ready.

When he arrived at Rica's private rooms, a crowd had gathered in front of the closed doors. A murmur spread through the milling pack. And with it a rumor.

An attempt on the Overlord's life had been made. The assassin—Alexandreina de cu Soare.

Sorin couldn't believe it. It had to be a lie. More manipulation and propaganda spread by the Overlord himself.

Suddenly, the double doors opened. Overlord Rica stepped through them, Lord Mihai and General Cezar at his sides. He was shirtless, and Sorin could plainly see a bandage wrapped over his shoulder. Blood seeped to the surface staining the fabric. He was indeed injured.

The crowd grew silent as Rica swept his gaze over them. "The rumor is true. There was an attempt on my life. But as you can see, I am not yet dead." He grinned.

That sent a ripple of laughter through the throng.

Sorin rubbed a hand over his mouth. He was very close to getting sick. If Alexandreina did indeed do this, where was she? Already dead? Ripped apart by a raging lunatic that was the Overlord?

“It is also true that the assassin was a Roma. The Lady Alexandreina to be exact.”

That announcement sent a wave of shock over the crowd. There was obviously more than one Draconian that thought that to be impossible. Sorin found Vanda’s face in the mass. She too had a look of incredulousness.

“She has been taken to the dungeons.” Rica’s gaze swept the crowd again. It rested on Sorin, and a definitive message was sent through his black piercing gaze. *I have you now.* “She will be executed in the morning for her crime of high treason.”

Sorin didn’t stay for the rest of the Overlord’s speech. He promptly turned on his heel and made his way to his room. He had to plan a way to get down to the dungeons to see her. She couldn’t die, not without knowing how he truly felt about her.

As he strode down the hallway, he passed Priestess Cami. She nodded to him as he walked by. While he continued to walk, he glanced over his shoulder at her. She was watching him. There was something in her face that made him stop, turn and walk back to her.



Alexandreina didn’t know how long she’d been unconscious but when she came to, she was laying on the cold, hard stone of a dungeon cell. Her entire body ached and her head pounded.

Twisting her body, she rolled onto her side and tried to sit up. Her head screamed at her to lie back down as she pushed into a sit and leaned against the stone wall. Panting to dampen the wave of nausea that washed over her, Alexandreina surveyed her surroundings.

Her cell consisted of four stone walls, a small wooden door with bars in the miniscule window and nothing else. They hadn't even provided her with a pan to use as a toilet. There was no window, so she didn't know how long she'd been down here. Judging by the way her limbs clenched and cramped, it had been long enough to know she was very close to her end.

She put her head in her hands and sobbed. She had failed. Failed her people, failed Anghel. They had been wrong in putting their faith in her. Now, they had nothing. Her people would suffer for her failure, even after she transcended to the Underworld.

The sound of the door creaking open lifted her head. A guard shuffled in and stood off to the side. "To your feet, wench, you have a visitor."

Surprise jolted her when Sorin walked into the cell. He looked over at the guard and jerked his head toward the door. "Leave us."

The guard hesitated, but when Sorin handed him a small bag of coins he gladly left them, shutting and locking the door behind him.

She cried out when he rushed to her side and gathered her in his arms. Fresh tears fell from her eyes as he hugged her to him, nuzzling his face into hair.

"Oh by Zamolixis, I feared you dead," he murmured against her head.

"I will be by dawn."

Stroking his hand over her hair, he pulled back and looked into her face. "Why? What possessed you to do such an impossible thing?"

She wanted to tell him everything. Tell him how Anghel and Cami had come to her. About their relationship and her brother still alive and amassing an army. About her hopes for her people's freedoms. But the words wouldn't come. She couldn't betray her people no matter what, not even to Sorin, a man she could've loved if given half the chance. Now, they had nothing. Except for this moment. That was all they had left.

She set her hand on his cheek. “It doesn’t matter. Not now. Just hold me, Sorin. Hold me and let me remember this moment before I go to my death.” Leaning forward, she pressed her lips to his.

Burying his hands in her hair, he pulled her even closer to him, crushing her mouth against his. He groaned into her, and she swallowed every sound greedily, reveling in the way he held her, the way he kissed her. Passion and heat. That’s what she thought of when in his arms.

Her insides ignited on fire when she was near him. And when he touched her like he was doing, a hand caressing her cheek and another running up and down her back, her belly exploded in an inferno of desire. His touch alone could send her spiraling into total bliss.

If she was going to die, she couldn’t think of a better memory to take with her to the Underworld.

Nibbling on her lower lip, he slid his hand down and cupped her buttocks, kneading one cheek then the other. “Put your legs around my waist.”

She did as he asked, straddling his lap. She could feel his erection, hard and hot, pressed up against the crotch of her underpants. Oh, how she loved the feel of him inside her. She yearned for it, for him.

Suddenly eager, panicked even, Alexandreina reached between them and undid his trousers. Slipping her hand past the band, she found his cock. Like silk-wrapped steel. She wrapped her hand around the shaft and began to stroke him.

As he laved his tongue across her lobe, he moaned into her ear. “I love what you do to me, woman.”

“I want you, Sorin. I don’t want to think about anything but how you feel deep inside me.”

Growling, Sorin moved his hand around from her buttocks and quickly found his way under her skirt. Without ceremony, he ripped away the fabric of her underpants and buried his fingers into her slick, wet folds.

She cried out as he slipped two fingers into her, pushing and swirling them around, as if testing her readiness. She wanted to scream that she was more than ready for him. Had been waiting for him her whole life. The thought shocked her to no end. To think she would find her soul mate in a Draconian, and only hours before her execution.

Fate had played many games with her over the years. This last one being her final and most important match.

