



BLOOD
Resurrection

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Blood Resurrection

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Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-burning*.

My Vampire and I

BLOOD RESURRECTION

J.P. Bowie

Dedication

To Vampire lovers everywhere
and for Phil, above all else

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Chapter One

France, 1425

Bernard

So that you don't take me for a hallucinating idiot in some of the things I have to tell you, I'm going to let you in on a little secret. Well, not so little really—maybe quite important. I'm a vampire. Yes, it's true. Please don't shudder with fear. I'm really quite a nice fellow, and I promise I won't take any bites out of your neck or suck on...your blood. Well, not unless you say 'go ahead', first.

My name is Bernard Fournier—yes, I'm also French, but please don't hold that against me, either. A French vampire, I hear you saying. What else is he going to confess to us before the story's end? Lots of things, actually, some good, some not so good, and some quite terrible—but, I must not get ahead of myself.

My life began, some six hundred years ago, in a little village in the south of France. The name of it is irrelevant, for it no longer exists—it being just one of those long forgotten casualties of the wars that have raged off and on throughout the centuries, before and since I was born.

I was born a bastard, the product of ravishment by pillaging knights, thrown into a rubbish heap by my less-than-doting mother then discovered by an old woman digging for scraps of food. Amazingly, she didn't eat me but handed me over to some monks who baptised me to redeem me from sin and gave me the name Bernard. They raised me after a fashion, using me as a slave to fetch and carry then when my prettiness began to show through the grime and filth I was covered in due to their neglect, they abused me. Truth to tell, I had no idea as to what I looked like or why I had suddenly become an object of lust. I had never seen my reflection. Such a thing as a mirror was not hung in the monastery stable.

Not an impressive start to anyone's life you might say and I would have to agree. So is it any wonder that my mind was consumed with thoughts of escape, and sometimes, with revenge? Many times, I would lift my eyes and look beyond the monastery walls to the fields and forests that lay so near, and yet so far, with their promise of freedom. Escape was

impossible, however, for the good monks fettered me securely at night and, in the daytime, tied a length of rope to my ankles, long enough to not impede me in my chores but not quite long enough to enable me to run through the monastery gates.

For eighteen terrible years, I lived thus, wondering why the God the monks prayed to several times a day and praised as the Almighty Saviour did not care to save me. What had I done to deserve this wretched life? I asked Him each night as I knelt in the stable straw that served as my bed.

I had long since become immune to the vile advances of the monks, merely lying passively as they had their way with me, not even protesting when they would beat me afterward for being the temptation they could not resist. When left alone, I would lie on my back, staring up at the stable's wooden roof, and imagine myself being able to fly away from this place of torment. If only I could escape, I thought, and never have to look again at the cruel and leering faces of the men who brutalised me, I would forego any desire for revenge. To be free of them and their hypocrisy would suffice.

* * * *

Perhaps God did hear my silent pleas after all, for it came in the form of a tall and handsome man, who arrived at the monastery late one night, requesting shelter from an impending storm. The monks and I had been busy shoring up doors and windows, getting the livestock inside and bringing enough food and water indoors to last them until the storm abated. The previous year, they had been confined within the chancery walls for three days. I, of course, had not been permitted to shelter there and had to huddle inside the stable, listening to the howling winds and lashing rain and wondering what would happen to me should the stable be carried away in the gale.

I watched with interest as Prior Hubert conversed with the tall man who had a military bearing and was dressed in fine clothes. Greedily, the Prior snatched the coins the tall man offered him then ushered him indoors, away from my sight. A moment later, one of the monks bade me to take the man's horse to the stable and bed him down for the night.

The horse was a fine steed, its saddle and trappings of the best quality, and I handled all of it with care as I stowed them away in a corner of the stable, before preparing to brush

the horse down. In the distance, I heard the rumbling of thunder, heralding the storm's approach.

"That's all right..." A deep, melodious voice behind me made me jump. "I'll take care of him."

I turned, and my heart quickened as my eyes met the man's emerald green gaze. I could now see that what before I had considered merely handsome was in fact...beauty. His smile became a frown when he saw my filthy state, the ragged clothes and the rope that bound me.

"By the gods, boy," he murmured. "Who treats you so ill?"

I hung my head in shame, tears pricking the back of my eyes. He put a hand under my chin and raised my face to his, staring intently at me as if seeking the answer to his question in my mind. As he gazed into my eyes, I saw his face set in a grim expression then his eyes filled with compassion.

"Here," he said abruptly, untying the rope around my ankle. "Give Orion his oat bag. He can do without his brushing for one night. Then come with me."

I hastened to do his bidding without question, so well schooled was I in obedience. He led me from the stable. His hand on my shoulder lent me a comfort I had known little of in my life. The wind had picked up and big drops of rain spattered down on us as we walked quickly across the courtyard. I halted at the monastery door.

"Sire, I cannot enter here. I am forbidden."

"Not tonight, you're not," he said. "Tonight, you are my guest."

"But Sire, the Prior will be angered at my presence. He will beat me."

"No, he will not," the man assured me, steering me indoors and into the refectory. I trembled as every eye turned upon me. Prior Hubert stormed towards us, his face set in an angry grimace.

"What is the meaning of this?" he rasped, glaring at me. "Bernard, return to the stable immediately. Your filthy body is an abhorrence to the Lord God."

"And just who allows the boy to live in this filth?" The tall man's voice had taken on a hard and icy edge. "Does he not live here under your protection, Prior Hubert?"

The Prior drew himself up to cast a haughty look at my defender. "He does, and if it were not for our charity, he would have died long since. He was born a bastard and found among rubbish—"

"Through no fault of his own," the man murmured.

"We took him in when no one else would," the Prior continued, ignoring the man's comment.

The man's hand on my shoulder tightened. I felt his anger through the tension in his body. "An admirable action, Prior," he said, his smooth voice belying his rage. "But surely only what your calling demands. And does your charity not extend to a clean body and clothes? The boy is pale and weak from lack of proper nourishment. Have a bath prepared for him in my room, and send clean clothes and a hot meal. He will stay with me until the storm abates."

"What?" The Prior flushed with outrage. He turned to me, his eyes blazing. "What have you told him?" he seethed.

"He has told me nothing," the man said quietly. "And yet, I know all." He took his hand from my shoulder and pushed back the folds of his cloak, revealing the hilt of his sword, its gold embossment glinting in the candlelight. "Now, do as I bid, Prior, before my natural instincts to punish the corrupt ones in your brood make me forget I am a guest here."

The Prior gasped. "You dare—?"

"I more than dare, Prior Hubert." He grasped the hilt of his sword. "I promise." His smile was chilling. "Of course, I expect to recompense you for this inconvenience. I will see you well rewarded for your benevolence."

The Prior had the grace to look away as he said, "Very well. Your request is granted." He turned to one of the monks who stood nearby. "See to it." And with one more look of loathing at me, he strode away.

"Come." With a gentle hand again on my shoulder, the man led me to his room, a large space dominated by an ornate four poster bed, the likes of which I had never before seen. A table for dining, some chairs, a large oaken chest and a rug of green and gold completed the furnishings. I had not known, for as long as I had lived there, that such a room existed.

"So, they call you Bernard," he said with a smile as I gaped at my surroundings. "My name is Marcus Verano."

I bowed my head to him. "I am so very grateful to you, Sire," I mumbled. Of course, I was terrified that as soon as the storm was over and he was gone, my punishment would be

terrible. The Prior would never forgive me for what he saw as nothing less than utter disrespect for his authority on my part.

"Do not worry, Bernard," Marcus said, still smiling. "I have no intention of leaving you to their mercy. I know only too well the evil of which men are capable."

I looked at him, my mouth slightly open in surprise. "Sire—"

Anything else I may have said was interrupted by a banging on the door, which was then abruptly pushed open. Two monks carrying a metal bath burst into the room, followed by others carrying buckets of hot water. Marcus watched with some amusement as they busied themselves filling the bath, all the while casting hostile looks at us both.

"Will there be anything else, Sire?" one of them asked, his voice filled with sarcasm.

"Food and wine," Marcus replied. As the monks turned to go, he grabbed the impertinent one by the arm. "And when you return, remember to knock and await my permission before you enter."

The monk stared into Marcus' eyes with a sudden fear. "Yes, Sire," he said, visibly trembling. I could not help but feel a small thrill of elation as he all but ran from the room, closing the door very quietly behind him.

"Now, Bernard, off with those rags and into the tub with you." Marcus smiled at my hesitation. "I'll not look, if you're shy."

I was not shy. After all, every part of me had been leered at and fondled by many men, and indeed, in his presence, I felt no overt threat...only safety and comfort. I pulled off my clothes and climbed into the tub. As I sank into the hot water, it was as if euphoria overtook me, the water acting as a balm to my misery and wretchedness. I took the soap he handed me and began to wash away the grime from my skin. After he had removed his cloak and sword belt, Marcus watched me intently, and again I felt the compassion in his gaze. As we smiled at one another, a deafening clap of thunder rent the air over the monastery. Vivid streaks of lightning lit the room as if it were daytime, and the window shutters rattled and banged against the walls. The storm was upon us, and from the sound of its fearful intensity, it promised not to abate any time soon.

"Are you frightened, Bernard?" Marcus asked.

"No, Sire. I love thunderstorms. Their intensity and power have always fascinated me." I wanted to add, 'Just as you are now fascinating me', but it seemed there was no need for me

to speak the words. The smile in his eyes told me he knew what I was thinking. He moved to my side, took the soap from my hand and began to wash my back. His touch sent shivers of expectation through me, and I could feel myself grow hard—something that not one of the men who had lain with me had ever been able to do. I leaned back into the strength of his hands as he massaged my shoulders, working the soap into my skin. He reached for one of the still full buckets of water and poured some over my head then worked up a fine lather, kneading my scalp with his fingers to rid my hair of months' worth of tangles and dirt. I was more than content to give in to all his ministrations, and even if he desired payment in kind for his services, I would have gladly succumbed to his wishes. Never before had it been my good fortune to have someone as magnificent as him tend to my needs.

"Close your eyes," he said, before dousing me with more water and rinsing the soap from me. I reached for the towel and draped it modestly in front of me as I stood up. He rummaged in one of his bags for a moment then drew out a velvet robe of deep burgundy. "Here." He handed it to me as I stepped from the tub. "Wear this until they bring your new clothes."

"But it's much too fine, Sire," I protested feeling its luxurious texture.

He held it open for me to slip into. "It looks well on you," he murmured, his expression suddenly questioning.

What was he thinking? I wondered.

"And stop calling me 'Sire'. My name is Marcus, as I told you earlier." He paused for a moment then said, "Tell me, Bernard...you did not know either of your parents?"

"No, Sire—Marcus." I stumbled over his name. It seemed too familiar to address him so. "My mother was a peasant woman violated by a band of marauding knights."

"Knights, you say? So the one who fathered you was a knight? I thought there was some breeding there."

I gave a mirthless laugh at his words. "God knows how many other bastards he gave his breeding to!"

He touched my face gently. "Unfortunately, an aristocratic name does not always result in refinement or consideration for another's dignity. War has a habit of bringing out the worst in people." He took my hand and led me to where a large mirror stood on a wooden frame. "You have never seen yourself, have you, Bernard?"

I wondered how he could possibly have known that, but it seemed he already knew so many things about me, that I did not question it. I shook my head as I gazed at my reflection in the mirror. The youth who stared back at me was not unpleasant to look upon, but my inherent low esteem, beaten into me over the years, prevented me from thinking of myself as comely. Behind me, Marcus smiled and placed his hands on my shoulders.

"You are a very attractive young man," he said. "Don't let the spite and jealousy of others tell you differently."

I stared at myself, taking in the auburn glow of my hair and the very dark blue of my eyes. My body was slim and leanly muscled. "I am too thin," I said, feeling I had to find something to complain about.

Marcus chuckled. "You are slender, Bernard. Something many strive for without success." A timid knock at the door made him smile. "Come in, Brothers," he called out, gesturing that I should sit at the table. Two of them rushed in carrying trays of food and wine and, after laying them on the table, scurried back through the door without a word. Marcus sat beside me and poured us both a large quantity of red wine into the goblets provided. "You see what a little persuasion can do?" he asked, his green eyes twinkling with amusement.

"They are afraid of you," I said. "When you leave, they will beat me without mercy. But until then, I will enjoy all you have done for me. Just to have seen them so humiliated is worth the pain they will inflict on me."

"They will not punish you. That I promise." Marcus lifted his goblet of wine and bade me do the same. "Drink, Bernard – to your future."

I took my first ever quaff of wine. It was delicious.

"My future?" I asked, looking at him over the goblet's rim.

"It can be whatever you wish it to be," he said.

Outside the thunder boomed, and the rain drummed on the roof over our heads as I gazed into his eyes – eyes even more intoxicating than the wine.

"What do you mean?"

"When the storm is over, and I leave this wretched place, you will come with me, if you wish –"

"Oh," I cried, reaching for his hand. "There is nothing I would wish for more than that! To be free of this place, of these...these evil men...it would be as if my wildest dreams had come true."

Before my astounded eyes, Marcus suddenly sprang to his feet. With a move so fast, he became a blur, he reached the other side of the room, pulling back a drapery to reveal the startled figure of Prior Hubert. With a growl that made my hair stand on end, Marcus pulled the Prior into the room and disarmed him of the knife he held in his hand.

"So," Marcus snarled. "Have you heard enough, Prior?"

"You have violated our hospitality, and now you seek to kidnap our ward," Hubert snapped. "We will not let you do this."

"And how do you intend to stop me?" Marcus turned his back to me, so that all I could see was Prior Hubert's face as his expression changed from one of defiance, to one of sheer terror.

"No!" he screamed. "Monster! Help me, Brothers! Help me!"

The door was flung open, and it seemed that every member of the monk community surged into the room, some carrying weapons. I jumped to my feet, ready to defend myself, then was stayed by the looks of shock and almost abject horror that was written on every man's face. From my position in the room, I could not see what so obviously terrified them, but then I saw Prior Hubert being lifted into the air by the scruff of his neck, supported only by Marcus' left hand. *Dear God, I thought, he must be immensely strong.*

Then the cry went up. "Vampire! Vampire! Run for your lives!"

Within two seconds, the room was empty, and a gibbering Prior Hubert was dropped to the floor where he lay, sobbing and mouthing words that were unintelligible to my ears.

I looked at Marcus who gazed back at me, his beautiful face serene and composed. "What happened?" I asked him. "Why did they run?"

"Because I allowed them to see the real me," he said quietly.

"The real you? You mean you are that which they called you...a...a vampire?" I took a step back from him, yet as our eyes met and held, any fear I might have felt, faded away under the power of the spell his smile cast.

"There is no need for you to be afraid of me, Bernard." He held out his hand. "Only evil men need fear me."

I took his hand, and he drew me into his arms. "Your tenure here is over. These men have no more power over you, Bernard. You are free to come with me, if you still wish it."

"I do still wish it," I whispered, pressing my body to his.

"Then we shall leave first thing in the morning."

"But the storm..."

"It will be over by then."

"Will they let us leave?"

He laughed lightly. "Do you think they will ask us to stay?" He looked with some pity at the Prior's quivering body. "I'm afraid his fear has destroyed his mind." He walked to the door where one or two quaking monks hovered nearby, holding crosses before them. Marcus sighed. "Put away those useless relics, and tend to your Prior. I will not harm you." We watched as they lifted Prior Hubert to his feet and dragged him from the room.

Marcus closed and locked the door. "We will be safe enough tonight," he said. "While the storm still rages, they cannot go for help."

I knew next to nothing about vampires, only the tales of horror spread among the superstitious, but one thing I remembered. "The daylight? Can you travel then?" I asked.

"The skies will still be darkened," he replied, smoothing my hair from my forehead. "Only the sunlight can harm me." He smiled. "Then I will have to rely on you to protect me."

I pressed my face to his chest. "I will gladly," I said. "With my life."

All night the storm raged around us, and I feared Marcus might be wrong in his prediction that it would be over by morning. We lay together in the big bed, my head resting on his chest, his arm around me, bringing me comfort—and something more. My hand strayed over the cool smooth skin of his torso. The flesh beneath my fingers was hard and enticing. Surely, he would want me to satisfy him in one way or another, I thought, letting my fingers inch lower. To my surprise, he grasped my hand in his and raised it to his lips.