Desperate to feel him, she pulled on his cock, inching him toward her waiting sex. Sorin took her cue and lifted her up to settle her against him. Within seconds, he pulled her down, fully sheathing his cock inside her slick channel.

Gasping for breath as he filled her, Alexandreina wrapped her hands in his silky hair and held on as he took her up. Gripping her hips, he pulled her forward then pushed her back, finding a steady and purposeful rhythm.

It didn't take long to feel her orgasm building deep inside. No man had ever made her experience so many sensations at once. Every nerve ending in her body hummed, every muscle quivered.

As waves of pleasure surged over her, she sought his mouth with hers, eager to feast on his lips again. He opened for her on a sigh and swept his tongue over hers again and again. They kissed passionately, a heated liquid dance.

Breaking the kiss, Sorin brought his hands up to caress her cheeks. Staring deep into her eyes, he spoke, "I wasn't living until I met you, my lady. And now I don't know if I can go on without you."

His words gripped her heart tightly. She could barely breathe with the fierce power of it. Tears fell from her eyes.

"You can, my lord. Just know that I love you. I never wrote those things about you in my journal. "

A single tear materialized in his eye. It rolled down his cheek as if unsure of its true path. "I know. And I love you, and will never love another."

Crying, Alexandreina wrapped her arms around him and held on as he buried himself deep and came in a rush of emotion. She followed him down seconds later, coming in an explosion of rapturous heat.

Alexandreina held him close, crushing her to him as their bodies quieted, their breathing slowed. She never wanted to let go. Ever. However, she knew she had to.

Cradling his face in her hands, she kissed him again. One last time. And with it, she transferred her love and passion for him in hopes that he would take it with him and always remember her.

Moments later, the door to her cell opened and the guard shuffled in. At least he had the decorum to avert his eyes and not stare at them in such an intimate embrace.

Sorin grabbed her and hugged her hard, nuzzling his face into her neck. "I will not let you go."

He gently lifted her off him and set her back onto the stone floor. Quickly, he tucked his cock back into his pants and tied them up. He stood, brushing the dirt from his trousers and walked toward the door.

Before he stepped through, he glanced over his shoulder once more. "Remember what I've said." And with that, he disappeared.

The guard followed him out and shut and locked the door behind.

Alexandreina didn't move from where Sorin had put her. She stared at the closed door and pondered his words. She was exactly in that spot when three executioner guards, wearing black hoods, finally came for her, to escort her to her death.

Chapter Eighteen

Feeling empty and drained of all emotion, Alexandreina marched down the dark hall behind the guards. One led, and the other two followed her close behind. They had shackled her in manacles and leg irons and she found it difficult to move. More than once, she had stumbled to her knees, scraping her skin on the rough stone ground.

Each time, the guard directly behind her picked her up and set her on her feet once again. She wished he would just leave her be, and let her perish on the cold floor. However, that would not be her sentence. That would be too easy. Rica would never allow her to die so simply. He wanted pomp and ceremony at her execution. Easier to control the people, when they witnessed their last royal link twitch and hang from the gallows. Hope for any future would hang with her.

As they came around the last corner before reaching the stone steps up to the courtyard, Alexandreina stumbled and fell again. The guard bent over this time and grabbed her arm. Cowering, she expected him to hit her for her clumsiness.

“Stay down,” he whispered.

Before she could even consider his words or why he said them, the guard drew his sword with lightening quick speed and beheaded the guard behind him, then advanced on the guard in front, running him through the throat. He pulled the sword loose, grabbed the keys from the other’s belt and crouched beside Alexandreina to unlock her chains.

Once free, she scrambled to her feet. “Why have you done this?”

“I told you I would not let you go.”

“Sorin!” She launched into his arms.

He hugged her close. “We must hurry, I have horses waiting, but I don’t know how long Rica will wait for your appearance in the courtyard.”

“How were you able to do this?”

“Let’s just say we have friends in high places.”

“Cami.”

He nodded as he moved toward the beheaded guard. He pulled the black hood off the head. He tossed it to her. “Put this on.”

She stared down at the gore-soaked hood. Blood dripped onto her skirt. “Excuse me?”

Sorin continued to strip the dead guard of his other clothing, tossing them at Alexandreina’s feet. “The disguise will at least afford us reason to be walking out of here and through the courtyard.”

Nodding, Alexandreina drew in a deep breath and dressed in the dead man’s clothes. Swallowing down the bile rising in her throat, she pulled the hood over her head.

Sorin led the way out of the dungeon hall, up the stairs and out into the courtyard. As Alexandreina glanced around, she noticed several Draconians milling about, talking, as if it were just another day. Further on, she could see the gallows and the crowd of her people rounded up and guarded by Draconians, forcing them to witness her execution.

Before they were noticed, Sorin grabbed her arm and steered her toward the back gate. The one that led to the stables. As they passed, other Draconians nodded to them, or saluted them. Alexandreina just nodded and tried to keep pace with Sorin. His long legs made long strides that she found difficult to match. By the time they were through the back gate, Sorin was all but dragging her.

No one was around the stables when they neared them. Alexandreina gave a small blessing to Zamolixis. Sorin pulled her through the double doors and toward two horses already saddled, bridled and ready to go. She pulled off her hood as she neared the animals.

"I can't believe we made it here without any problems." She patted the beautiful roan mare's nose.

"Me either." Sorin stripped off his hood and started to check the saddlebags and tack on his horse.

"You surprise me, Sorin. I never thought you had a death wish."

A lump formed in her throat as she turned toward the menacing voice. Rica stood in the doorway, three guards on either side of him.

Sorin didn't turn toward Rica but stared at Alexandreina, forcing her to look at him. When she did, he patted the scabbard hooked over the pommel of the saddle. Curious, she wrapped her hand around the hilt of the sword and slid the blade up. The glint of silver sparkled back at her. Silver swords. She couldn't believe it.

Sorin pulled his blade from its sheath and turned to face Rica and his men. "However, I always knew *you* were a coward, Rica."

As the metal glinted in the sunbeams penetrating the wooden structure of the stable, the guards took several steps back.

"You won't leave here alive." Rica reached behind him and pulled a sword from one of the guard's scabbard. "I'll kill her first, so you can hear her scream."

Anger fueling her, Alexandreina pulled the silver sword from her saddlebag and pointed it at Rica. "Try it and I will gut you like the pig you are."

Rica took a step forward. "You are no match for me, Roma, even with a silver blade." Sneering, he spat on the ground. "You need to learn your place, which is beneath my boot."

Sorin struck then. Advancing forward, he swung his sword at Rica. But the Overlord ducked in time, and the blade hissed by his face, just nicking him in the cheek. Smoke coiled up from his wound and blood ran down his skin.

"Kill them!" he shrieked at the guards.

They finally jolted into action. Four advanced on Sorin, and two on Alexandreina.

As the two Draconians neared her, she backed up, away from the horses, keeping her sword in front of her. Swinging his weapon, one guard attacked her. But he misjudged her height, having likely fought men much taller than she, and she was able to maneuver around his blade. As she moved, she swung her weapon blindly, hoping to catch him off-guard. It worked.

The horrible hissing sound rose in the stable as her blade made a clean slice across the man's gut. He fell forward onto his knees, gurgling his last words. Swallowing down her nausea, Alexandreina didn't linger long over his dying form. There was still one more guard trying to kill her.

He advanced on her. She swung but missed. Smiling, he ducked to the side as she swung again. He was playing with her. Taking a few steps back, Alexandreina kept her blade up, pointing at him, but her arms were beginning to shake under the strain. However light the silver was, forged together with the heavier steel hilt, the weapon was still very heavy and not made for a woman of her size.

It wouldn't be long before she couldn't hold the blade up any longer.

Looking past the guard, she saw that Sorin was making easy work of his attackers. Three of the four guards lay dead or dying on the ground. Rica stood off to the side watching the whole thing. What was he waiting for?

She took another retreating step and to her horror ran into a wooden beam. She couldn't back up any more. She was trapped.

"Nowhere to go now, wench," the guard spat at her. He raised his weapon and brought it down in a swift wide arc.

As if in slow motion, Alexandreina watched as the blade swung toward her, seeing every inch of movement the weapon made moving

through the air. She could already feel the swish of the air over her face, as if in prediction of where the blade would land.

However, the sword never reached her.

Another weapon, Sorin's weapon, blocked the blade.

The guard stumbled back as Sorin knocked the sword from his hand. He didn't get far before Sorin ran him through with his silver blade. The Draconian fell over, his eyes rolling back and blood cascading down his body.

Alexandreina watched the action in awe. Sorin had saved her again.

Turning, he met her gaze and smiled.

"Sorin! Look out!" she screamed.

But it was too late Rica's sword already poked through his side to impale him through his stomach. The Overlord had attacked him from behind exactly like the coward he was.

Eyes wide, Alexandreina watched as Sorin moved forward, sliding his body off Rica's blade, and turned with his sword hand to knock the bloodied weapon from the Overlord's hand. Unarmed, Rica stumbled back, surprised at Sorin's stamina, his utter strength to prevail.

As if he'd never been injured, Sorin advanced on Rica. The Overlord fell backwards onto his buttocks, and Sorin pressed the tip of his blade into his neck. Tendrils of smoke drifted up from where the silver touched his flesh.

Alexandreina raced to his side and glared down at her felled tormentor. She had suffered too long by his hands. "Kill him."

Sorin's hand shook, and she could see the hesitation on his face.

"Why do you falter?"

Rica started to laugh. "Because he knows what it means to slay me."

"What does that mean?" She touched Sorin's shoulder. "What is he talking about?"

"Under Draconian Law if I kill the Overlord, I become the Overlord in his place unless a successor has already been named."

“And has there been one named?”

“Lord Gogu.”

Alexandreina flinched back in shock at the name of the only other Draconian more brutal and ruthless than Rica. No Roma would survive under his rule. Her whole race would be doomed.

No this couldn't be. “Bugger the Draconian Law. We can change the rules.”

Sorin shook his head. “No, I'm afraid we can't, Reina. There are too few of us.”

“And the two of you won't last much longer, I guarantee you that,” Rica growled.

Leaning back, Sorin raised his blade from Rica's throat. “But we'll have a head start, you bastard.” With that, he sunk his sword into Rica's side. Rica screamed as the silver seared and sliced his flesh. “It'll take you months to heal that.”

Withdrawing his weapon, Sorin took her arm and steered her toward the horses. Sheathing his sword, he helped her onto her mount. He winced as he did it. Rica's weapon had done some damage, but thankfully it had not been silver.

When she was secure on top of her horse, he mounted his own. Clicking his tongue, he dug his heels into his horse's side and rode out of the stable, Alexandreina following right behind.

They met no opposition in the city as they rode through. The guards at the gates didn't even send up a call as they galloped past. Alexandreina risked a look behind her as they raced through the green field, but there was no party chasing them down.

It was as if they were allowed to leave.

Past the field, they galloped along the river's edge heading north toward Moon Clan land. Sorin pushed them on to cross the river when it was shallow. Once across, he led them on again, pushing the horses hard.