"Sleep, Bernard," he whispered. "You have had enough of servicing men's desires."

"But, Sire...I mean Marcus...it would bring me joy to pleasure you."

"And it would bring me joy to pleasure you, Bernard." He turned to me, holding me gently in his arms. "Something I feel you have never experienced."

"No, I have not. The men, who have lain with me, did so only for their own release. My needs meant nothing to them. I doubt if they ever gave it a fleeting thought." He kissed my

brow and my eyes, and I moved closer into his embrace. "I would be honoured if you would let me love you," I said. "If only for this time we have together."

His arms tightened about me, and his lips found mine. His kiss was sweeter than I had ever imagined another man's lips on mine could be. In my enthusiasm to savour it even more, I pressed my mouth to his with all the ardour I could muster. He pulled back slightly, and put his finger on my lips.

"Gently, Bernard. At first, be gentle. Like this..."

His lips brushed mine, back and forth with the gentlest of touches. Then he caught my lower lip between his and, parting them just slightly, inserted the tip of his tongue into my mouth. The effect was a sensation I had never experienced. My body tingled as every nerve ending came alive. I moaned into his mouth, and his tongue slid all the way in, caressing mine and bringing me almost to the brink of ejaculation. My body shuddered in his arms, and I clung to him as though he were my lifeline to the ecstasy I felt coursing through me. Our kiss deepened, my own tongue now finding its way into the moist heat of his mouth. My eyes rolled back in my head at the sensation.

Never had I known such ecstasy. It was as if he were cleansing my soul, freeing me from all the memories of the vileness perpetrated upon me over the years. In his arms, I felt nothing but elation and joy, and I sobbed aloud as my emotions overwhelmed me.

"Bernard, Bernard," he murmured, holding me close to his thrilling body. I knew he understood why I cried. He had known of my grief and anguish from the moment he had gazed into my eyes. He had read my thoughts, seen the horrors I had been subjected to, and now his compassion reached out and enveloped me like a lover's embrace. In my mind, I asked him to take me, to make me like him—to bring me release from fear, to make me as strong as him.

"I know you must have my blood to live," I said, my lips still close to his. "I would give it to you willingly."

Illuminated only by the flickering candles, his eyes were as green pools of light, incandescent and unearthly. "Look away," he whispered, and I turned my head, exposing my neck to him. His bite was sharp, and I moaned, but only for a moment, for then a feeling of utter contentment suffused both my body and my mind. My hands caressed his head, my fingers tangling in his curly locks, holding him pressed to my throat while he sucked from

me. The glow I felt became a need, and the need, a burning in my loins. His lips soothed my throat where he had bitten me then took mine in a kiss that brought me to the edge and almost into the paroxysm of my orgasm. I clung to him as his lips found every part of my body, before coming to rest at the head of my engorged cock. His tongue gently teased the slit then laved the head before he took it all into his mouth.

My body arched in ecstasy as the heat of his mouth brought me sensations I had never even dreamed of—feelings of complete and utter abandonment of all misery, all connection to the past. I gasped as I felt the moist warmth of his tongue lap at the tight opening to my anus. A whimper born of both need and wonder escaped my throat at this new and wondrous sensation.

“Marcus,” I whispered, my voice hoarse with emotion. His tongue pushed harder, swirling inside me as I raised my hips to prolong the ecstasy. I felt as though I were melting, and would have given anything to have this rapture go on and on, forever.

He raised his head from between my legs and smiled, his eyes filled with a feral lust that should have filled me with fear but did not. Innately, I knew I could never be afraid of this man, regardless of what I knew him to be. I welcomed the hard flesh that pushed between my thighs, and I opened myself to him, winding my legs around his torso. I had been taken so roughly, so many times, that when he entered me, big as he was, the anticipated pain was lost in the ecstasy he brought me.

Our bodies, now fused together, began to move in a slow and sensuous rhythm. The pulsing of his cock deep inside me, the long smooth strokes that glided over that indefinable part of me, infusing me with exquisite pleasure, brought me to the point of no return. I cried out as I came in great, jolting spasms. He lowered his head to catch my seed in his mouth, his lips holding my cock fast until I was completely drained. I heard him groan softly, his body stiffened in my arms, and I felt the heat of his semen flood through me.

For a long time after, we lay quietly, still locked in our embrace, my face pressed to his chest, his arms a comforting shelter from the day to come. Outside, the thunder rumbled ominously through the night sky. The occasional bolt of lightning lit the room, and the pelting rain drummed a steady tattoo on the roof over our heads.

As I moved closer into his arms, my mind was filled with the resolution that no matter what occurred on the morrow, I would leave this place at his side.

* * * *

The day dawned dank and drear, the sky leaden with black clouds from which fell a steady, soaking drizzle. To my surprise, Marcus surveyed the gloomy weather with a smile.

"A perfect day for travelling, Bernard," he said, flinging his cloak about him. "I hope you won't mind the discomfort of the rain."

I brightened considerably at his words. He still intended to take me with him.

"I said I would, did I not?" He gave me a reproving look then grinned at me. "Your thoughts are mirrored in your expression. Now..."

He strode to the door and flung it open. There was a flurry of robes and a scurrying of feet as the monks outside fled from him. I could hardly contain my laughter at the sight.

"Bring fresh clothes for Bernard," Marcus yelled at them. "And a travelling cloak—and be quick about it!"

A few minutes later, one of the brothers, Gaius, knocked and took a hesitant step into the room. His hands trembled as he held out a bundle of clothing to me, with many a nervous glance at Marcus.

"How is your Prior?" Marcus asked him, with some civility.

"He stares at the walls and mumbles of devils," Gaius replied. He turned his eyes to me. "You will go with this monst—uh, this man?"

"Gladly," I said, unable to stop the smirk that played on my lips. "He is no monster," I added. "I am leaving the monsters behind me—in this hellish place."

His eyes flashed with anger. "You will burn in hell for that blasphemy," he hissed.

"Enough!" Marcus grabbed his arm and dragged him to the door. Gaius whimpered with fear as Marcus drew him close and stared him down. "The real blasphemy is how you have allowed this boy to be abused," Marcus said, his voice low and deadly.

"I did not," Gaius squeaked. "It was some of the others—"

"But you allowed it. You turned a blind eye to the evil perpetrated in this so-called holy place. All of you who allowed it are culpable and should be punished. Be glad that Bernard and I are leaving you without exacting a terrible revenge for the pain and humiliation you have heaped on him." He pushed Gaius away with an expression of disgust. "Go. Tell your

brothers of their good fortune. We will leave in a few minutes. Do not try to impede us, or I may put aside my forgiving nature." He slammed the door behind Gaius and locked it. "Now, young Bernard...time for you to dress so we can be on our way."

I ran to him and flung myself into his arms. "How can I ever thank you for all you have done for me?"

"You have already thanked me, Bernard," he said huskily, kissing my cheek. He patted my bottom. "Now, get dressed, and let us be gone from this foul place."

* * * *

The monks, skulking in the corridors and watching our departure, muttered among themselves as we passed them on our way to the courtyard. One more foolhardy than the rest, leaped out at us, waving one of the large crosses from the chapel altar. "Devil," he cried, glaring at Marcus. "The Lord will send you to hell where you belong!"

Marcus stopped and stared at the monk, then he reached out and, with amazing ease, wrested the cross from the monk's shaking hands. "The Lord does not abide in this place," he said quietly, placing the cross on the ground. "And just so that you understand some things about us, we are not cursed by your god or any god for that matter. Crosses, holy water and religious icons cannot harm us, nor it seems, can they bring goodness where none exists."

Ignoring the monk's stupefied expression, Marcus put his hand on my shoulder and led me outside. The cool rain came as a relief after the oppressive, smoke-laden atmosphere inside the monastery. I held my face up to its clean freshness as we walked quickly to the stable where Orion, his steed, waited. Marcus saddled him with skill and speed. He hoisted me up into the saddle as if I weighed nothing at all then mounted behind me. A quick flick of the reins and we rode out into the courtyard where the monks had gathered in a scowling, clucking herd.

"Monster!" came the cry. "Devil's spawn..."

Marcus sighed and pulled me back into the haven of his arms. "How can they be expected to teach God's words, when they can't seem to remember what they've just been told only minutes since!"

I joined in his laughter as we cantered away from the Monastere de Dieu, across the wide meadows made even greener by the steady rain—and away from the blight of the first eighteen years of what was to become a very long life.

Chapter Two

Rome, Italy, Present Day

Constantine

I was born—or should I rather say, created, in Rome, Italy, two hundred years ago. I knew no mother or father, no siblings, no doting grandparents to fuss and fawn over me as I grew from infant to youth to adulthood. If you ever saw me, you would guess that I am somewhere in my late twenties, a tall, rangy young man possessed of a ready smile, an athletic build, and the dark hair and eyes of the typical Italian.

Only, I am not a typical Italian. Far from it, I'm afraid. You see, I am not entirely human. Does that confession give you a poorly suppressed shudder of horror? It should. Despite my outwardly calm appearance, within me lives a monster. When unleashed, it can cause pain and sometimes death to those who challenge me.

On the day that I was born—yes, I was brought into the world in the usual manner, emerging from between a woman's legs, and immediately taken from her outstretched arms, never to be seen by her again. The midwife who drew me into this world handed me over to the man who had awaited my arrival for nine long months. His name was Bartholomew—a priest who dabbled in the black arts and who needed a newborn babe to fulfil what he believed was his purpose in life.

He took me to his home, a secret place in the vaults of an old cathedral on the outskirts of the city. What he had to do needed to be done quickly for it to succeed. He had laid out his preparations for the deed in advance. Of course, being but a babe, I had no knowledge of what was to occur. This he related to me many years later, when the time had come for me to follow my destiny.

His power came from wizardry, magic conjured from spells he had learned from masters of the dark arts—a cult of evil men once vanquished by their enemies, the Vampires, but who had risen again, ready to seek revenge on their conquerors. Bartholomew had been given the task of creating a warrior strong enough to aid them in their quest. He had lulled the mother I never knew into a deep sleep and had impregnated her with demon sperm

while she lay unaware of what he had planned. And so I was born, half boy, half demon—part waif, part monster, though the monstrous side of me I hide well, subduing its darkness until I find it necessary to let it surface.

You might think mine has been a lonely existence, and you would be right. No lover lightened my day or filled my nights with companionship. There have been dalliances—one or two memorable for their sweet intensity—but for the most part, out of necessity, my life has been a solitary one. After all, how could I explain what I am and my mission in life to an unsuspecting companion? How could I confess, without sounding like a madman, that a Pope who had ruled hundreds of years ago had entrusted to me the power to prepare the world for his return as the Antichrist? That the man who had me created now held my destiny, and that of all mankind, in the palm of his hand?

Sometimes, even I cannot quite believe it possible. Sometimes, the enormity of what was bequeathed to me brings me despair and the urge to disassociate myself with the task. Yet, I cannot. It was solely for this purpose that I was created. Should I refuse to obey, my existence would be terminated immediately.

My mind had been wracked with doubt for some time due to the presence of a young man for whom I'd felt an immediate attraction. Gustav. I knew his name by reading his mind. Human minds cannot be closed to me, and so it was easy for me to find out all about the young scholar. He was twenty-three years of age, from Berlin, and on a scholarship from a university, majoring in Ancient History. He was also lonely like me, and I was certainly not immune to the blue-eyed stares of longing he cast my way from under the blond locks that covered his brow.

Throwing all caution to the winds of chance, I approached him as he sat in the library of the Galleria Borghese, poring over some ancient manuscripts and making copious notes in a ledger by his right hand. I had followed him there that morning and had allowed him a little time alone while I prowled amongst the various statues and works of art, my favourite, as always, Bernini's Apollo and Daphne. Silly woman, I thought for the hundredth time as I gazed at the white marble sculpture. Why would you want to turn yourself into a tree rather than be bedded by Apollo? From any angle, the young god was, in today's jargon, a hottie!

And from the beauty of the past, I turned to gaze upon the beauty of today...the object of my lust.

“Ciao.” I looked down at him, a small, shy smile curling my lips.

“Oh...” He looked up at me, his blue eyes widening with recognition, then to my delight, his smooth cheeks suffused with a pink glow.

He was adorable.

“H...hello...” His voice trembled, but his hand was steady as it brushed back the errant locks from his forehead.

“May I sit with you?”

“*Bitte*...please...of course.” He held out his hand. “Gustav Werner.”

“Constantine di Filippo,” I said, gripping his hand in mine and holding it for just a shade longer than necessary. I pulled my chair closer to him as I sat down. “I’ve seen you in the Vatican library.”

“*Sì*.” He smiled as his eyes met mine. “I have noticed you there.”

“And I would have to be blind not to have noticed you,” I murmured.

His face took on an even rosier hue, but his eyes did not waver from mine. He was not the innocent he appeared to be, and as I probed his mind, I saw the memory of a lost love—a heartbreaking parting and a desperate need to reassert his self-esteem.

“May I invite you for a coffee?” I asked, touching the back of his hand with my fingertips.

“Yes, you may,” he replied with a soft chuckle. He spoke Italian very well. “I’ve had quite enough studying for one day.”

We strolled down the Piazza di Siena until we found a small but busy outdoor café. Taking a corner table for two, we sat and continued the conversation we had enjoyed since we’d left the Villa Borghese. Gustav, I found, was not the shy youth I had imagined him to be. His earlier heartbreak had made him wary, but not uncommunicative, and he had an infectious sense of humour I found totally refreshing. For the hours we were together that day, I began to feel more human than at any other time in my life.

* * * *

Gustav accepted my invitation to dinner at my apartment that evening, and as I awaited his arrival, I could not help wishing that what I appeared to be was, in fact, the truth – and the monstrous part of me I hid from the world, did not exist.

His smile, when I opened the door to him, made the breath catch in my chest. He was so young, and if not entirely innocent in the ways of men, he could not have imagined what I am even in his wildest dreams. If I'd had any sense at all, I would have told him to turn around and never come back.

"Constantine..." He moved into my arms so smoothly and his lips were so warm on my cheek, that I, for the moment, forgot my demonic soul and gave in to the desire with which his touch filled me. I held him, inhaling his young, clean scent, completely enthralled by his presence.

Our lips met in a long, sweet kiss. His eyes twinkled as his gaze met mine. "I wanted to do that all afternoon."

"I didn't take you for the forward type," I teased him.

"You don't know me yet," he murmured, kissing me again.

I slipped my hand inside the pale blue shirt he wore and lightly stroked his chest. His skin was smooth as a child's but with a man's strength beneath it. I felt his erection pressing against mine, and with a quiet moan of pleasure, I gave myself up to the carnal desire he instilled in me. His lips were soft and moist, his breath warm and sweet on my tongue. I held him in a fierce embrace, while our kiss went on and on, until he gasped into my mouth and pulled back a little. His eyes, when they met mine, held trust and a plea I could not refuse. Taking his hand, I led him into my bedroom.

I undressed him slowly, savouring each part of his body that I laid bare. My lips lightly brushed his neck, his shoulders, his chest. I lingered over each small, round nipple, feeling them harden against my tongue. He wrapped his arms about my neck and brought his luscious lips to mine with a kiss that swept away all doubt as to the wisdom of what I was allowing to happen. Holding him in my arms, feeling his naked warmth pressed to my body, I believed I could deal with anything, or anyone, that might stand in the way of our happiness.

I eased him onto the bed then sank to my knees before him, and for a few moments, I was content to gaze up at him while my hands stroked his smooth thighs. His smile was

entrancing as he held my face between his hands and leaned forward to kiss my lips. His touch was a rapture I had never known. I felt as if I were drowning, unable to resist the sweet allure of this mortal being. Everything about him tugged at my senses, and I wanted nothing more than to hold him in my arms forever. I bowed my head and took his cock into my mouth, gently teasing the velvety crown, running my tongue over it and licking up the salty essence that spilled from it.

He shuddered from the sensations I brought him, his hands caressing my face, his fingers tangling in my curls. I took all of him, down to where his cock sprang from a musky down of blond hair. His breath became a whimper of desire as my throat muscles tightened about the head of his hot hard flesh. A long low moan escaped his lips, and I felt him spasm in my mouth.