It wasn't until they had ridden for hours that Sorin brought his horse down to an easy canter. He brought his horse back alongside hers.

He looked at her then, and she saw the pain etched clearly across his face.

"We should stop and tend to your wounds."

He nodded and pulled his horse toward a small clump of trees in a grove. After stopping, he dismounted and went to help her down. She shooed him away and got off by herself. She didn't need an injured man tending to her.

"Do we have supplies?" she asked.

"In the bags. The priestess stocked us well." He found a couple of large rocks. He sat and leaned against them.

Alexandreina retrieved the medical supplies from the saddlebags and crouched down beside him. He already had his shirt off and she could clearly see the stab wound in his stomach. Remarkably, it had stopped bleeding and was already starting to clot.

"It looks bad," she stated as she dabbed a cloth with stringent and rubbed it over his wound.

Wincing, he shook his head. "I'll heal. Will just take a little bit of time."

Finished with cleaning it, Alexandreina applied an herbal healing agent, and then wrapped his body with bandages. When she was done, she let her hand linger. "I thought I lost you."

Sorin grabbed her hand and brought it up to his face placing it on his cheek. "You will never lose me. I would fight death itself to stay with you."

Cradling his cheek, she ran her thumb over his lips. Tears welled in her eyes. "Will we be okay?"

"We will find my clan. There are others that are sympathetic to the Roma plight. This is not over. I won't let Rica win."

"And us? Are we over?"

“Never.” He leaned forward and pressed his lips to hers. The kiss was gentle and full of longing, and desire. “I love you, Alexandreina de cu Soare. My Roma princess. I will never let you go.”

“I love you, Sorin de cu Luna, my Draconian lord, and I will never let you leave.”

Wrapping her arms around him, Alexandreina nuzzled into the security of his arms. Her Draconian lover, her one true love. For now, their fight was over. They had escaped with their lives and their love.

However, she knew that the war was just beginning.

About the Author

A VIXEN at heart, Vivi Anna likes to burn up the pages with her original, unique brand of fantasy fiction. Whether it's in the Amazon jungle, an apocalyptic future, or the otherworld city of Necropolis, Vivi always writes fast paced action-adventure with strong, independent women who can kick some butt, and dark, delicious heroes to kill for. You can find her at www.vivianna.net.

Can she heal lifetimes of pain and make him believe salvation is possible?

The Daystar

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Always feeling different from the world around her, a power grows within Lexine Parker. In the light is where she belongs—even as she finds herself thrust into the nocturnal realm of the Templar vampires.

Scarred by a brutal past, Constantine is a creature consumed with rage. He knows only darkness and sin. Believing he fights a losing battle of redemption, heaven is something he doesn't dare hope for—until Lexine makes him believe salvation is possible.

Locked away in an ancient castle, they come together in body and spirit, searching for love to chase away the darkness. With Constantine's soul at stake and Lex's life on the line, the nights tick down to a cataclysmic event that could tear them apart forever.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *The Daystar*:

At the sharp knock at her door, Lex didn't even bother to get up. Her muffled "come in" was said into her pillow. She assumed it was Allie coming in to give her the usual "older sister spiel", which was why, when the door opened and no Allie was forthcoming, Lex sat up to see who it was.

Her heart slammed against her ribcage at the sight of Constantine filling the doorway. As much as her mortification reached epic heights while he stood silently staring at her, she was glad he'd followed her. It meant he cared. Didn't it? Or was she just reading more into his recent behavior than was healthy? Whichever it was, Lex was still glad he was here.

"What are you doing here? Come to point and laugh at the silly girl who just made an ass out of herself with her wayward thoughts?"

He shook his head, his expression, for once, not unreadable. In fact, the shock on Constantine's was almost comical. "You can't mean it."

"Oh Lord, I don't want to talk about this."

"Neither do I."

That surprised the hell out of Lex. She stood cautiously, as if trapped in a room with a wild animal. By the look on Constantine's face, she had the feeling she wasn't too off the mark. One sudden move and she had the distinct impression he'd pounce on her.

Not that she'd have any problem with Constantine doing some pouncing. Given how pissed he looked, she didn't know if it would be the good kind of pouncing or the sort that would make her wish she'd locked her door to keep him out.

"If you don't want to make fun of me and you don't want to talk about my little bomb, then what are you doing here?"

Though Lex thought it impossible for him to frown any deeper, Constantine proved her wrong. "I don't bloody know why the fuck I'm here."

Like the demanding, and sometimes annoyingly arrogant, warrior he was, Constantine walked right up to her and yanked her into his arms. When she slammed against him, Lex knew what it meant to be manhandled.

She didn't have a chance to protest—not that she would—before he brought his face close to hers. For a moment she thought Constantine was going to kiss her, but he didn't and a momentary stab of regret pierced her.

"I'm not leaving."

His tone suggested that was a warning and not an announcement. Warning or no, it left Lex was a bit breathless. "I'm glad."

He bared his fangs. This close, Lex saw just how lethal they were. Yet every time he kissed her, never once had he hurt her with them. His control astounded her.

But then, everything about Constantine was tightly controlled rage and power. His body was a work of art, from his tattoos to his scars. They were marks of his life—and his death. The thick cords of muscle that moved under his pale flesh were a testimony to his discipline as a warrior. She couldn't begin to imagine what it had taken to hone his body into the fine weapon it was.

"I can't be around you without wanting to bury myself in you."

That healthy dose of honesty ignited a fire in Lex that burned its way through her entire being. "Then stop denying us both. I can't make it any clearer, or easier on you than that."

Pride be damned, Lex laid herself out for his taking. Now—she just hoped he'd take it and stop torturing them both.

"You've no bloody idea what you'll be inviting into your body."

That statement spoke volumes to Lex and it broke her heart. How could Constantine think so lowly of himself? No matter what'd done in his life, or what he'd done after, God loved him enough to give him a second chance. Didn't that mean anything to him? Didn't it mean anything that she loved him?

And, oh God, how she loved him.

Lex placed her hands on his cheeks. "Don't I?" She dropped her hands and placed them on his chest. It was high time she gave him back that same raw honesty. "I think it's you who doesn't know me. I'm not the delicate flower you all treat me as. I'm a woman, Constantine, and I know what I want. And what I want is you."

The expression of shock Constantine had worn before was replaced by a beautiful play of emotions as he fought a battle with himself to either leave or take what she so blatantly offered him.

For a moment Lex expected Constantine to leave and a stab of disappointment pierced her. She knew that if he left her, he wouldn't just be leaving her chamber. He'd be leaving her.

When his mouth came down on hers, there wasn't a shred of tenderness in his kiss. Instead, it was a brutal, almost punishing, joining of their mouths as he showed her exactly what manner of man he was. Not that Lex needed the reminder. She knew Constantine wasn't a gentle man. She expected things to be a bit—rough—with him. Given who he was, she didn't think otherwise.

Stepping up on her tiptoes, Lex pressed her body against Constantine's as her hands ran over his back. His lips were unyielding, demanding, and when she sighed into his mouth she felt him inhale it. There was something extremely erotic about that. His tongue moved over hers hesitantly and Lex realized he was struggling to be careful with his fangs. When he brought them into play, they added a certain amount of danger to his kiss.

Hoping Constantine wasn't going to bring this to an abrupt end, Lex melted into him. She wanted to touch all of him, know every inch of his body, but there was so much of him she didn't know where to start. His size scared her just a little and she prayed he couldn't sense it since she knew he'd probably stop if he did.

When she trailed her hands down his back and came to settle on his ass, he hissed. She squeezed and he growled. She pulled him closer and he tore his mouth away. That was definitely not the reaction Lex was expecting.

"I shouldn't have come here."

Was he joking? He wasn't going to start that again. He wanted to be here. She wanted him here and she was going to fight to make him realize he was being foolish in resisting what was between them.

He set her aside and went to leave. By a will of its own, her hand settled on his arm. He stopped dead, his gaze fixed on the door. "You can't keep doing this to me, Constantine. You can't keep playing me like this. One second you want me, the next you can't wait to be rid of me. I mean, my God, my pride can only take so much."

Cursing, Constantine turned and pinned her with a glare. "You've no idea of the things I want to do to you."

"No, I don't." She ran her hand through his hair, not an easy task given their height differences. "But I can't make it any clearer that I'm not afraid to find out." Something warned her he still might flee, which was why Lex decided to play dirty. "Besides, they can't be half as nasty as the things I imagine you doing to me."

Right then Lex knew she had him.

The look that darkened Constantine's eyes caused her heart to race. Liquid heat poured through her when he brought his mouth close to her ear and whispered the most wicked things. Heat settled between her legs. In the wake of the warmth came wetness, which brought the ache of emptiness.

"I won't give you a gentle ride."

God, she hoped not. "If I wanted gentle I wouldn't be here with you."

The intensity in the silvery depths of his eyes cut Lex right to her core. "If I stay I'm taking this to the end."

She smiled at the thought of him being the one to show her the wonders of her body. "You'd better."

"You're mine, Lexine" he gritted out between his fangs. "No other man will ever put his hands on you but me." He fisted his hand in her hair and pulled it so she was forced to arch her neck. "Say it. Tell me you're mine."

Will this Elven warlord be conquered by lust?

Lords of Ch'i *(c) 2006 Ciar Cullen*

Cast out by an usurper to her clan's throne, warrior Silver SanMartin throws herself at the mercy of her compelling enemy, Jet Atraud. The sexy warlord rules his Elven clan with an iron fist, but Silver finds she lords some power of her own. Jet can't keep his eyes—or his hands—off his lovely captive.

In a battle to gain self-control and maintain his ten-year oath of celibacy, Jet tries to focus on the task at hand—conquering the enemy clans. Despite his strong will and best intentions, Jet cannot ignore his growing love for Silver. But can a sworn enemy be trusted?

Enjoy this excerpt from *Lords of Ch'i*:

Silver looked up again, and a shock of electricity ran through her at Jet's intense stare. He looked from her eyes to her lips, and let his gaze wander to her breasts, pushed high by her gown. His eyes burned as she he assaulted her senses.

"You're rather strong-willed, Silver. I don't buy your apology for a second. And I think I rather fancy that about you. You'll make a good bodyguard. What do you think of the gown? It's been in my family for many generations."

"Lord?"

"Yes?" He continued his sexual appraisal of her and her breathing quickened in longing. She let her gaze wander down his smooth stomach to his rigid cock, straining against the black silk wrap. *Surely he can hear my heart, it's so loud.*

“Do you like what you see, Silver? You can’t seem to pull your gaze away for long. Do you know the whole time we’ve spoken, the whole time you’ve cried over the conflict and your brother, you’ve filled the room with your lust. You’ve stared at my mouth and my chest, my stomach, wondering how it would feel, how it would be between us. Am I wrong?”

“You are quite wrong, Lord.”

He laughed a little and motioned her to come closer. “I’d like a closer look at you in my ancestor’s garb. You must admit, it suits your figure, which is...” Jetre took in a quick breath. “Adequate.”

“Adequate? My figure is adequate? Why are we discussing my body? Your oath, your...”