"Not yet, not yet," he whispered, almost to himself. I raised my head, releasing him and, instead, climbed on top of him and began a long slow exploration of his body with my lips and tongue. He gasped and moaned, moving his body beneath me in slow sensuous movements that had my cock on fire and lust spilling from every pore on my body. I swept him into my arms and, for the moment forgetting my more-than-human strength, lifted him from the bed as though he were a child and crushed him to my body. His murmur of surprise alerted me to my mistake, and with a muttered apology, I lowered him onto his back, covering his neck and chest with soft, soothing kisses.

"You're so strong," he said, with what sounded like admiration. "You must work out every day."

"Yes," I lied. "Almost every day."

He ran his hands up over my arms, across my shoulders then down my back, caressing and stroking each part of me,

"So beautiful," he murmured, winding his arms around my neck and bringing his lips to mine. "I would like you to fuck me."

"Yes," I whispered, my breath catching in my throat. I knew that at that moment there was nothing in the world I wanted more. He lifted his legs and wrapped them around my waist. My erection slid between his thighs, probing at the tight ring of muscle hidden in the cleft of his buttocks.

"Condom," he murmured. "You have one?"

A cold wave of disappointment washed over me. Of course, I didn't have one. The need had not presented itself in a long time.

"I'm sorry... I didn't think," I muttered.

He smiled up at me. "Then it's just as well I did," he said, reaching for his pants.

I sighed with relief. "Do you always carry one?"

"No..." He chuckled and kissed me hard on the mouth. "I was just hopeful. And..." His smile grew sly. "I also brought some lube." He ran his fingers up and down the length of my erection. "From the feel of it, perhaps I should've brought more!"

I tore open the foil wrapper and eased the condom over my cock. I coated my fingers with the slick substance he handed me then inserted them into his opening. He squirmed a little, bearing down on my fingers, drawing them inside him. Looking down at his sweet face, his expression one of rapture, at his lithe, tightly muscled body writhing beneath me, I was filled with an almost overwhelming desire to completely possess him, to have him forever in my life and never let him go.

As I entered him, he gasped, and his body reared up in protest, a moan of pain escaping his lips. I pulled back, afraid of hurting him, but his hands cupped my buttocks, and he eased me forward, raising his hips to give me greater access.

"It's all right," he whispered on a breath.

I leaned down to take his lips as I thrust forward again. He whimpered into my mouth, but at the same time, he wrapped his arms about me, holding me locked to him. Sweat beaded his forehead as he strained to take me in beyond his tight muscles of resistance.

"You're so big," he panted but did not pull away from me. Gradually, his expression of pain was replaced by a smile, small at first then widening as my cock glided back and forth over his prostate. "Oh yes, Constantine..." Now his hips moved under me to the rhythm I had begun, the pain taken over by pleasure. "Oh yes," he crooned. "Fuck me, Constantine...fuck me..."

And I did. The sounds and sensations that surrounded us were like nothing either of us had ever experienced before. His mind was open to me, along with his body, and his thoughts were of ecstasy and bliss and of the best sex he had ever had in his life. And those thoughts drove me wild, for of course, I wanted this to be the best he'd ever had or ever

would have. As I thrust hard into him, driving my cock all the way to the root, he cried out his delight, saying my name over and over, clinging to me as I pounded his body with mine.

Suddenly, he let out a strangled cry, harsh with need and pleasure, and I felt the surge of his orgasm erupt between our bodies, his hot semen spraying over both our chests even as I emptied my seed inside him. I heard myself give vent to a long low growl that made Gustav laugh and cling to me even tighter while we both shook and shuddered in each other's arms.

"Oh, mein Gott – du bist wunderbar, meine Constantine," he whispered in my ear. *"Und du bist das beste Liebhaber...the very best lover."*

"Gustav, caro mio..." I pledged myself to him. *"Ti voglio bene."*

"I love you too," he said.

* * * *

To know Gustav, was to love him. In the days and weeks that followed, our relationship grew and strengthened until I found myself thinking of him day and night. The time we spent together was the happiest I had ever known, but at the same time, I knew that what I had to do would end it. Once the Master called me to his side, all earthly desires would have to cease. I would have to give up my association with Gustav and bend my will to His. This was my destiny, and it could not be altered. Not by me, nor any living being – not even by love.

The end of times is prophesied in many books, including the Bible. Prophets, both genuine and charlatan, have pronounced Armageddon as inevitable. Numerous stories have been written on how to look for the signs of the approaching apocalypse – some based on fact, but most outright conjecture. Nevertheless, many believe it will come, and when it does, my Master will take advantage of the chaos to announce his destiny – to save mankind from its own destruction and to rule unopposed forever. Those who resist will be killed. Those who comply will live under the Master's laws and will prosper, for a time. I do not pretend to know the end result of all this, for man's future is hidden from all but the Master. I was not even certain what my fate would be. All I knew was that I was created to serve him and to prepare the way for his coming.

You may well ask how someone as monstrous as me could find the power and the desire to love a mortal being such as Gustav. A fair question, for the answer is my curse. Although I am demon spawn, I was born of humankind. I feel that the woman who bore me must have had a loving soul. She must have been a compassionate mortal with hopes and dreams of her own. I say this because of the moments of doubt I have about what I am doing—moments that recently have become hours, even days when my mind rebels at what the Master commands me to do.

Before, it seemed simple. It was my destiny. Now...now I find myself wishing for a different destiny, one that includes my beloved Gustav. One in which I would never have to admit to him what I am, and why our futures cannot include each other. If, for one moment, the Master ever guessed that I hold such traitorous thoughts, he would not hesitate to terminate my existence, regardless of what I am to him, or even more terribly, threaten Gustav's life as the penalty for my betrayal.

There is no turning back for me, no change of course. What was decreed hundreds of years ago, I cannot change, no matter how hard I may wish to.

Chapter Three

France, 1425

Bernard

The world outside the monastery was a revelation to me. Confined as I had been to its grim, austere atmosphere and subjected to the perverseness of the monks, this new and unexpected freedom filled me with a joyous anticipation that life would, at last, have some meaningful future. The sky above us remained dark and filled with rainclouds, allowing Marcus to cover a great distance on our first day of travel. Orion galloped as though he had wings, and with each mile he put between us and the Monastere de Dieu, I breathed a little more easily

As darkness fell, we found an inn where Marcus ordered a room for the night and a meal for me. I already knew that what the landlord served on a plate would not interest Marcus.

"I must go out," he said. "I will not be long."

For a moment, I did not understand, and then I realised what he meant. "Please, Marcus, don't go," I pleaded, scared that what he must undertake would lead him to danger. "You can drink from me. I will gladly give you my blood to keep you safe." The knowledge that he needed human blood to live should have horrified me, and in some aspects, it did. Yet, I could not equate this beautiful, kind man with the tales of terror and loathing vampires inspired. After having lived a life of degradation at the hands of the supposedly pious, Marcus seemed to me to be my saviour.

Gently, he touched my face with his fingertips. "Thank you, Bernard," he murmured. "But I will not weaken you by taking too much of your blood." He kissed my cheek. "I will return presently."

And without further conversation, he left me alone in the room. A few minutes later, the landlord knocked on the door, bringing me a steaming platter of beef stew and a flagon of wine.

"Your master must think a lot of you," he said, laying the food and wine on a corner table. "He orders for his servant, but not for himself."

I did not bother to correct the man. Let him think I was squire to my Lord Marcus. It suited me well. And indeed, what better master could I have—he who had saved me from a life of humiliation and had given me the chance to make a better future for myself? I only hoped that whatever lay ahead for me, included Marcus.

I wanted to wait up for him, anxious to know he was safe before I fell asleep. The warmth of the fire and the goblet of wine I'd imbibed along with the food made me drowsy. I must have dozed off, despite my best intentions to stay awake, for I was suddenly aware of him moving about the room and pulling back the covers on the bed.

I rubbed my eyes. "Oh, I'm sorry," I muttered. "I must have fallen asleep."

"As well you should," he said, smiling at me. "You've had an arduous day of travel. Come now. Lie down on the bed and sleep properly."

"Will you not join me?"

"Later...you must sleep. We have another long day's travel ahead of us tomorrow, and the inclement weather is of benefit to me. Once the skies clear, I cannot travel in the daytime."

I nodded and started pulling off my clothes. "Did you find...sustenance?"

"I did. Two very amiable gentlemen, engaged in a rather longwinded talk on the effect of the weather on their crops, obliged me."

I looked at him wide-eyed. "They did not mind you drinking their blood?"

His smile was beatific. "Of course not," he said, chuckling softly. "They have no recollection of it."

"But I remember," I said, climbing into the bed. "I remember it with fondness and a wish that it would happen again."

"That circumstance was different." He smiled down at me as he drew the covers up to my chin then sat by my side. "Many years ago, I discovered that I could induce forgetfulness in the minds of those I drank from. It saves them from the horror the memory of my feeding on them would bring. I leave no mark and take only enough that I might live."

"But then," I asked, "where do all the terrible stories of throats being torn out and bodies rising from the grave come from?"

"There are those vampires who do not care who they kill, or in what manner," he replied gravely. "Just as in the mortal world, there is good and evil. But tales of bodies rising from the grave after being bitten by a vampire are merely myths—a superstition put about to terrify people. Vampires are not so easily made." He touched my cheek. "But now, you must sleep."

"I would sleep more restfully if you were lying next to me," I said, silently willing him to shed his clothes and climb into bed with me.

He smiled and passed his hand over my eyes.

I slept.

* * * *

When I awoke, I felt his presence next to me. Slivers of daylight stole into the room, and I stiffened with alarm. *It is much too bright*, I thought. I ran to the window and peered out. The skies had lightened. The storm was over, and patches of blue were appearing between the clouds.

Marcus was in danger!

"Marcus..." I put my hand on his shoulder, and he instantly awoke. His eyes narrowed as he realised that the room was lighter than it should be, but there was no terror in his expression as he looked up at me.

"Put my cloak over the window, Bernard. That should suffice for the time being."

I flew to do his bidding, making sure that his cloak covered every inch of the window frame. The thick material darkened the room immediately, the only light coming from the fire that burned low in the grate. I thrust a taper into the flames and lit a candle by the bed.

"No daytime travel for us this day, Bernard," Marcus said ruefully. "We will have to wait until dusk before setting out again." He took my hand in his. "Thank you for being alert to the danger to me."

I raised his hand to my lips. "I owe you everything," I murmured. "If I have helped protect you, it is only a small token of the esteem I hold for you."

Sighing, he fell back on the pillow, pulling me into his arms. He kissed my brow. "The sunlight will bring me weariness," he said, his lips cool on my skin. "Tell the landlord I am unwell, and we will stay another day. Order yourself some refreshment."

"And for you?"

"I require nothing but the darkness you have provided. Go now." He released me, and I ran downstairs to the kitchen.

The landlord was sympathetic as I told him my master felt a little under the weather. "All that rain, I expect," he said. "Damp gets in your bones. Would he like some broth, do you think?"

"He said he couldn't keep anything down," I replied, straight-faced. "But I'll take some up to the room, just in case he changes his mind."

I went outside as the landlord happily prepared the broth. The air was warmer, with a slight breeze that brought the smell of blossoms to my senses. *How beautiful the world is*, I thought. Far from the confines of the monastery, I could almost forget the misery I had endured for all those years. Being with Marcus had brought me a strength and optimism I had not known I possessed. His tender compassion, so at odds with the men who had raised me, had given me hope that indeed there were gentler people in the world who would not abuse me for their own satisfaction.

* * * *

When I returned to the room, he was still asleep. Eventually, I would learn that on days when the sun is high, vampires sleep the sleep of near death. The vitality and vibrancy that is theirs when awake and alert slows to a murmur, making them vulnerable and susceptible to danger. Although I was not fully aware of that at the time, I nevertheless felt it my duty to sit by his bed and watch over him until he awoke.

Perhaps it was the near darkness in the room or perhaps as the day wore on I felt the need to rest, but at one point, I gave a mighty yawn and decided I would slip between the sheets and lie with Marcus. I stripped and quietly climbed into bed. In the soft glow of the candlelight, I could see the cascade of dark curly hair that framed his noble face. I reached to touch it, curling my fingers in its softness. Then growing bolder, I traced the curve of his jaw

and cheekbone with my fingertips. He murmured and turned on his side, facing me. I put my arm around him, and he moved closer. I kissed his mouth, remembering how he had shown me, brushing his lips gently with mine. He stirred, his eyes fluttered open, and I felt him smile, his mouth still on mine.

“Bernard,” he whispered, moving closer, giving into the temptation my young, warm body presented to him. I pressed myself to his nakedness, thrilling to the feel of his silken skin covering the hard-muscled flesh. His arms enfolded me, holding me close, his lips moving from my mouth to my throat, to my chest where he teased each nipple, nipping lightly at the nubs and causing me to writhe with a sensual pleasure beneath him. He lifted his head and smiled into my eyes, before capturing my lips again, his tongue sliding smoothly over mine, filling my mouth with his sweet breath.

My arms tightened about him, and I felt the ripple of his muscles under his skin as he moved over me, caressing my body with his, bringing a fire to my loins. Our kiss deepened, and my mind was numb with desire. Everything I had ever dreamed of had been manifested in this one man. I wanted to love him forever, to be with him, to be like him—in all ways.

From my mouth tumbled words of love and devotion. He stilled them with his lips, holding me within the haven of his arms, letting me know, without words, that what we shared was special to him also. I will never forget the emotions Marcus instilled in me. No matter that he was perhaps the most beautiful man I had ever seen—even to this day, I have not seen his equal. However, beauty can oft times be a veneer, a disguise for what lies beneath, and when that which is hidden from sight is discovered, it can be unsettling, perhaps even dangerous.

But with Marcus, his beauty also lay within him. This may be a surprise given the reputation vampires have for killing and mutilation. Yes, he could be a formidable enemy, possessing the strength of ten mortal men as he did. His supernatural powers exceeded even his strength. He could move at lightning speed, disappear in the blink of an eye, know exactly what you were thinking—or were about to think—and could erase from your memory all thoughts of himself, if need be. Marcus, in all the time I spent with him, never abused those powers—except when he felt he, or someone dear to him, was in danger. Then he was a frightening force to reckon with—a beautiful but terrifying angel of death.

All these things I would come to know in due course, but then, lying in his arms, snuggling into the shelter of his flesh, those thoughts were as distant as the stars from my mind. Never, I thought, never will I find anyone to compare...and so it was, for many, many years to come.

* * * *

Later that afternoon, as he saw the sky once more darken with heavy clouds, he told me we should prepare to leave. In all of this time, I had never asked him our destination. *Just where are we headed?* I wondered.

"I have a modest chateau in the hills above Toulon," he said, answering my unspoken question. "I was on my way there when I took shelter from the storm at the monastery."

"I will always be grateful to that storm," I told him, with complete sincerity.

He smiled, warming my heart. "When we get there, it will be your home also—if you so desire."

I was speechless for a moment, tears stinging the back of my eyes as I gazed at him. "Oh, Marcus... You are too generous."

He chuckled. "You might not think so when you see the state of the place. I have been gone a long time, and the chateau has been closed up with no one to care for it. It will need a great deal of work."

"To which I am no stranger," I said quickly. "It will be a joy for me to put your home to rights."

"I hope you are still saying that when we get there!"

If the landlord was surprised that we were leaving at such a strange hour, he said nothing but bobbed his head gratefully, accepting the money Marcus passed to him as we left. Orion seemed pleased to be on the road again, whinnying in appreciation as Marcus gave him his head, and we galloped through the moon-laden night.

We reached the wooded hills on the outskirts of Toulon before dawn, and I gaped in awe as we cantered up to the gates of the chateau Marcus had described as 'modest'. It sat amongst what looked like many acres of land which, although overgrown with wild grass

and trees in need of pruning, were lush and verdant. Marcus dismounted and removed the chains from the gates then led Orion through into the grounds.

"As you can see, Bernard," he said, as he locked the gates behind us, "even in this half-light, it is obvious there is much to be done here."

"It's a challenge I will gladly accept," I assured him, smiling down at his upturned face and thinking again how incredibly fortunate I had been to meet this beautiful man. Surely now, my life could only be filled with happiness. As he walked, holding Orion's reins, he pointed out the shadowy silhouettes of the mountains that rose behind the chateau, the outline of which I could now make out. I gasped. It was immense, even bigger than I had imagined. Could all this belong to one man—even a man as noble as Marcus?

He smiled up at me, reading my thoughts. "Believe me when I say, this chateau is modest compared with some you will one day visit with me."

Although I believed every word he uttered, my mind could not entertain the idea that anyone's home could be even more majestic than this—unless it was a castle or a palace—but as I had never seen either one I had nothing with which to compare it. Marcus tethered Orion outside then unlocked the door, ushering me inside the darkened hall. I would later learn that Marcus could see in the dark, but for my sake, he lit some candles, and as they flared into life, I audibly gasped at the splendour they illuminated. The walls of the entry hall where we stood soared on all sides to a domed ceiling far above me, from which hung a chandelier so huge. I wondered how it could remain suspended there on its delicate, finely wrought chains. His hand on my shoulder, he led me forward into the great room ahead of us, and once more, I gaped in wonder at such luxury—finely carved and upholstered furniture set amongst magnificent works of art that lined every wall.

"This you think of as modest?"

"Well, it is my favourite amongst all my homes."

"You have more than one?" This I could not imagine. Just how wealthy could one man be?

"I'm afraid the kitchen will be bare, Bernard."

"That's all right," I said. "I'm not hungry."

"But you will be later. When you awaken, take Orion down into town and gather yourself some provisions."

"What shall I get for you?"

He smiled. "I require very little. Now, let me show you your room."

My room? I had anticipated sharing his bed. Had he tired of me already?

"Bernard..." He gathered me in his arms. "No, I have not tired of you."

I felt shame creep upon me at his words. I would have to learn to guard my selfish and petty thoughts from him. I could not have him think me unworthy of his friendship.

He kissed my forehead gently. "Do not berate yourself so," he murmured. "You will share my bed if you wish, but the life I lead will not always be compatible with yours. You must have your own room to come and go as you please, without fear of disturbing me. This will become easier for you to understand as time goes by. Come now..."

He took my hand, and together, we climbed the magnificent staircase that curved its way to the upper floors. From the top landing, I could look down into the hall below and see the sparkle of the chandelier's crystals caught in the glowing candlelight. Marcus opened one of the many doors on the landing and led me inside the bedroom that lay beyond, lighting a candle with the taper he carried. Again, I was surrounded by luxury and elegance.

"This will be your room, Bernard," he said, looking at me, his eyes twinkling. "That is, when you tire of my company."

"That will be never," I assured him, and he chuckled at my serious expression.

"Well then, when you wish to be alone with your thoughts or your studies."

"My studies?"

"Of course, you must study. A young man like you must prepare himself for what lies ahead of him."

I looked at him in amazement. I had never given a thought to my future while inside the monastery walls. There, I had resigned myself to a life of servitude and degradation, but now...

"Yes, now Bernard," he said gently. "Now you may choose the direction in which your destiny lies."

"I think I would like to be a teacher," I said, with some fervour. "To bring enlightenment to minds that are filled with the superstitious fears inflicted upon them by those who call themselves holy."

He nodded. "You have chosen a noble profession, but one that requires a great deal of study. We will have to find a suitable college for you to attend."

"They would never let the likes of me into a college," I protested.

"Just leave all that to me," he said. "Now, I must sleep. There are fresh linens in that chest."

"I would rather sleep with you, Marcus."

"Very well, as we are both weary from our travels but, in future, this is to be your room, Bernard. Of course, mine is open to you at all times."

And so it was that I came to live with Marcus in his splendid chateau, and that our friendship and love for one another grew and deepened as the years went by. Some things of vampirism that I still knew nothing of, I learned quickly. I had thought it amazing that Marcus could read others' thoughts, that he possessed the strength of ten mortal men, and that he could move with a speed and agility the human eye could not keep up with. But that he could fly was a revelation that astounded me. My amazement so amused him that he caught me up in his arms and soared with me higher than the moonlit clouds, all the while laughing with delight at my cries of wonderment. As we swooped and zoomed through the cool night air, I have to admit that once or twice I had to close my eyes tight when we came so close to a treetop or church steeple.

"But why," I asked when we were once more on solid ground and I had recovered my breath and my wits. "Why when you can fly, do you still use Orion for travelling?"

"Because, my dear Bernard, I like it!" He smiled at my blank look. "Think of it, Bernard. I have lived for hundreds of years and will almost certainly live for hundreds more. What is there for me to hurry to? Yes, I could be in Paris or Rome in much less time than on a horse at full gallop, but why the haste? If I am needed in an emergency, then I make use of that particular ability, otherwise, Orion suits me well."

* * * *

I was enrolled in a fine college in Toulon and, later, fulfilled my ambition to be a teacher. It seemed that no one knew the truth of Marcus, for he was regarded as a boon to the area's economy, hiring daytime staff to keep the chateau's many rooms clean and the lush

gardens trimmed and weed free. It was an unspoken agreement between us that I would supervise all the work done and ensure that his room was left to last. Only I had the key to unlock it and only after I was certain that he had risen. All was well until one day, I noticed that several of my students were missing from my class.

"They are sick," was all I was told, and although I thought it unusual that so many should be taken ill at one time, at that time, I saw no cause for great alarm. But as the days passed, more and more students were missing, and the dreaded word 'plague' was whispered in the corridors.

Marcus had been gone for several weeks, and upon his return, he told me that many parts of France and Germany were beset by the terrible disease. All classes were cancelled, all public buildings were closed upon orders from the King and the state, and a blanket of fear descended upon the country. The plague of 1430 was not as severe as the previous epidemic some one hundred years before, but nevertheless, it claimed many thousands of lives – sadly, many of my students among them.

I was twenty-three, fit and healthy, so it came as a terrible shock on the morning that I found myself unable to rise from my bed. I was nauseous, shivering, and covered in sweat. I lay there all day until sunset when Marcus came to my room, his intuition telling him that something was amiss. He summoned a doctor, who immediately diagnosed me as a plague victim and rushed from the chateau as though his arse was on fire. Marcus sat with me day and night, bringing me cold compresses for my fever, warm blankets when I turned icy cold, and fresh water to ease my parched throat.

I was dying, and we both knew it.

"Bernard," he whispered, his lips close to my ear. "I can save you, but you know what must be done."

Feebly, I nodded my understanding.

"Is it what you wish?"

"Yes," I murmured weakly. He raised my withering hand to his lips and kissed it gently.

"Then when next you see me," he said, "you will be whole again."

* * * *

When I awoke from my death, he was by my side, holding my hand.

"Marcus," I whispered. "Am I now like you?"

He nodded, his expression grave and compassionate. "It is five days since we last spoke. How do you feel?"

"Like new," I replied, sitting up. And it was so. As ill and weak as I had been before I died, I now felt strong and vital, filled with an almost overpowering energy—and an unquenchable thirst.

"It will all feel strange to you at first," Marcus said as I stretched the muscles in my arms and legs newly filled with strength. "You must go slowly, learn to adapt..."

I nodded, but I was only half-listening. I wanted to leap from the bed and experience my new found vigour and vitality. Marcus, sensing this, kept my hand in his and his eyes fixed on mine as he spoke.

"Listen to me, Bernard." His voice remained gentle, but there was no mistaking the gravity of his words. "You are now immortal, yet you can die. You are powerful, yet you are vulnerable. You can make men fear you, but if they fear you, they will hate you and seek to destroy you. There is much for you to learn of this new life. If you learn well, you will enjoy the best that being a vampire can bring you. If you do not heed my words, you might discover to your cost, and too late, that what you have become can be of more danger to yourself than to anyone else. Do you understand what I am saying?"

"Yes," I whispered, gripped by his intensity.

He smiled. "Good. Now walk about a little. Feel the newfound strength in your muscles..."

Naked, I jumped out of bed and ran around the room, exhilarated by the lightness I felt in my blood, and the spring in my step. I looked at Marcus. I could hear what he was thinking!

"Yes, my beloved Marcus," I said. "I will listen to you, for there is no one I admire more in all the world. Just be patient with me should I appear to be too eager to know everything about this new life you have given me."

"Come here," he whispered, opening his arms. Gladly, I melted into his embrace, my face nestled in the hollow of his neck. The scent of his blood flowing beneath his cool, smooth

skin sent my senses on fire. For the first time, I felt my incisors extend, and a feral growl escaped my lips. Still, he held me close.

"Yes, drink," he murmured. "I have fed, so that you may take what you need from me tonight."

I bit deeply into his jugular vein then pulled back so that his blood filled my mouth with hot, sweet spurts. His arms tightened about me as I sucked his rich, powerful blood—the blood he had given so selflessly that I might live and that he now shared with me in my first moments as a vampire. Never had anything tasted as sweet, or as potent, and with it, a tumult of sensation—love, joy, longing, lust...and the comfort his arms provided. Gently, he lifted my head from the wound I had inflicted on him. Our bodies and our thoughts were as one, joined in a perfect harmony with one another.

"Enough for now," he said quietly, kissing my lips. He passed his fingertips over the wound, and I watched it close instantly. I gazed into his eyes, into their deep green beauty, and my body was suffused with desire for him. Aware of my need, he crushed me to him, his hands caressing my bare skin, his lips taking mine in long, sweet kisses. We had made love before, of course. Not often, for Marcus was seldom at home, but each time had been unforgettable, taking me to heights of ecstasy I could not imagine anyone else being capable of.

But now, my body imbued with vampire blood, the sensations he created within me became even more intense, even more powerful than before. It seemed as if every caress, every kiss he gave me carried with it a hundred times the passion I had once felt.

Looking at his body anew through my vampire eyes, though once I would have deemed it impossible, his nakedness took on an even more sensual and alluring form. The silken texture of his skin and the tight, sculpted musculature of his chest and abdomen seemed to me to be carved by a gifted artist's hand. I kissed that smooth skin, licking and nibbling my way across his torso, teasing each nipple with my lips and tongue. I sank between his thighs, my hand grasping the long, thick shaft that rose from its thatch of curly dark hair. My tongue traced the veins on the underside up to the broad tip, wet with the juice of his arousal. My mouth engulfed it, my lips sliding slowly down the hard length. Marcus groaned. His hands caressed my face and stroked my hair. The sound of his pleasure made

me suck all the harder, wishing above all else to bring him the same sweet sensations he had brought to me so many times.

They say that the vampire's sexual senses are heightened by the taking of blood, that the act of drinking the blood is a sexual experience. I would not argue the point, for indeed the infusion of Marcus' blood into my veins had set my own blood on fire. A new vampire I might have been, but his powerful blood now filled me with a desire that threatened to overwhelm me. For the first time, I experienced the heightened array of sensations only vampires are privy to. As I let my lust take over, I felt a fierce passion rage within me. The hard flesh that pulsed in my hand became the sole object of my desire. I laved it with my lips and tongue, searing the soft skin with the heat of my mouth. Marcus writhed with pleasure—pleasure I was bringing him, pleasure that only he, another vampire, could fully abandon himself to.

I heard his breath catch in his throat and knew he had reached his limit. His hips bucked, pushing his throbbing cock deeper into my mouth. I opened to him, taking him down my throat, my hands clutching at his thighs as I felt the first scorching spurt of his semen explode from deep within him. I held him in my mouth until his last body-racking spasm had subsided. Then gently, I released his cock, licking at the last vestiges of his semen as it slid from my mouth. He drew me up into his arms and kissed me, holding my body pressed tightly to his own.

We made love again and again through that first night of my new life. I wondered then if any other newly born vampire had ever been initiated in such a wondrous manner.

And even now, I seriously doubt it.

* * * *

Of course, some things had to be sacrificed. No longer could I walk through the lush gardens in the morning sunrise nor sit on a bench to look up at the mountains bathed in its golden light. Marcus told me we could catch the last fading vestiges of the setting sun as it sank behind the mountains. For many nights after, I would stand at the window of my room watching the sky change from its rosy hue to a deep purple as dusk fell and the night became mine.

The darkness brought me strength, and a clear mind, after the almost death-like sleep I endured during the daylight hours. For the first few months after I had been changed, Marcus was there to guide me in all things. With infinite patience he showed me how to react to my newfound power – and how to control it when necessary. The first time I took human blood, he instilled in me the creed he had lived by for all his hundreds of years.

“Be gentle,” he told me. “There is no need to tear at the flesh. Take only as much as you need. Human blood will replenish itself, and who knows, you may wish to drink from that same human again. The vampire bite does not kill of itself. In fact, it adds a year or two to a mortal’s lifespan. Always make sure they have no memory of the encounter. I prefer to give them the vague remembrance of a fleeting rapturous moment.”

“Does it always bring the flush of desire?” I asked.

“Almost always. Blood is life to us, imbuing us with its vitality, feeding the libido that controls all lust and desire. That is why you must be careful, Bernard,” he said, his strong grip on my shoulder. “Although most mortals fear us, there are those who might wish to bond with you. That should not be done without great forethought. To bind a mortal to your side can sometimes have dire consequences for both of you.”

I listened to all that he said, for where would I find another as wise as he in the ways of the vampire? And in truth, I had no wish to hurt anyone. To drink the blood was essential to my existence, but to maim or kill in the process was not something I craved. Of course, in my eagerness to heed his advice, I was clumsy in my first attempt, and my ‘victim’ put up a struggle and punched me so hard on the mouth. If Marcus had not been there to control the situation, things might have turned ugly. Fortunately, he was there to take the young man in his arms, to soothe his anger with one look from those deep green eyes, and after he had gifted his blood, to make him forget all that had occurred.

But I was to discover that Marcus had many responsibilities beyond my need for mentoring. Many years before he came into my life, he had led an army of vampires against the forces of evil and had been victorious. Since then, he had been called upon to settle disputes between the various vampire factions, his loyal followers forever advocating his wisdom and impartiality in these matters. For long periods of time, sometimes for years, I would not see him and had to make my own way in life. All was well for many years until,

through no fault of my own...well, perhaps a little carelessness of mine could be blamed, I was taken captive by an evil brood, the Wizard Brotherhood.

They caught me with my pants down—I'm ashamed to say, quite literally. Over the years, I had honed my hunting skills and could feed and disappear in a flash, the young man or woman from whom I fed having no recollection of ever being in my arms. But this night, the young man I held and drank from beguiled me. I rather think this was the work of the Wizards. Whatever it was, I was completely lost in the youth's kisses and caresses, fired up as I was by his sweet blood, and he, eager to bring me ecstasy, dropped to his knees to take my aching erection into his mouth. I had closed my eyes, giving in to the sweet sensation of his lips on my throbbing flesh, when suddenly, he was rudely thrown to one side and we were surrounded by men in dark cloaks, their faces shrouded by large hoods. I was to wish they'd kept their faces hidden at all times, for they were without doubt the ugliest men I had ever seen in my life. Fortunately, the young man escaped, running into the darkness of the forest.

They brought me before an extraordinarily handsome man with fascinating grey eyes. They were holding him prisoner and forced us to exchange blood. Joseph Meyer has already recounted this episode in his journal, so I will not repeat all of it here, except to say that using wizardry and my vampire blood, they sought to retain his beauty for all time, for their own pleasure. But their plans came to naught when Joseph and I exchanged much more than that. What we did that night and the following night bound us in love and friendship for all time.

Outraged, the monsters threw me outside into the daylight to die. Fortunately for me, the sky was filled with clouds that day, allowing me to get to the shadows and the safety of the nearby forest, where I hid until nightfall. I had promised Joseph I would tell Marcus of his plight, but it was many more years before I could do so—years in which Joseph was subjected to the Wizards' vile ministrations and hideous pleasure. The day came at last when Marcus rescued Joseph from his humiliation, and with the aid of his vampire army, drove the Wizards into oblivion, destroying their stronghold, and slaying any who resisted. Following that victory, the world seemed a safer place for we vampires—for a time, at least.

Chapter Four

Rome, Italy, 1904 – Present day

Bernard

Since my changing, I had been fascinated by the lore that surrounded our creation. So many of the tales I knew to be no more than myths, perpetuated mostly by the church. It taught that we were soulless monsters, doomed to wander the earth, only at night, in search of blood. ‘Beware, young men and ladies, lest you be taken in by vampire charms and condemned to live like the undead, banished from hearth and home—your grave your only resting place!’

I decided I would rewrite the vampire history, try to dispel the many myths and legends that superstition and ignorance had laid at our door, and in doing so, perhaps allay some of the fear with which mortal men and women perceived us. No small task, I can assure you, and one that I am undertaking to this very day, some five hundred years since I began.

I have been fortunate enough to have had a wealth of reference and information at my disposal—schools, colleges, and libraries all welcome the eager student—and if my request that I use their facilities only at night seemed somewhat eccentric, for the most part, I received no objection.