“Have I broken my oath, Silver?” He worked his fingertips from her collarbone across the swell of her breasts. His touch blazed a fiery trail across her skin and his energy seeped into her veins. *Which burns*, she wondered—*the touch of an elf or the touch of a lord?* He slowly unfastened the clasps of her dress until he exposed her breasts. His calloused fingers and palms brushed across her skin like a kiss as he cupped one breast in each hand. His moan stirred her to quivering. He caressed her as if he’d found a priceless treasure he’d sought for a lifetime. Silver fought the sensations he evoked, but surrendered and cried out when he rubbed his thumbs on her nipples.

“Jetre.”

“Yes?” He continued his slow circles. “You find this unpleasant? Should I stop?” Jetre looked at her from beneath his dark lashes as he leaned in to suckle on one breast. His hot mouth assaulted her senses, his tongue darting across her nipple, his lips pulling and pinching. A low groaning sound came from far away, and Silver realized in shock it was her moan, her lust filling the air. She laced her hands in an errant strand of his luxurious hair and pulled it towards her face, smelling his scent—dark spices and male magic. When he moved to her other breast, the new pleasure sent her to the brink of orgasm, and he kept her

hovered there for minutes. He broke away suddenly and looked into her eyes.

Silver panted, aching, throbbing, ready to push him to the ground and assault him. “You’re no virgin.”

“How dare you. Do you understand how you insult me, Warrior?”

“I honestly couldn’t tell you what I think right now if my life depended upon it.”

Jetre arched a brow. “It will come to you.”

Silver’s hands shook at the conflicting, overwhelming emotions consuming her. This man, this gorgeous man, her sworn enemy, now her master—was he seducing her? No, simply playing with his prisoner. No more, certainly. A tiny dagger of regret pierced her heart. Silver shuddered, the memory of his mouth on her still making her tingle, still making her throb and moist and ready.

What I wouldn’t give to lay with him, to feel him inside me... She cursed to herself. Too late, he heard it.

“Tell me, let me hear what you want.” His voice grew low and languid, his eyes nearly hidden beneath his black lashes. “Tell me what kind of lover you imagine me? What draws you? My look? My manner? Or my power?”

All of those. None of those. Don’t let him hear any more. Thoughts poured out, desire and longing overwhelming her, betraying her.

You’re the most beautiful creature. Take me now or leave me be. I don’t want to feel this way.

“Yes you do.” His voice was such a low whisper Silver thought she might have imagined hearing him speak.

Jet sat up straight, eyes now wide, spell broken. “I’m not one to take advantage of my position with a woman, with anyone. You aren’t required to placate me in a sexual way.” Jetre snorted. “Perhaps that’s only my ego. I couldn’t stand the thought of forcing myself on a woman.

I've always assumed no woman would reject me, which is quite disturbing. Perhaps you don't want me?"

Silver groaned. "Don't mock me, Lord, you read my thoughts clearly enough. It's bad enough that I've betrayed my kind. Don't make me betray myself."

Jetre ignored her words and stood, pulling the cord from his hair.

That's his way? Play with me for a moment, send my world reeling, and dismiss me like a scrap of garbage.

"You'll help me dress now, and we will eat and drink with the soldiers and their families. I intend to speak to the crowd of your presence here. Some of it will annoy you, badly, especially when I speak of your brother. Try to show restraint. Understood?"

"Yes, Lord."

He turned and nodded. "Silver, in private, you may call me Jet. I'm a little less formal than most of the lords." He held out a finger. "In private, mind you."

She nodded. "Jet." She tested the nickname on her tongue.

"One thing." Jetre turned away again. His voice was quiet and Silver struggled to hear him. "Was it right? Did it feel right, what I did? When I kissed your breasts?"

It was the last question she expected from him, the most amazing thing. The great Lord Jetre, wondering if he had given her any pleasure. *How to answer him?*

"Because my ten years end in a matter of days." He pushed his hand through his hair and laughed at himself. "I don't want it said the oath made the lord incapable. How embarrassing. Is this your nature—to bring out the inner truths of a person?"

"How will I protect you from the women who will storm your quarters when your oath is complete? They'll be more dangerous than Fire and Metal combined against you." *And how will I bear to watch it?*

Jet laughed. "As appealing as that picture might be, I must pick only one. The second part of the deal." He shrugged.

"I see." A small knife poked at her heart unexpectedly. No doubt the woman would be Wood and was probably already betrothed to the lord. An elf, of course.

"You didn't answer my question." Jet toweled down and Silver turned away. From the corner of her eye she saw him step into his dark leather pants and pull on a thin, collarless, long-sleeved, black shirt. He went to the dresser and placed a kohl stick against each eye, blinking and wiping the excess from his cheeks.

"The woman will be quite fortunate, Jet. I hope that satisfies your ego."

He inclined his head and smiled very subtly. "It does. Might I practice on you again some time?"

Silver closed her eyes. The pain came in very faintly, like the smell of a coming summer rain shower on the breeze. She wanted her sworn enemy, and she meant nothing to him. A plaything, a practice toy. *Well, there are worse fates than being the whore of such a man.*

He pointed to his tall boots and Silver brought them to him, helped him push into them.

"You did something terrible to me when you branded me, Jet. I know you did. You say you wouldn't force a woman, but you charmed me in some way."

Jet looked up at her, puzzled. "Nonsense."

"I don't believe you."

Jet pointed to the dresser and his heavy, white-gold pendant, the Wu Xing symbol of his clan, the symbol of the Way of Ch'i. Silver brought it to him and fastened it around his neck. She bit back thoughts of Kilé and how she had fastened his pendant many times.

"Not many call me a liar without punishment. If Jaine or Art were here, you'd already be bleeding."

“Yes, my lord. Based on my brief encounter with your formidable sister, I believe you.”

“Now my hair.”

“What about it?”

“Brush it.” He rolled his eyes at her.

“This is fucking awful, Lord.”

“You’ll get used to it.”

Silver went to the dresser, grabbed a brush, and pulled a cushion behind Jetre’s. She brushed his beautiful hair, wishing she could bury her face in it.

He turned suddenly and grabbed her by the neck. “I heard that.”

She cried out softly, even though he didn’t hurt her.

“They’ll have to wait a few minutes more.”

She controls the elements, but he controls her heart.

Nuermar's Last Witch

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Nuermar's history is whittled in ruins, its prophecy carved in stone. Maelis, child of the Prophecies, is the last of her kind—a green-eyed witch, and the only one whom the stones of Nuermar say can channel the Elements. She alone has the power to vanquish the evil that reigns over her land. But without the greatest element of all, she has no hope of winning such an impossible battle.

A turncoat-assassin holds the key to her ultimate triumph. Yet the destruction of her village and the brutal slaughter of Maelis' family lies on Joran's hands. Can she overcome her hatred in order to fulfill the Prophecies and channel the ultimate Element—love?

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Nuermar's Last Witch*:

Maelis Keshnar's tears fell unchecked. Dust rose up with each breath to smart and sting her eyes. Crouched as she was, she felt her heart thunder in her chest, an unsteady rhythm as it pounded in impotent rage. She squinted at the pouch her grandmother had forced into her hand before slamming the door on her hiding place.

Maelis was not prepared for it; she hated it already—yet that was a paltry emotion compared to what was to come.

Fireballs were lobbed through the windows to crash in puddles of flame against the back wall. The doorjamb cracked and gave way as the door flew open, crashed against the wall and sent pots and jars flying from their shelves. From her hidden vantage, Maelis watched her grandmother, Niomi, spin to face the door as an intruder swept in with a swirl of black robes. With surreal speed, he closed the distance between

them and his large, tattooed hands snatched at the old woman as she turned to flee. Niomi threw her thin arms up in defense. He cinched the fingers of one hand around her wrist and whipped her around to face him.

Niomi's face paled in panic. A guttural cry escaped her lips only to be smothered by his heavy palm. Still, she struggled. Her feet flailed, kicked at his legs and knocked over storage baskets all around them, to no avail; he overpowered her.

He forced her into a chair. With one hand pressed against her chest, he searched the floor with the other. His hand came upon a knitting basket which had spilled over in their brief confrontation. His fingers curled around a wound, woolen ball and the cloaked man bound Niomi's wrists with her own yarn.

"Tell me where the Talisman is," he said. "Tell me where to find the Witch."

From her place of hiding, Maelis could not see his face for the darkness within his hood. His voice was disembodied. There was no point on which to focus her rage.

"Tell me, woman!" he snapped, and he moved his ink-worked hands as if he meant to throttle Niomi. He hesitated, his fingers grasping for her and then drew back. His retreat seemed more a gesture of annoyance than sympathy, as if he summoned tenuous inner resolve not to choke Niomi to death in his rage.

Not enough sport in strangling an old woman, Maelis thought, her anger increasing.

"I cannot," Niomi whispered. She looked deep into the darkness of the hood, peered into the face Maelis couldn't see. "Don't you understand? She is my grandchild, all the family I have."

He recoiled again, though whether moved by Niomi's words, or simply still considering her a nuisance, Maelis couldn't tell. Niomi hung her head and acted as though the intruder was no longer present. She waited

bravely to die in silence rather than to speak Maelis's name or disclose her whereabouts.

"Very well," the man said. He balled his hands into tight fists, his posture rigid, his voice strained as if he spoke through gritted teeth. "I pray that she is worth it. May the gods have mercy on your soul."

With that sacrilegious petition and a final whirl of his vestments, he walked out and left Niomi tied to a chair in her burning home.

She's safe! Maelis rejoiced. I need only to free her and we will escape all this!

But no sooner had Maelis entertained that thought than another man entered Niomi's home. Like the first man, he sported tattooed hands, blackened robes, but he was slighter of build, shorter than his fellow. He strode straight to the chair where Niomi was bound, reached out, wrapped his hand around the old woman's neck and squeezed.

"Tell me," he growled.

No other words were necessary.

Niomi knew the information he wanted, but she would not give it. Her will did not waver and her body did not struggle as he crushed her throat. Her faded green eyes glared at her murderer until death closed them. Her body went limp and her head slumped down on her chest.

No! Maelis's heart cried out. *Not my grandmother!* She remained silent where she hid, unable to move, struggling to suppress the primal scream which threatened to break loose.

She could no longer watch; nor could she look away. She seethed in rage of depths unknown as this second cloaked figure ransacked the hut. A black, horrid hate wound its way into her heart and mind as he turned over furniture, shredded cushions with his dagger, knocked shelves off the walls. After a fruitless search, he kicked over an oil lantern and stormed out, without even a glance at the woman he'd killed.

The door, coated in licking tongues of flame, slammed shut and Maelis rushed to her grandmother's side. She knelt in front of that

cursed chair and untied Niomi's hands. They were still warm and soft, as they had always been in life. Yet now they were motionless and gave no comfort. Maelis's eyes brimmed with tears as she laid her head in Niomi's lap, like she had done so many times as a child. Maelis kissed her grandmother's hand and her tears soaked into the simple dress the old woman wore.

"No more hiding," Maelis sobbed. "No more pain."

The blaze behind her mocked in crackled laughter.

Just then, a cry rang out in the streets, "Burn them all! Destroy the Witch's village!"