My frustration came from the fact that the tomes housed in these halls of learning told me nothing that I did not already know. The same tired old stories, myths, legends and tales of horror were recounted over and over until I despaired of ever finding writings that stripped away the myths and were based on fact. I had heard it said that manuscripts existed in the Vatican in Rome. Some hundreds of years before, one of the Popes had begun a vendetta against the Vampire world in order to, as he saw it, rid the earth of the ‘vampire pestilence’. Obviously, he had been unsuccessful, but much of the fear mortals have for us can be attributed to him. It was even rumoured that he had been in league with the Wizard Brotherhood and Darius, the leader of the Dark Forces and Marcus’ most powerful enemy. Those manuscripts I longed to read...

So it was that in the year 1904, I became an archival scholar in no less a place than the Vatican in Rome. I had long sought this position—of course, changing my surname and age every so often so as not to cause any alarm among those with whom I interviewed. On my first night there, I was greeted and given the grand tour of the library by a comely young man with dark, close-cropped curls and a winning smile.

He introduced himself as Pietro Dante and told me he had been the night attendant for only one year. He preferred it, he said, because it allowed him to visit his father in the daytime—an old man who suffered from extreme memory loss and was less than lucid in the evening.

I found Pietro charming, and we soon formed a close friendship, even though I could not accept his invitations to accompany him on any of the visits he paid his father. Eventually, after a period of some weeks, I ran out of excuses and simply told him the truth—well, a semblance of it at least.

“I have a terminal aversion to strong sunlight, my dear Pietro,” I told him. “An affliction of the blood,” I added. “It weakens me, and prolonged exposure could be fatal.”

He was at once filled with remorse for having badgered me over the matter. “It is so hard to believe,” he said in reply. “You look so strong and vital. But of course, you cannot risk your health over my selfish requests.”

He looked so forlorn, no doubt dismissing from his mind any countryside romps with me in tow, that I hugged him and kissed his cheek, telling him that perhaps as the winter months approached, I could accompany him in the late afternoon. He seemed cheered by that, but more importantly, did not step back from my embrace. Instead, his arms tightened about me, and his lips found mine in a tentative but thrilling kiss.

Over the years of my existence I have felt the surge of love and desire for another man only a few times. I felt it for Joseph, but we were torn apart so quickly that any furthering of our relationship was made impossible. Also, I had not forgotten the words of Marcus, my mentor, and indeed rarely kept company with mortal men, outside of the need to satisfy my hunger for their blood. Marcus, of course, I had loved, and still loved as a friend, infrequent though our meetings were. There had been others who had instilled me with not love really, but a desire for affection. There, locked in Pietro’s warm embrace, I wanted more from him.

Marcus' warning sang in my head, yet I ignored it, crushing Pietro's mouth with mine, holding him fast in my arms.

"Bernard," he whispered against my lips. "Do you know how I have longed for this? How I have dreamed of it ever since we first met?"

"I too," I murmured, nibbling at his plump lower lip. "What can we do about this dilemma?"

He chuckled, his lips tickling mine. "Whatever it may be, can we do it without delay?"

My employment had come with lodgings – a small, windowless room adjacent to one of the libraries. It was to there that Pietro and I hastened with as much speed as decorum would allow. Careful not to arouse the attention of our fellow employees, or the many clergymen and theologians who visited the archives to study, we made our way to my room, where we immediately fell upon one another with an enthusiasm that left us both breathless and panting.

Pietro was beautiful—not the powerful, sculpted beauty that was Marcus. Pietro was more delicate, fragile almost, but not feminine. There was strength there in his warm brown eyes, and the firm set of his mouth told me this was not a man to be trifled with nor have his affections toyed with. For a moment, I wavered. Should I follow where my heart and my desire led me, or should I whisper my regrets and show him the door? For better or worse, I decided to follow my heart and my desire.

I opened his shirt and pressed my lips to his chest. His skin, covered with a light down of dark brown hair, was soft and fragrant. He sighed as I teased each nipple, his hands caressing my face, stroking my hair. The scent of his blood was intoxicating, and I could feel my gums itch where my fangs longed to extend and pierce his exquisite flesh. I fought the urge to take him so quickly. Though I could make him forget, there was a deep-seated longing within me that he should remember everything that passed between us.

We fell upon my narrow bed, our clothes scattered on the floor around us. My hands cupped his round firm buttocks, pulling his crotch into mine. His pelvis moved rhythmically against me, his hard cock pushing between my thighs. His eyes fixed on mine, his lips parted in a sly smile that told me without words that he wanted to fuck me. I was slightly surprised. I don't know why I'd thought I would be the dominant one. I wound my legs around his waist, holding his leanly muscled body fast. He spat into his hand, rubbing his saliva over

the head of his cock and into the tight hole of my anus. He inched forward, his hardness pushing inside me, gently at first, then with a heat and determination that made me gasp with pleasure.

I grasped the back of his head, pulling him down until our lips met in a kiss born of hunger and a yearning for one another that caused my heart to pound with desire. I heard him groan softly, his breath filling my mouth as the rhythmic movement of his hips quickened, his thrusts becoming longer and deeper. I held him pressed tight to my body. He buried his face in the hollow of my neck, his lips working at my skin, his breathing harsh and laboured.

"Bernard..." His voice, muffled against my throat, was filled with such an earnest emotion that I felt myself melt beneath the warmth of his affection. My arms tightened about him, my hands caressing the smooth skin on his back. He raised his head and gazed into my eyes.

"Bernard, I love you."

Before I could say anything, his lips had covered mine again, his tongue sliding into my mouth, consuming me with his passion, even as his cock plunged ever deeper inside me. His body spasmed once, twice, and his seed flooded me. Beneath my hands, the muscles of his torso rippled and hardened with the strain and power of his ecstasy. As if in response to the overwhelming emotion that seemed to pour from every part of him, I felt my own orgasm surge through me, leaving me joyfully helpless in his arms. It was then, in that moment, that the loneliness, always an inherent part of a vampire's long life, flooded over me, causing me to tighten my arms around Pietro and give vent to a sob, both of joy and sadness, torn from my very heart.

Immediately, he tried to console me with whispered words of endearment and soft, sweet kisses. If he was surprised at my reaction to our lovemaking, he made no comment on it but held me fast in his arms until I calmed myself and returned his kiss. His words of love had stirred an emotion within me I knew I should resist but could not. I was in love with him, and instead of the feeling of joy that should come with that realisation, I was filled with apprehension and doubt.

He loves me now, I thought, but what if that love turns to horror on discovering the secret I keep hidden from all men, bar the two vampires I know in Rome? Looking into his dark eyes now

filled with love and compassion, I cursed myself for what I was and why it would necessitate my seeing him no more. I probed his mind, ready to cast the spell of forgetfulness upon him. He seemed intuitively to know what I tried to do. I gasped as I felt him resist me. His mind was filled with thoughts of love—thoughts of love, for me...for *me*. How could I take away what he felt with such depth and passion?

As if in answer to my thought, he said, "You cannot stop me from loving you, Bernard. Whatever it is you feel stands in the way of our love, we can overcome together. Don't shut me out of your life. I beg of you."

At his words, the tears that burned behind my eyes now burst forth, pouring down my cheeks, and I sobbed quietly in his arms.

"Bernard, Bernard," he crooned in my ear. "Tell me what it is, so that I may help soothe your troubles."

"I...I cannot, Pietro," I mumbled. "You would look on me with horror and run for your life—and I would not blame you for an instant."

Gently, he brushed away my tears with his fingertips and kissed my lips with a featherlike touch. "I promise you, I will never run from you," he whispered. "If it is too hard for you to talk of then I will not ask that you do. When you wish to tell me, will be time enough."

I felt a rush of relief course through me then the thought came to me that putting off the telling could only make matters worse. If I delayed, and he came to regard me as the one with whom he wished to spend the rest of his days, what then? When he grew old and began to wither, and I changed not one whit, what then? No, better he knew now, and when his love changed to feelings of horror, I might find it easier to relieve his mind of the burden of knowledge.

"Have you ever heard of vampires?" I asked him, my voice sounding tense and strained to my own ears.

"Of course...who has not?" He chuckled, then asked, "Are you a vampire, Bernard?"

"Yes," I replied, meeting his eyes, letting him see some of the feral light that glittered there.

His body stiffened with shock, and he jerked his head back as if to protect his throat.

I turned away from him.

"So now you understand why you cannot love me," I murmured, unable to look at the expression of terror I knew was etched on his lovely face. A long silence filled my tiny room, the only sound his slightly uneven breathing. "Perhaps you had better go now," I said quietly.

"Are you sending me away?"

I looked at him with surprise. "You do not want to run from here? From me?"

"Am I in danger, Bernard?"

I shook my head. "No, not from me. I would never hurt you, Pietro, never."

"Then why should I go when the man I love is here, lying beside me, holding me in his arms? Or was holding me in his arms until a moment ago."

"Pietro..."

A finger on my lips stilled my words. "What you have told me, I should find terror in, I know. But I look at you, dear Bernard, and I see only the man I love, not a rabid monster waiting to tear my throat out." His eyes grew wide for a moment. "You don't do that, do you?"

"No, I do not." I took his hand in mine and brought it to my lips. "If you want to hear that aspect of it, I will gladly explain, but first, let me assure you again, you are in no danger from me – nor shall you ever be."

To show his trust in what I had just vowed, he kissed my lips tenderly and laid his head on my chest. "Then my place is here with you," he said.

Of course, he wanted to know how all this had come about, and I was happy to tell him of the circumstances that led to my meeting Marcus, our subsequent friendship, and how he had saved me from the plague.

"The plague?" Pietro raised his head from my chest where he had rested during my long story. "There has not been word of a plague for centuries."

"Uh...no, that is correct," I said, touching his cheek and caressing it gently. "I was referring to the plague of sometime past."

"Oh..." His eyes searched mine for more of an explanation.

"Some hundreds of years past," I added, my voice no more than a whisper.

"Oh, you mean...?"

I nodded. "Yes. I fear I am somewhat older than I look."

A ghost of a smile flickered on his face. "Some hundreds of years older, by all accounts," he said, struggling to comprehend this new revelation. "But you look so young."

"Vampire blood has the power to resurrect and retain the image of youth...forever."

"Ah..." He fell silent again, studying my face as if trying to see any telltale sign of my real age. Then he chuckled softly and kissed me again. "I always thought there was something different and special about you, Bernard. I just didn't know how different and special you really are!"

And so Pietro and I became lovers – and yes, we remain true to one another, to this very day. He and I agreed that he would not go through the change from mortal to vampire while his father still lived. The old man, although sinking fast into a world of forgetfulness, still remembered his only son and seemed to perk up when Pietro visited him. But two years after the start of our love affair, Pietro came to me, his face stricken with grief. His father had died in his arms that very afternoon. He arranged to have the funeral at night so that I might attend, and afterwards, he and I lay in my tiny room, wrapped in each other's arms while I tried to bring him comfort and solace.

Around that same time, I became aware of a young priest who visited the archives almost every day, poring over ancient transcripts and reference books with a fervour that made me wonder at the reasons for such zeal. Of course, it was none of my business, therefore I resisted the temptation to simply ask him of his dedication. Nevertheless, I would watch him with some interest as he turned page after page at almost preternatural speed. He was young and handsome, with an ethereal quality about him. He was not a vampire. I had ascertained that immediately. The old saying 'it takes one to know one' applies to vampires, too. Yet, there was something strange about the man, and my instincts told me he was not altogether human. What then? I wondered. Could he be a demon, perhaps a warlock or wizard or even a shape-shifter of some kind?

His presence brought me uneasiness. If I recognised him as something other than he appeared to be, could he perhaps be aware of my true nature?

"You are far too interested in that young priest over there." The whispered accusation close to my ear startled me for an instant. I'd been so intent in observing the man in question, I had not heard Pietro sidle up behind me. I turned to look at his smiling face. He was teasing me, of course, but my heart tightened with a sudden fear for his safety.

"What is it?" he asked, his smile becoming a frown.

"I'm not yet sure. Something about the priest worries me."

"Well, I can check his credentials."

"No, don't do that. I don't want to arouse any suspicions in him. Let me keep an eye on him for a few more days. Perhaps it is nothing."

However, my opportunity to 'keep an eye on him' came to an abrupt end two days later when the priest suddenly ended his visits to the archive library.

"The priest has discontinued his studies," I told Pietro, later that day.

"Perhaps he has all the information he needed," he suggested.

"In such a short space of time? And did you notice that he never made notations?"

"Well, let's see what he was so eager to devour."

We walked over to the shelves that housed the books the priest had pored over day after day. Pietro pulled one from the shelf and handed it to me, while he perused another.

"Revelations and Its Relevance Today," he murmured. "What's yours?"

"The Antichrist – A History and Resolution."

"So he's interested in the end of times. Perhaps he's writing a book on it."

"Perhaps..." I felt a faint prickle of warning steal up my spine.

"What are you thinking?" Pietro asked.

I gave myself a shake. "Nothing..." I didn't want to voice my opinion of the man just yet. Why alarm Pietro needlessly?

"You're very solemn," he remarked, replacing the tome on its shelf.

I handed him the copy I had been riffling through. "That's because we haven't had any time together today."

"Hmm..." His smile was enchanting. "We must remedy that, at once."

Once we were alone together in my room, Pietro said, "I've been thinking that we should get an apartment away from here so that we don't have to skulk around in order to meet."

"Has something been said?" I asked.

"No, but some of the others have cast long looks at us now and then. I think they feel we spend too much time together, but whether they suspect anything other than that, I'm not sure."

"Then an apartment might be a good idea," I said. "I don't want to be removed from my position before I find the manuscripts I'm seeking."

"Oh? You haven't told me of those."

"No. Before you knew of my true self, I could not share that with you."

"And now?"

"It is said that one Pope made a study of vampirism in order that he might find our weaknesses and wipe us off the face of the earth."

"And did he?"

"Well, we're still here, Pietro."

He raised an eyebrow. "I meant, find your weaknesses," he said, sniffing. "And if he did, I shall want to know them so I can tie you to me for all time."

I smiled and kissed his nose. "You already know how to do that."

"Hmm...well, what did he find?"

"That silver can harm us—chains, knives, any weapons made of silver can slow us down and sometimes prove fatal if the wound is not treated promptly. Silver causes infection in the blood and prevents the wound from healing by itself. There are remedies of course, but as I said, prompt treatment is essential."

"Have you ever been wounded, Bernard?"

"Not by a silver blade, but I have been flogged and thrown into the daylight to die."

He gasped out loud. "Who would do such a thing?"

"Many people, given half a chance." I chuckled at his expression. "Vampires are not the most popular of species, Pietro."

"So, these manuscripts you seek...you think they are here, in the Vatican?"

"It seems the most likely of places."

"But many books and letters have been lost or burned over time."

"True," I agreed. "But I have a feeling I may find what I'm looking for here, locked away in one of the deeper chambers."

"We could look, but we'd need special permission to enter the vaults."

"Can we ask without arousing suspicion?"

Pietro shrugged. "Why would they care if we want to pore over ancient documents? I'll ask around to see if there is a problem with us entering the vaults. In the meantime, we need to find that apartment."

"Just make sure it has good strong window shutters!"

* * * *

On the first night, we were alone together in our new apartment, Pietro and I celebrated with a bottle of fine Italian wine. Slightly tipsy, we made love in a most abandoned fashion, and I, showing off my supernatural powers, levitated us from the bed in which we lay. As we hovered there between the bed and the ceiling, Pietro clasped tight in my arms, his smooth naked body moving sensually under me, I asked him to join me and become as I was—a vampire.

He was silent for a long moment, and I was glad of that. I did not want him to answer in a rush of emotion or give the answer he thought I would demand. Instead, practical as ever, he tapped me on the back and said, "Put me down first..."

Gently, I lowered him down onto the counterpane and lay beside him awaiting his answer.

"I have thought of this many times," he said quietly, his hand on my cheek. "I know that if I do not, I will grow old and die, leaving you still young and vital with an eternity stretching before you. Chances are, you may meet someone for whom you care as much as you care for me—" He stilled the words of denial that sprang to my lips with his fingertips. "That, of course, I cannot allow," he said, with his beguiling smile. "May God forgive me for what I am about to say, but I cannot deny you this request, my love. Yes, I will join you in immortality, and in your eternal journey, for I know I will love you to the end of time."

I held him, crushed to me in my arms, and wept. I had taken his blood before, and he mine, but this time, as we consummated our eternal union, he knew that when he awoke he would be changed and he would see the world through different eyes. Every sense, every movement, every smell, every touch would be enhanced. Every single thing he had taken for granted in his previous life would never again be the same.

In the years that followed, I was glad that he had agreed to be my forever companion, for the twentieth century in Europe became the most tumultuous and war-ravaged of any I had ever known. Of course, there had been endless wars before, but now the weapons that were used were so much more deadly, and the countless number of human lives lost was staggering. Had Pietro not come with me to the 'other side', he would have been conscripted into the Italian army and most likely lost to me, forever.

* * * *

Some years before the beginning of the twentieth century, Marcus had gone to the Americas. I had seen him but briefly after the devastating loss he had suffered when Thomas, his lover, was viciously murdered by the jealous Comte d'Arcy, but we communicated regularly. My powers of hearing the thoughts of others had become greatly improved over the centuries, and even vast distances did not impede my ability to 'converse' with Marcus when the need arose. For instance, I knew he had met and was mentoring a young vampire by the name of Jean-Claude Lepeltier, and much later that he had fallen in love with a mortal named Roger.

Roger and I were to meet in Rome, but only after he had become one of us. The terrible story of Thomas's betrayal I found almost hard to believe. How could he have been so deluded into thinking that Marcus would forgive him for draining the life of the man he loved? I could only think that the Comte d'Arcy had exerted a tremendous influence over Thomas in order to compel him to undertake such a hideous act.

While we were all together in Rome, I made mention to Marcus of a concern both Pietro and myself had regarding the priest who used the archival library at the Vatican—yes, we still worked there. I can only suppose that it was because of the vastness of the Vatican that for the most part, we went unnoticed by the staff who came and went throughout the years. But back to the priest—He had recently returned, the same handsome young man who had pored over the manuscripts of the 'end of times' so many years before.

He hadn't changed one iota in all of those years. His hair was still dark, without a touch of grey, his posture still strong and vital, his eyes still bright and all-seeing. He was not a vampire, of that I was certain, yet he had somehow managed to defeat death. Even if the

priest had been only in his thirties when first we'd seen him, he would now be at least that, plus a hundred. Marcus was intrigued and wanted to see the man for himself, and so I obtained a visitor's pass for him. Of course, the priest did not show up while Marcus was there. Was he also able to read minds? I wondered.

"Tell me about him," Marcus urged us, when we visited him one night, in the Lady Andorra's villa, high in the hills of Rome.

He sat on a couch, his arm about Roger who pressed himself so close to Marcus' side, they appeared almost as one person. Pietro told me later that he was extremely touched by the obvious love they had for one another.

We related the story of how the priest had come to the Vatican over one hundred years ago, relentlessly studying anything and everything to do with the Apocalypse and the Antichrist.

"What we thought strange, Marcus," Pietro said, "was that he made no notes. It was as if he could commit it all to memory."

"No mean feat," Marcus murmured. "But what is even stranger is the fact that he has not aged. You are certain it is the same man?"

"Absolutely," I assured him. "He is using another name, of course. Father Dominick."

"While before, he was Father Constantine," Pietro said.

"Marcus, we are sure he means harm," I said. "But to whom we do not know. His mind and thoughts remain closed to us. He most definitely has powers of some kind, but what he is, we cannot tell."

"A demon, perhaps," Marcus suggested.

"Could a demon masquerade as a priest?" Roger asked, his eyes wide.

"Demons are masters of deception," Marcus replied. "And if he's as powerful as Bernard and Pietro think he is, it would be an easy task for him. The fact that he didn't show up at the library while I was there makes me think his powers are, if not demonic, at least supernatural. He must have been able to sense my presence and somehow cloak his own before we could detect him."

"If he comes to the library again," I said, "Pietro or I will let you know immediately."

Chapter Five

Rome: Present day

Constantine

For many years I had visited the archives in the Vatican, disguised as a priest to collect the data necessary for my Master's plan. I knew I had been noticed, and I knew by whom. Two vampires had been watching me on my visits, and only recently, they had invited a third, a tall and handsome beyond compare vampire from whom I could sense extraordinary powers. I knew him by his reputation. He was legendary among his own kind and mine. Marcus Verano, one of the most powerful vampires of all. It was said that he should rule the Vampire Council, but he preferred to stay on the sidelines, going where he was needed, settling disputes among his people.

Of course, I avoided contact with them. Should they have discerned what I'm about, they would have tried to either dissuade me from my task or attempted to kill me. I was not afraid of them, regardless of their powers, yet felt it would be best if I did not frequent the library again. Besides, it seemed that the Master no longer had an interest in what my research showed. Lately, I had noticed a degree of arrogance in his attitude towards me and his other followers. True, one day, he would be the most powerful man in the world, and I suppose that with that power a fair amount of assurance is to be expected, but something about him worried me—or should I say rather, that my feelings towards him worried me.

Ever since I had met Gustav, ever since that first day when we had lain in each other's embrace, I knew that my outlook on my future had been changed. Now, I was not so sure that what I was doing was right. What had seemed certain and inevitable—what I had been created for, had been groomed for, had looked forward to with unwavering anticipation—now seemed...evil, and I knew in my heart that if I was to have a future with Gustav, I would have to forsake the Master's plan for the fate of mankind.

And therein lay my dilemma.

There was no way the Master would let me leave his service, at least not alive. Not only that, I could not ignore the possibility that he would also vent his anger upon Gustav.

Without a doubt, my relationship with the man I loved had to be kept a secret. The thought of him being confronted by the Master or his minions made my blood run cold. I knew only too well what dire punishments they were capable of. The correct thing, of course, would be to stop seeing Gustav, to tell him our love affair was over. Yet, I found I could not do it, could not find the courage to tell him face to face what I knew would break his heart – and mine.

Bernard

Marcus and Roger eventually returned to Los Angeles, the young priest stopped coming to the Vatican library, and as time went by, I began to forget about him. More important was the news I had received from Marcus that our old friend Joseph Meyer was in dire straits, being held prisoner by the Wizard Brotherhood. By the time I could offer my help, however, Marcus had taken care of the situation, Joseph was released, and Darius, my one time lover, had been sentenced to death.

Ah, Darius...he affords some explanation.

Marcus had long ago told me of the Dark Forces, that band of renegade vampires led by Darius, a one-time friend of his, but who later became his arch enemy. It was a surprise to me therefore, when I came face-to-face with Darius for the first time. He was so very different from what I had imagined. Marcus had said he was fair of face, and in that he was right. But apart from his comeliness, the man had an allure that was hard to resist. I later found out that he employed magic to ensnare those he wanted – magic he had learned from the Wizard Brotherhood survivors, in exchange for their lives.

I have never been sure of why he pursued me so lustily, for I had heard it rumoured he preferred mortal men and women. But the taking of a mortal for a lover was against the Dark Forces' laws – laws ratified by Darius himself, many years before. At first, I was flattered by his attention, drawn in by his beguiling smile and honeyed voice. He was careful not to malign Marcus in front of me, even though it must have galled him to know I revered the man he hated above all others.

For a time, close to a year, we travelled Europe together, and I have to admit that the time I spent in his company was never a hardship. He could be light-hearted on occasion, witty and extremely generous. In his more serious moments, he told me that the pressure of

leading the Dark Forces and dealing with the petty squabbles some of his men would bring to him, could often become more than he wanted to bear. For that reason, he had found himself two secret hideaways where he could, for a time, rest and renew his vigour. One of these places was in Paris, the other in Berlin. He took me to visit both of them, and fine, luxurious places they were. When we were together, we spent more time in his home in Paris than anywhere else, and as every lover knows, there is no more romantic city in the world.

Completely under his spell, and in love with the city, I was easy prey for Darius, and again, I have to be honest and say that his lovemaking was not repugnant to me—far from it. Not as tender as Marcus, Darius could be demanding and at times rough in his dominance. Once, he hurt me badly, despite my protests and urging him to stop. Afterward, he was remorseful and apologised over and over for his coarse behaviour, and I was only too eager to forgive him—then. Of course, eventually I came to realise that what I felt for him was not real but was induced by the magical powers he had inherited from the Wizards. When we were apart, his allure lessened, and in those moments of clearer thought, I began to wonder why on earth I associated with the enemy of my most treasured friend.

My decision to leave him came after one evening when we hunted together for the first time. Vampires, by nature, prefer to hunt alone, unless they are partnered. Some are even territorial, threatening those who would encroach on what they perceive as their terrain. This particular night, though, found Darius and me leaving a club in Paris—Le Petit Mal—frequented only by vampires.

As we walked through the Tuilleries Gardens and I admired the lamp-lit beauty of the park, he remarked that he had not fed that day. His eyes glittered as he spied a young man walking towards us.

“He’ll do,” he muttered. He moved so fast, the young man had no time in which to react. Using his supernatural speed and strength, Darius lifted him from the path and carried him into the bushes. I followed and was surprised to see the young man fending off Darius with some well-practised boxing jabs. Instead of subduing him quickly with his hypnotic powers as Marcus had taught me, Darius stood there laughing at the young man, dodging each punch with his vampire skill.

“Darius,” I murmured, wondering why he played this game.

"Look, Bernard." His voice had a grating, mocking tone that raised the hairs on the back of my neck. "He thinks he can best me. What should be the price of his arrogance, do you suppose?" Suddenly, he stepped forward, grabbed the young man's wrists and forced him to his knees. His victim whimpered from the pain. I heard the bones crack, and he screamed out.

"Darius!" I lunged forward to stop him. "What are you doing?"

"Stand back, Bernard," he hissed at me, his fangs extended. "This little man needs to be taught a lesson —"

"Stop it," I cried, pulling at his arm. "You'll have the gendarmes upon us."

He backhanded me, sending me staggering against a tree. Then before I could intervene again, he pulled the youth to his feet and tore out his throat with one vicious, rending bite. I stared, appalled, as he sucked the young man's blood and chewed on the soft flesh of his throat. When he had done, he let the lifeless body slip from his grasp, then turned and smiled a macabre and bloody smile at me. I shuddered with horror and repugnance. Not at the sight of the blood or the shreds of flesh that clung to his teeth and lips—I am a vampire after all. No, my spirit balked at the sheer unnecessary waste of life.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because I can," he replied, his eyes filled with a sinister cruelty. With that, he raised himself into the air and was gone, leaving me alone and unsure if I should follow.

I did not.

* * * *

Not long after that night, Darius asked me to spend my life with him as a member of the Dark Forces, and immediately I knew what my answer must be. How could I ever look Marcus in the face again as one of his mortal enemy's minions?

"No," I said flatly, and without emotion. Anger flared in his eyes at my refusal. "I am sorry, Darius," I continued, "but the price of such an affiliation would be more that I could ever afford."

"You mean it would cost you your precious friendship with Marcus, don't you?" he sneered. "Perhaps he would consider it a good riddance."

I sighed and shook my head. "Why would you say so petty a thing? Marcus and I have been friends for decades."

"Familiarity can breed contempt, Bernard. Have you not ever wondered why he stays away for such a long time?"

I sighed again. "I know why he is gone for long periods of time, Darius. He is needed in many places by those who love him."

It was then that I realised the immense differences between him and Marcus. Marcus was revered and loved by his followers. Darius was feared by his, not loved, nor did he have any love for those he had seduced into following him all those years before.

Reading my thoughts, his face hardened with distaste. "You would give up all that I offer you, for the love of a man who gives you nothing?"

"Marcus has given me more than you ever could ever imagine," I replied coldly. "He gave me life when death was ready to claim me. He was with me through the change, guiding me into this new life, ensuring I survived the dangers that can claim a young vampire."

"While he filled your head with his addlepated philosophy about being gentle with mortals," Darius sneered. "About not hurting them when you feed."

"A philosophy many vampires have adopted as their own."

"Bah!" He turned from me in rage, then as swiftly looked back at me, his face once again serene and composed. "Bernard..." His voice was silky smooth. "You know how much I care for you." He reached out and drew me into his arms, kissing my lips gently. "Come with me, I beg you. We can have a marvellous life together. All will look to you as my second-in-command. You will be revered, envied –"

"But not loved, Darius," I interrupted, trying to steel myself against his charm.

"I love you," he murmured, pulling me tighter into his embrace, his hard arousal rampant against my thigh. "I will give you everything you desire. What more can you ask?"

"A truce with Marcus," I said. "An end to this hatred you have for him."

"And will that then secure you by my side forever?"

"Forever? Nothing is forever, Darius." I stepped back from his embrace. "You think that your love for me will last forever? What of all the others who have gone before me? Did you not swear to love them also, forever?"

His face darkened again. "I am offering you what no other has been offered! Take care, Bernard, that my love for you does not evaporate and become hatred. I make a very bad enemy."

"That I know. Marcus has told me—"

"Marcus...Marcus... Must I hear that name again from your lips?"

He grabbed me by the arm and brought his face to mine, his eyes burning with power—power to make me his willing slave, to bend my mind to his will, and be forever his, until he tired of me and cast me aside like he had done with so many others. Exerting every ounce of strength I had in my mind and body, I fought him. He growled with anger as he felt my resistance. His eyes burned all the brighter, searing my brain with their intensity, making my mind collapse into uselessness. His vampire power, honed over hundreds of years, enhanced by the magic the Wizards had given him, was too much for me to overcome. I fell into his arms, an unresisting vessel with which he could do anything he wished.

"Now, Bernard," he whispered against my ear. "Now you will be mine."

I don't know where my ability to thwart him came from. Later, I would ask Marcus if he had somehow known of my plight and had entered my mind, giving me the strength to defy and challenge the spell Darius had cast over me. Marcus, of course, denied it, telling me it was all my own doing—but suddenly from deep inside myself I felt a power surge through my blood.

"No!" I roared, breaking free of his embrace and his thrall. "I will not join your band of renegades, Darius. My allegiance, and my love, will always be with Marcus!"

Darius stared at me hard and long, his face first a mask of disbelief then one of intense contempt. "So be it," he snapped. "You have chosen, and I will not ask again."

For a moment, I thought he intended to summon his magic to kill me in the most painful way possible. I knew he could, and I would be powerless to prevent it. He knew it too, for I saw his eyes flicker with the intent, then he turned from me with a dismissive wave of his hand.

"Go to your beloved friend then," he rasped at me. "But know this, Bernard. I will never forget nor forgive what you have done here today. Should our paths ever cross again, I will not be so magnanimous. And when you do see Marcus again, tell him what you have cost him—a truce, perhaps a peace, with the Dark Forces. Tell him that, and see how he

regards you then!" And with that, as if to prove his powers were greater than any of ours, he disappeared from my sight in the blinking of an eye.

I stood immobile for several minutes, my mind in chaos. Had I, by rejecting his offer, ruined any chance of peace between Marcus and Darius? Could I have changed the course of our vampire history? *Only time will tell*, I thought, calming myself then, came the thoughts I longed to hear in my head, strong and clear.

Marcus.

Yes, Bernard. I was privy to your encounter with Darius. You chose wisely, my friend.

Forgive me, Marcus.

There is nothing to forgive. You must not reproach yourself for any of this. Darius used his magic to bewitch you. Your own strength saw you through, and you must know that he would never have kept his part of the bargain. A truce with me? He would never countenance it. He was lying, and you saw through his pretence.

Where are you Marcus? I need you near me, now.

I am at our home in Toulon. Meet me there.

At once...

It never ceased to give my heart a small tug when he referred to his chateau as our home. It was just one of the reasons for which I loved him so much. For which, I still love him.

I have to admit to a momentary twinge of regret at the news of Darius' death sentence. Darius, for all his evil ways, had an allure that was hard to resist, and the thought of his death, of his virile and vibrant life being cut off, was not something I could find pleasure in. I would not tell Joseph this, of course. He was understandably enraged by what Darius had tried to do – take his mortal lover from him by force. Nor did I mention my regret to Pietro. He would never have understood my sympathy for the demise of someone as devious as Darius. Sometimes, some things are best left unsaid, and all thoughts of them should be blocked from those minds that could reach them.

* * * *

Some months after the news of Darius' death, Marcus invited Pietro and me to visit him in his home in Los Angeles. Pietro had never been to the United States, and I had only been

to New York while Marcus lived there many years before. So it was with some excitement that we accepted his invitation.