Maelis could see the murderer through the shattered window frame. He flung a lit torch against the side of their house, and the brittle wood and thatch immediately erupted in voracious flames. Ringed in fire, the man appeared inhuman, cloaked in darkness that eddied around him as he leapt astride his horse.

He spurred the steed, and shouted again, "Burn them all! The Talisman is not here!" He raised a whip and his hood fell back, revealing a young man no older than Maelis herself, his face, which might have once been handsome, now chiseled and made ugly with anger and hatred. The great horse turned, thundered away and took Niomi's murderer with it into the dusk.

Her own life was now in danger as the building burned down around her. The roof timbers groaned and gave way. The flames began to snap at Maelis as even her family's singular magick which had so long protected the hut dissolved in the heat. The only escape left to her now was Niomi's tunnel in the cellar leading out to the banks of the pond.

Maelis spun on her heel and ran toward the door to the cellar. The leg of an upturned chair caught her thigh, pitched her off balance and made her stumble. Burning beams crashed around her. Walls collapsed, and a shattered door jamb struck her arm and knocked her to the ground. Fire raged, devoured her home and every other. All around, the

screams of the dying faded into the roars of growing fires. She rose on shaking limbs, forced herself to move again, so that her grandmother's sacrifice would not be in vain.

The blaze was nearly too much for Maelis, and her eyes felt raw from heat and smoke. She closed them out of instinct and fumbled blindly for the handle to the cellar door. The scorching metal of a latch singed her palm. Maelis turned it and tumbled against the hard dirt floor below. A rib cracked, her head struck the floor, and consciousness threatened to desert her.

Maelis coughed bloody spittle as she struggled to catch her breath there in the cool shadows. She struggled upright and scrambled her way up the slope and toward the far end, away from the stench of murder and toward the fresh air and wet smell of the healing mud beside Sunar's Pond.

Once through the tunnel and out the other side, Maelis stood alone; an open and easy target. But, her safety was not her concern. Her sudden loss, her impotent rage reigned.

Anger rose up like bitter bile in her throat. So much had changed, both within and without. Where once she knew joy, only sadness remained. Her jaw muscles clenched. She knotted her fist around the pouch in her hand. Her fingers curled so tightly that her knuckles whitened and her fingernails dug into the flesh of her palm. Blood welled up, soaked into the blue velvet, but Maelis didn't care. She couldn't. She could scarcely hold herself upright; her spirit besieged, her battered body threatened collapse. Only her will kept her moving, a will that spun with savage speed into a fury every bit as heated as the flames she'd only just escaped.

Maelis cocked her arm back, fist raised high. No prophecy could soothe her pain. *Nothing that this pouch could contain is worth so many lives*, she thought.

She inhaled a deep breath and readied herself to heave the bag and its culprit contents. Then, her grandmother's face rose in her mind—her grandmother holding the very pouch she held, and telling Maelis to take it and hide. Maelis had followed Niomi's directions, and in doing so witnessed her grandmother's murder. *She died to protect me*, Maelis mourned. *My grandmother died so that I might live to harness the power this Talisman controls.*

That truth struck her brutally, with a nearly physical force.

Her grandmother, the only family that she had ever known, had died to protect Maelis from the armies of Lord Nemenon. The entire village had shared Niomi's fate. The fires, meant for Maelis, had taken them all while she herself remained unscathed. The fires, meant for her, had taken them all. Her furious resolve failed, trickling away like the rivulets and streams feeding the pond by which she stood. She fell to her knees in the mud. Memories, so fresh and painful, deluged her mind.

"They were peaceful!" Maelis cried into the night air. She collapsed to her knees, tears blinding her vision, heartache blinding all else.

In silence Maelis vowed that she would avenge Niomi's death. The cloaked men would feel her wrath. In the pouch hidden close to her breast was the magick talisman to destroy them all. Maelis would discover its contents and harness its powers.

I will bring retribution.

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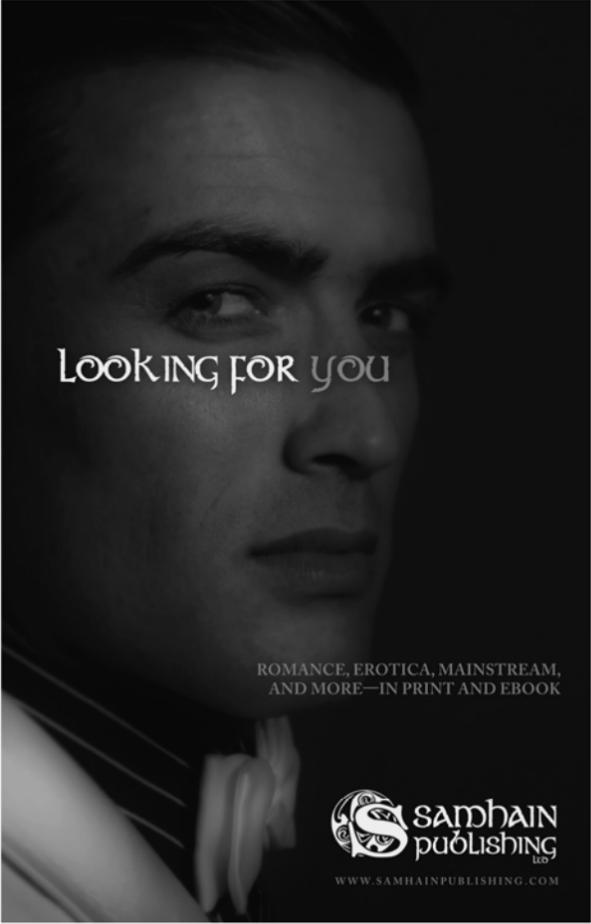
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