It was wonderful to see Roger looking so well and now so thoroughly at ease with his vampire life. Joseph and I had a joyous reunion, and it was a source of real pleasure to see his obvious happiness with his forever companion, Micah. It seemed Joseph had told Micah all about our adventures together, for he greeted me with great warmth, telling me how grateful he was that I had saved Joseph all those years before. He had been changed, but recently, and was still coming to terms with all that it entails, but it was heartening to see the love he and Joseph had for one another.

I was struck by just how close Micah and I became in such a short time. Was it the blood we shared? I wondered. But then, we had all shared Marcus' blood in one way or another, especially Roger. And while I felt a fondness for him, I was moved to an almost brotherly love for Micah—a familial tie of some kind.

Jean-Claude I had met only once, and that a hundred years ago in New York, yet he told me he remembered my visit with fondness. His lover, Ron, was still mortal, but very much at ease amongst us.

Pietro found that amazing. "How does he cope?" he wondered aloud later, when we were alone, at dawn, in the sumptuous guest room Marcus had provided for us.

"Very well, I thought," I replied, turning down the comforter on the bed.

"But it can't be easy, knowing he's the only mortal in the room."

"Marcus says he has family issues," I told him. "His brother visits frequently and sometimes unannounced. It would be a disaster if he should find out about Jean-Claude."

Pietro nodded. "I can see that would be a problem, but still..."

"They manage as best they can, Pietro. They are very much in love, as are Joseph and Micah."

"Love conquers all, eh?" Pietro gave me a sly smile.

"As well you know."

"Indeed," he agreed, pulling me into his arms. "I've known it for over one hundred years."

"And they said it wouldn't last!"

Laughing, we tumbled into bed then fell silent as our mouths had better things to do than talk.

* * * *

The following day, the news on the television and in the newspapers was astounding. *Pope Dies in His Sleep*, the banner headlines screamed. *Pontiff Laid Low by Mystery Virus*.

Pietro threw me a worried look. "What does this mean? Should we go back to Rome?"

I shook my head. "We've seen several Popes come and go, Pietro. They'll elect a new one, and life will go on."

"But he was Pope for such a short time. What do they mean by 'mystery virus', do you suppose?"

"Just that. He might have picked up something on his visit to Africa."

Marcus joined us in the dining room. "You've heard the news?"

"Yes. We were just talking of it," I said. "What do you think of this 'mystery virus' they're giving as a reason for his death?"

"I don't like it," he muttered. "Something feels wrong about this." He stared at Pietro. "You look concerned, Pietro. What are your instincts telling you?"

"Like you, I don't like it at all," he said, glancing at me. "There were rumblings from some corners when he was elected. I know there's a lot of jealousy and power playing whenever a Pope dies, but he seemed an unpopular choice from the start."

"That's true," I agreed. "Still, it could be just a coincidence that he's out of the way already. Now I suppose whoever thought he should have been elected last time, will put forward an even stronger claim."

"Anyone we should know of?" Marcus asked.

"No one springs to mind," I replied. "Pietro?"

He shook his head. "Cardinal Firenze, perhaps, but it could be anyone, really."

"Well, no point in trying to speculate, I suppose." Marcus smiled as Roger came into the room. "Joseph and Micah are expecting us at their new apartment tonight."

"I've got their housewarming gift right here," Roger said.

"Housewarming," Pietro repeated wistfully. "I had forgotten such things."

“Yeah, well Micah’s pretty new to vampirehood,” Roger explained. “He still thinks in human terms just as I did for some time after I was changed. It’ll help ground him some if we keep up some of the old habits for just a little while. Besides, I know Ron’s bringing them something, so I didn’t want to look cheap!”

Chapter Six

Constantine

The summons came faster than I thought it would. The Master wasted no time after the Pope's death was announced. He gathered his supporters around him, of which I, of course, was one, and told us he had already secured enough votes to be elected. I found myself wishing that his news would have made me feel better than it did, but instead, a dark dread filled my mind.

So, I thought, it begins...and it is over. Now, what do I do? Do I take the coward's way out, and simply sever all communication with Gustav? Should I leave him wondering where I have gone, and what he did wrong, or do I face him and tell him we can no longer go on seeing one another? Either way, we will both be devastated. Only the night before, we had lain in each other's arms, swearing to love one another forever. A foolish promise on my part, for I knew that at any time I could be called away from him, but I meant it, nevertheless. And I so wanted to make it a reality.

There was nothing I could now do.

The Master would be declared Pope. He would use his charisma, his incredible power of oratory to sway the people to his side. Governments would fall, unable to control the people's will as He did. Before long, he would rule the world, and the end of times would begin. Nothing could stop him now.

Nothing...

He called me to his side in his private room.

"So, Constantine, it begins," he purred, his face a mask of satisfaction.

"Yes, Master."

"Are you prepared to serve what I shall become—the most powerful being in the world?"

"Yes."

His eyes narrowed as he studied my face for a time in silence. "This young man you have been seeing..." His lips curled in a faint sneer of dislike. "You will end your relationship with him. Immediately."

I stared at him, my mouth slack. Of course, he knew. My thoughts and those of all of us were as an open book to him. I could have blocked his probing, but that would have only aroused his suspicions and made me suspect in his eyes.

"I love him, Master," I said quietly.

He sniggered. "Demons do not love, Constantine. You desire him, lust for him...that is all. Although your need for sexual release is understandable, love does not come into the equation. You know what you must do. Finish it today, and make sure that any future liaisons with mortals remain just that—brief episodes, quickly forgotten."

I found myself ready to beg him to reconsider, but his stone-like countenance told me all I needed to know.

It was over...and I was desolate.

* * * *

Gustav stared at me, his face white with shock, tears staining his cheeks, his hands balled into tight fists that he clenched and unclenched as if in agony.

"What do you mean, 'it's over'?" he asked, his voice breaking. "Why, Constantine, why? What have I done? Only last night, you told me you would love me forever. How could you change your mind so quickly?"

"I'm afraid that's the part of me you don't know," I said, trying to sound glib and unfeeling. "I'm just a shallow fellow at heart. And you were wearing your heart on your sleeve when we met. I'd have been a fool not to take advantage of the situation, now wouldn't I?"

He looked at me as if he suddenly didn't know who I was, and I'm sure he did not. I stood with my hands clasped behind my back so he could not see them tremble. I wanted to reach out to him, to hold him in my arms and dry his tears with my kisses, but I could not. I dared not, or all that I feared for him might come true. I could not put him in danger. It was

best for he to hate me now and get on with his life. Perhaps, one day, he might meet someone worthy of him.

“Constantine...” His whisper of grief tore my heart in two.

“Cheer up,” I said brightly. “We’ve only known each other for a few short months. You’ve a lifetime to get over it.”

He gaped at me. “You bastard,” he cried and slapped me hard across the face.

That’s good, I thought, as I pretended to reel back from the blow. *Get him to hate me as quickly as possible*. I waited until he had slammed the door to my apartment behind him before I allowed myself to weep.

* * * *

The days that followed were dark indeed. I should have been elated. Wasn’t this what I had waited for all my life—my true calling? Instead, I found every word the Master uttered now grating on my nerves. He seemed over-blown, unreal, in a way I could not understand. What had happened to my loyalty to him, the One who would lead the world into its days of glory?

He watched me sometimes through narrowed eyes, as if he had divined my doubts, but he said nothing, other than what was necessary to prepare for his ascendancy to the Pontiff’s throne. Every day, we were surrounded by cardinals and bishops, guards, reporter, photographers. It seemed as if all humankind had descended upon our once private and numinous world. The Master revelled in it, of course. This was what he had waited for all these years, and unlike me, he had no doubts about his calling. He took a certain delight in hearing himself called ‘the handsomest Pope ever’ and ‘sex-symbol in the Vatican’. He was handsome without a doubt—time had not ravaged him or lessened his charisma.

Cardinal Enrico Ferriti would take the name Pius, after the longest reigning Pope in history. “But I shall reign even longer, Constantine,” he told me with a feral grin. “Far longer than any living being—even until the end of days. This is what it’s all about Constantine—power, real power. The power to change the world, change men’s destinies, change the way of things, forever.”

I shuddered at his words, words that would have once given me joy. What had happened to me? Why did I now look on him as though he were my nemesis rather than my liberator?

As hard as I tried to push the answer from my mind, it came to me time and time again. Gustav.

His face hovered in front of my eyes every minute of the day. The touch of his lips, the smile that made his eyes shine, the sweet way he would put his hand on my shoulder when we walked together. Now all of that was lost to me – and I found I could not bear it.

But why?

Demons are not supposed to have these deep feelings. Love does not come so easily to us. The monstrous side of us which makes us cold and uncaring of another takes love and compassion and makes those qualities seem insignificant. It should have made me impervious to sorrow. Hard as I tried to invoke that part of me, I could not. He had touched my heart, and the human side of me had responded to his loving nature. I loved him, needed him to make me whole, and because of my calling, he was lost to me, forever.

* * * *

Bernard

The time we spent in Los Angeles as guests of Marcus and Roger was indeed a joy. They and their friends went out of their way to ensure we enjoyed all that the city's nightlife had to offer. Still, the most pleasant times for me were when we were joined by Jean-Claude, his mortal lover Ron, Joseph and Micah. We sat in our small group, the eight of us, drinking wine and talking.

Micah, only recently one of us, but so in love with Joseph that he hung on his every word, was a delight. Still human in his mannerisms and given to bursts of spontaneous laughter, he was like a breath of fresh air in our sometimes too-long existences. I was happy for Joseph. He had suffered much in his lifetime and truly deserved the love and happiness he had found with Micah. The small intimate party they gave in their new apartment to celebrate their first year together was, for me, the highlight of our stay in Los Angeles.

We were able to watch the consecration of the new Pope on TV. Pietro was puzzled by the choice, as were a number of people. Cardinal Enrico Ferriti...not a name he or I was familiar with, yet from somewhere in my memory, Ferriti's face struck a chord. I just could not quite place the where or the when.

Pietro saw him first. He gripped my arm and pointed. "Look, Bernard. The priest from the library, the one standing by the Pope's side. Is it not him?" And it was. There was no mistaking the tall, young, handsome man who stood quietly by Ferriti as he blessed the crowd of well-wishers gathered around them.

"Marcus," I exclaimed. "That's the priest we told you about," I said. "The young man who has been coming to the library for over a hundred years."

"He looks good for being over a hundred," Roger remarked. "Is he a vampire do you think? Oh wait..." He chuckled softly. "Duh...he couldn't be out in the sunlight if he was."

"Not a vampire, certainly," Marcus said, gazing at the young-looking man intently. "But only part human..."

"And Ferriti?" I asked.

"Old...he's very old." Marcus frowned as he stared at the new Pope's handsome face. "Does he not look familiar to you, Bernard?"

"There is something about him," I agreed. "The name, no, but the face...like someone I vaguely knew many years ago."

"Yes, I feel that too." He paused, in deep thought, then he got up and left the room. Pietro, Roger and I continued watching the news coverage until Marcus returned some time later, a sheet of paper in his hand.

"Look," he said quietly. I took the paper from him and gasped at the image imprinted on it. "I researched old portraits of former Popes on the internet," Marcus explained. "This portrait is of Pope Alexander who ruled from 1508 to 1511 –"

"Such a short time," Pietro remarked, looking over my shoulder at the man's image. "He looks exactly like Ferriti."

"I am sure it is Ferriti," Marcus said.

"Wow," Roger muttered, his eyes straying from the image I held then back to the TV screen. "He's an immortal, then?"

Marcus nodded. "He has conquered death by some means. I would guess he must have been in league with the Wizard Brotherhood..."

"Those guys again," Roger snorted. "Man, they're really a pain in the ass!"

"Were," Marcus corrected him. "Darius' betrayal was the end of them, but they spread their knowledge of the dark arts to anyone they deemed useful. Ferriti must have some plan they approved of."

"He's waited a long time," I said.

"For the end of days," Pietro murmured, gripping my arm. "Remember, the young priest studied nothing else. The portents, the prophecies of the coming of Armageddon—"

"You mean the advent of the Antichrist," Marcus said, looking grim. "Of course, what more powerful person to sway the minds of the people could there be than the Pope himself? And if he has truly mastered the art of dark magic, there could be no stopping him."

"But stop him, we must," I said, jumping to my feet. "Pietro, we must return to Rome."

"Wait." Marcus put his hand on my shoulder. "If Ferriti really does believe himself to be the Antichrist, he must have prepared himself for every contingency. I am sure he will be heavily guarded, day and night. Look at some of the men around him. Do they look like ordinary priests to you? And we already know about one of them—half human, half demon perhaps. Ferriti has had a long time to prepare for this. Whatever we do, we must be as prepared."

"What do you suggest?" I asked, seeing the sense of his words.

"We must gather as strong a force as we can. Three or four of us will not do. I will communicate with the Vampire Council and alert them to what might happen. You and Pietro should return to Rome. Find out what you can from inside the Vatican, and report back to me anything you feel is of importance. I will forward all the information to the Council and let them decide the next step. Do not try anything on your own, Bernard." He paused and put his arms around me. "Promise me you will not confront the demon-priest."

I hugged him back. Of course, he had known of my intentions without asking. "I promise, Marcus. In my heart and mind, you are still our leader, and I will not go against your wishes."

"Thank you for that, my friend. Now, for the rest of your stay, let us put this away and enjoy each other's company!"

Chapter Seven

Constantine

For as long as I had been with the Master, his indulgences could still surprise and shock me. It seemed he cared nothing for what others might think, and indeed, even his most outrageous remarks and actions were greeted with a kind of bland acceptance by the Vatican hierarchy. His powers had grown at an alarming pace, and it seemed he could bestow his will on any man or woman he deemed worthy of his attention. His physical personality was immense, immediately changing forever the way he addressed the faithful. The stuffy pontificating that the Vatican speech writers handed him would, after he had glanced at them, be thrown away, and he would deliver his message with a flamboyant eloquence that had his listeners riveted to his every word.

He preferred to bed women, but it had never been beyond him to use a man in this way if it benefited him. He could, to echo some ancient quote, charm the birds off the trees. Few, if any, stood up to oppose him, and certainly, no one dared a face-to-face confrontation.

International magazines, eager to give him rock-star status, spread his smiling image across the covers of their weekly or monthly issues, declaring that at last the world had a Pontiff who could really reach the masses and who could bring people, especially the young, back to the Church, excited to hear the word of God. If only they knew, I thought, flipping through the pages of the Italian *People* magazine as I sat in an outside bistro I had become fond of during my relationship with Gustav. The interviews Pius had so freely given were, of course, fabrications. Obviously, he could not tell the truth. The fact that this was the second time he had been elected Pope, the first being some five hundred years ago, might just cause a stir!

If only they knew, I thought again. If only they could see what lurked beneath that smooth and smiling façade. That monster that sat impatiently waiting within him, ready to unsheathe its claws and rend the hearts from those who dared opposed it. The monster that had created me from its own sperm...my Father.

I sighed and tossed the magazine to one side. Nothing I did could help eliminate the feeling of despondency that swept over me each time I thought of Gustav. Every day, I longed to call him, to waylay him on some pretext or another.

I looked up as a shadow fell across the table.

"Gustav..." I gasped out my surprise at seeing him, standing there.

"Constantine." He neither smiled nor inclined his head in greeting but stood stock still, his piercing blue-eyed stare making me tremble with longing.

"Please sit," I said. "How are you?"

He sat, but his expression remained cold. "If you really wanted to know the answer to that, you would have called me," he said.

"Gustav... I am so sorry —"

He held up his hand to silence me. "Please... It's a little late for all that. And besides, I don't believe for one moment that you're sorry. You're such a shallow fellow, after all. I recall you saying that just before I left."

"Gustav... *caro*..." I gazed at him, trying to see some sliver of forgiveness in those ice-blue eyes. "I know you hate me. You have every right to, after what I did. But, believe me, it was for the best. I could not endanger your life along with my own."

"What the hell are you talking about?" he rasped.

"I can't tell you the details. Suffice to say that I am not what I appear to be."

His laughter was brittle. "No need to tell me that!"

"All I ask you to believe is that what I did, I did for you."

He sighed, but his eyes softened a little as he met my gaze. "Constantine, what are you talking about?"

I shook my head miserably. "I can't tell you, Gustav."

"Is this something to do with your position as Pope Pius' bodyguard? I saw you on TV," he added. "You were standing next to him."

"It's something like that, yes."

"But I don't understand why you had to break off our relationship. Surely there are other gay men in his service?"

"There are...but this is different."

His eyes widened. "You're his lover?"

"No!" I shouted the denial so loudly several people turned their heads to stare at me. "No," I repeated, lowering my voice. "Believe me, *nothing* could be further from the truth. Oh Gustav, forgive me, but I still love you. It's just that it is impossible, the way things are..."

He was silent for a moment or two, then he said. "I have a new apartment a short distance from here. Come with me, just this once...please."

Every part of my brain screamed 'No!' but my heart whispered, 'Yes', and as I rose from the table and followed him out onto the street, I could hear only what my heart longed for.

His apartment was tiny, but clean and neat, and smelled of fresh herbs. His lips were soft and moist, his skin as fragrant as I remembered, and I felt myself falling helplessly in love with him all over again. We clutched at each other, hands groping, stroking, mouths joining, tongues meshing, caressing... Oh, but the touch and feel of him was glorious. I wanted to shout with joy and weep from happiness.

"Gustav," I murmured, my lips at his ear. "I love you so..."

"Then come back to me," he whispered. "Come back so that I can love you each and every day. I miss you terribly, Constantine. You're all I think of, all I want, night and day."

His tears were wet against my cheek, and I tried to kiss them away. I lifted him into my arms and carried him to the bed. His hands caressed my face, his eyes locked on mine, pleading, imploring... I opened his shirt and kissed each nipple, teasing them gently with my lips and tongue, causing him to gasp with pleasure. *That's right*, I thought. *Bring him the ecstasy he needs from you now. Why refuse him what we both desire?*

I slipped his shirt from his shoulders and unfastened his pants belt. I pulled down his zipper so that I could take his hard cock in my hand and feel it throb in my grasp. He groaned as I put my lips to the head then very slowly brought all of him into my mouth.

"Aaah..." A long groaning sigh escaped him as he raised his hips to meet the downward thrust of my mouth. His hands raked my hair, pulling me closer, making me take him deeper into my mouth. We paused momentarily to tear the clothes from one another, then I fell upon him, devouring every inch of his sweet body, while he writhed under me, whispering words of love and longing. My heart filled with happiness while my blood boiled with desire.

Yes...this was what I needed, wanted, above all else

"Constantine..." His eyes were filled love for me...for *me*. What would my life be without him?

"I love you, Gustav," I whispered, gathering him in my arms and taking his lips in a kiss that seared itself into my demon soul.

"I love you, too," he gasped when at last I freed him from that kiss. "Fuck me, Constantine. Make me yours again, *liebbling*. I want to feel all of you inside me. Over and over again..."

The passion that overwhelmed us both had us trembling in each other's arms. His hands shook as he reached behind him to retrieve and tear open a condom packet. Oh, how I longed at that moment to tell him we had no need for that kind of protection, that my blood was immune to all human disease. He must have seen a trace of that yearning in my eyes for he reached up to stroke my face gently.

"It's best until we get tested," he murmured. I nodded and slipped the condom over my throbbing flesh. "Here..." He squeezed a generous amount of lubricant onto my fingers. "Put it in me."

I leaned over him as he lifted his legs over my shoulders. I let the lube warm on my fingers before inserting one, then two, into his tight anus. He squirmed down on my fingers, his hands clutching at my arms, his eyes filled with lust and the anticipation of our joining. He gasped as the head of my cock entered him, his grip tightened about my arms, his teeth worrying at his lower lip. I went slow, stretching him gently, letting him draw me in at his own speed. He released my arms, his hands sliding down the sides of my torso to cup my buttocks. He pulled me in deeper. All the while, his eyes remained locked on mine, a small wanton smile playing on his soft lips. I bent down to capture them in a kiss that had him moaning into my mouth. His hands tugged at my hips and I slid even deeper inside his moist slick heat.

"Constantine..." He said my name over and over as I fucked him with long smooth strokes. His arms now wrapped around my neck, he clung to me as our rhythm intensified, carrying us to heights of carnal ecstasy I know I had never experienced before. Never in my long existence had I felt so completely enthralled by any other, so totally and utterly in love as I was with this sweet and extraordinary man.

"Gustav!" His name was forced from my lips as I felt every muscle in my body stiffen with the onset of my orgasm. Tingling jolts of exquisite ecstasy coursed through me, and a long wrenching cry of sheer rapture was torn from me as I exploded inside him. Behind my closed eyelids the world became a dizzying blaze of colour. Gustav's body shuddered under me as his climax took control of him. His arms tightened around my neck, his mouth sought mine, and he held me as our bodies were racked by spasm upon spasm until every vestige of our seed was drained from us, the warmth of his semen coating both our torsos. I collapsed on top of him, holding him pressed to me as if I would never let him go.

His tender murmurs of pleasure, the soft kisses he laid on my lips and neck as we lay in blissful contentment within the haven of each other's arms, made me realise what a fool I had been to ever consider leaving him and giving up the only true happiness I had ever known.

And after he had fallen asleep in my arms, his gentle breath warming my chest, I resolved, although I yet had no idea how it could be done, that against all my better judgment, I would leave the Master's service and make a life with Gustav.

* * * *

My absence from my father's company had been noticed. When I returned, he cast a look of suspicion my way, and I was quick to notice that the other guards were wary of me.

"Constantine," he purred from his position at the dining table. "Come sit with me, and tell me about your day."

I did as he bid but held a question in my expression. "My day, Master?"

"You must address me as Your Holiness, Constantine." The hardness in his eyes reproved me though his words were said mildly enough. "Master sounds...wrong, now."

"Yet, you are still my Master."

"I am your Father, Constantine, first and foremost. You are my son and heir."

I laughed bitterly. "Heir to what, Your Holiness? When your reign is ended, there will be nothing to inherit."

He glared at me, his eyes flashing with derision. "Surely, you do not believe all that is written? There will be no Day of Judgment, Constantine. At least, not as the theologians

understand it. You know as well as I do that the destiny of mankind is ruled by whoever is the strongest. I have not schemed and planned for this to have it end because of prophecy."

"Even though a part of the prophecy foretells your ascendancy?"

"I have made that part become a reality. The words uttered by prattling fools centuries ago have served their purpose. My powers brought me to this place, and I intend to stay here for all time. Now..." He fixed me with a baleful look. "You have disobeyed me. This mortal youth you have been seeing again..." He smiled cruelly at my gasp of surprise. "Don't look so shocked, Constantine. Your eyes give you away, and you know I can see into your mind — see it filled with your love, or should I say lust, for him."

"He means nothing to me," I said. "He is a passing diversion, that is all."

"Don't lie to me!" His face grew flushed with anger. "That is a very foolish tactic, as well you know."

"I broke off the relationship when you became Pontiff..."

"Another lie... You went back to his apartment today."

I knew there was no point in denying his accusation, yet I had to protect Gustav somehow. "He begged me to. Father, please don't harm him. He knows nothing of what I am. He thinks I'm one of your bodyguards, that's all. He is an innocent —"

He roared with laughter. "Oh Constantine, are you really so foolish? No one is innocent. The boy knows you are close to me and is using you for his own ambitions."

"His ambitions?"

"Ambitions he has to move in the highest of circles. To be invited to wine and dine with the echelon of Rome. He sees you as a free pass to realms that before he met you, he could only dream of."

"Gustav is not like that," I snapped. "I daresay he would be bored out of his mind in the company of the elite of Rome. He is a scholar and extremely intelligent. He would have nothing in common with those who move in the highest of society's circles."

He smirked at my indignation. "Hmm...he sounds like someone I would like to meet."

I gasped at the implication. "Please, Father... Don't harm him. I promise to never see him again, if you will just let him be."

"He means that much to you?"

I grew wary. If I admitted I still loved Gustav, I might expose him to danger. I had gleaned over the years the power to close my mind to others like me. My father had been able to penetrate my mind when my guard was down, but now, knowing that he was probing my thoughts for answers, I willed into place the mental barrier I had refined long ago.

"I told you, he is a pleasant diversion," I said, evenly. "An extremely pleasant diversion, but that is all. He is sweet, unspoiled—an innocent, as I said before. But I know there is no future in it. He would die of shock if he knew what I really am."

He chuckled, a sinister sound without humour. "Then why are your thoughts closed to me now? If, as you say, you have ended the relationship, why can't I feel your sadness over the fact you will not see him again?" He shook his head slowly. "You are still lying to me, Constantine, and if I cannot trust you, my own son, then what must I do with you?"

I shrugged. "Do with me what you will, Father, Master, Your Holiness—whichever you prefer." My tone grew sharp, indifferent. "You are the all-powerful one, after all. I am merely your servant, even if I am your son."

"You are also insolent." His face filled with anger again. "Do you know what I can do to you, should you betray me?"

"Only too well..." I shuddered as I remembered the horrors of the past. When those who had tried to usurp his power had suffered endless torture, screaming for death as they watched their own bodies being torn apart, inch by excruciating inch. "You have the power of life and death over all of us."

"And you are mindful of the fact that right here in the Vatican remain the instruments of torture used on traitors in years past?"

"Yes." I had seen those terrible dungeons. Those evil places where men and women had been subjected to the vilest abuse. Relics of times past, yes, but still there and still a viable threat from one who would not hesitate to use them.

"Do you think your little scholar would be interested in seeing those relics of the past, Constantine?" He smiled as he watched the blood drain from my face. "Very well, I think I just had my answer. Banish all thoughts of leaving my service, my son, or your lover will perish in the most fiendish way. Do you understand?"

I bowed my head in defeat and nodded my understanding.

That night, as I lay awake in my bed, staring up at the ceiling, for the first time in my life, I contemplated murdering my Father. He had shown me his true worth, and now, it amounted to very little in my eyes. He didn't know it yet, but he had made a grave mistake by threatening Gustav. My Father might be more powerful than me, but he was not invincible. I knew his weaknesses, and if he dared to hurt the man I loved, I would not hesitate to make use of my knowledge. He had admitted earlier that he could not penetrate my mind when it was closed to him. From now on he would be allowed to read my thoughts only when I wanted him to and only when my thoughts were of inconsequential things.

Everything else I would keep hidden from him.

* * * *

As the weeks passed, I kept my thoughts of Gustav locked securely in my mind. His Holiness did not ask about him again, and I, of course, never mentioned his name. I was content in the fact that Gustav and I had renewed our relationship. His apartment had become our place of assignation, and we spent many long and joyous hours there. Oh, if I could but tell you of the rapture he brought me each and every time we were together. Yes, I could describe the lovemaking for you, and no doubt, titillate your senses with my descriptions of his sensuous body wrapped around mine. But, even more rapturous than the sex were the moments immediately after when we would lie in each other's arms, and he would whisper to me his words of love and trust. My heart would swell to the point of bursting with happiness, and I would hold him tightly in my embrace, ready to ward off anyone or anything that dared destroy what we had together.

My father, meanwhile, proceeded with his plans. So consumed was he by them that, for a while at least, he forgot what he considered to be my indiscretions. Strangely, it never occurred to me to doubt that my father was what he said he was. He was hundreds of years old, had powers far beyond those of mortal men, and could bring anyone he wanted to his side—celebrities, presidents, royalty...all seemed to court his favour. Whether they did it out of fear of him or simply because he willed it, I was never sure, but day after day, month after month, the Vatican was crammed and bustling with visiting dignitaries from far and near.

Then, one day, he called a meeting of those of us closest to him. His face, as he stood before us, was a mask of hatred and rage. What he had to say to us was not for mortal ears, and so all doors were closed to the ordinary servants and priests.

"I have received a communication from members of the Vampire Council," he said, his voice strained with tension and indignation. "They dare to threaten me...me!"

"Threaten you, Your Holiness?" I asked, with some interest.

He gave me a withering look. "Yes Constantine, they say they are aware of my plans to lead the world to the brink of the end of days. They also say that they will do everything in their power to stop me." His eyes swept over everyone in the room. "How, I ask, could vampires possibly know of what we plan to do here? Who amongst you has been in contact with them? Who has betrayed me?"

Everyone looked as surprised as they ought to be. Of course, I knew none of them had been in touch with any vampire. I assumed that the two who worked in the archival library had recognised me as the same man who studied there over one hundred years ago. They must have seen me several times since, in the Vatican or on my Father's TV appearances. I was always with him on those occasions. They would have to be deaf, blind or very stupid not to have put two and two together.

"There are two vampires working in the library," I said. "They must have recognised me from the times I studied there over the years. Seeing me close to you must have aroused their suspicions. If they reported what they'd seen to the Vampire Council, I'm sure an investigation was undertaken."

"Without our knowledge of what they were doing?" Father was fairly seething as he glared at me. "Your carelessness may have put my plans in jeopardy."

"I was only following your instructions," I pointed out, unwilling to let him put the blame on my head. "You needed the information you said, pertaining to the prophecies leading up to Armageddon."

"Bah!" He waved at me dismissively. "I have no need of information. I am the one who will prophesise the end of days—the one who will bring about Armageddon, in my own time! Those two vampires must be dealt with. Constantine, see to it!"

By see to it, he meant take as many men as I needed and eliminate the vampires. Easier said than done, I thought, knowing only too well the legendary vampire strength and ability. I was not at all pleased that he would give me this kind of dirty work to do

“Would it not be better done discreetly?” I asked, as civilly as I could.

“And just how do you propose to do that?” he asked with a sneer on his lips. “How do you kill vampires ‘discreetly’?”

“I will have to think on it and plan carefully,” I replied. “But it would not do to barge into the archives and stake them in full view of everyone there, now would it?”

He studied me carefully with an expression that was not at all fatherly. “Constantine,” he said slowly. “Your attempts at humour begin to annoy me.” He waved his hand around the room. “I can call on anyone here to do my bidding, if you will not. Don’t think that because you are my son that I shall be any more lenient with you than any of my other followers who fail me. Dispose of the vampires quickly and with any method that will ensure they cannot rise again. I trust you know how to do this?”

“Yes, your Holiness.” There was no point in getting into a war of words with him. He was right. There were many who would willingly, and with great alacrity, take my place at his side. If I was beginning to have second thoughts as to the wisdom of being in his service, I was sure I was in the minority. As I looked around at the hard faces of those others in the room who now regarded me with some wariness, I knew there was not one there to whom I could look for support. At the same time, I felt it was a huge mistake to kill the vampires. The news of their disposal would only anger the Vampire Council...

My Father’s lips grew tight with impatience. “You still hesitate. Why?”

“I was wondering how the Vampire Council will react to having two of their kind killed. What if we simply dismissed them from service.”

“No! They may know too much and could still be a danger even outside these walls. Eliminate them, and quickly. And, Constantine...” He paused and gave me a wicked look. “Remember, I know of someone very precious to you, my son. I should hate to see you bereft of the one who brings you so much pleasure.”

I was careful not to let him see the hatred I felt in my heart at that moment as I stared back at him. With a sharp bow of acquiescence, I turned and left him with his sycophants, who no doubt gloated at what they perceived to be my humiliation.

* * * *

The archival library was immense, and it took me some time to locate the vampires. When they saw me approach them, they stood their ground, and even though I had blocked my mind from their thoughts, I could tell they knew only too well the purpose of my visit. The younger one took a defensive position slightly in front of his companion and sent a quiet snarl of warning my way.

"Pietro," the other said, his hand on his friend's arm. "I am sure the priest only wants to talk."

"You know who I am," I said.

"We know who you were," the one named Pietro said, still in defence mode. "Who are you now, Demon?"

I motioned that they should follow me to a more private part of the library, and after exchanging glances, they accompanied me to an ante room used for storage.

"My name is Constantine," I said, closing the door behind me. "I am the Pope's son —"

"His son? But you are —"

"Your names, before we proceed. Pietro and...?"

"Bernard," the taller of the two said quietly. "What is it you want of us?"

"His Holiness has received a warning from the Vampire Council. I presume their information comes from you."

Bernard nodded. "And you have come to stop us? That will not be an easy task."

"I am aware of vampire ability and strength," I said. "But you must realise the Pope has an army of faithful followers who will do his bidding without question."

Pietro looked at me sceptically. "And you, his son, do you not do his bidding also?"

I hesitated. Would they believe me when I told them of my change of heart? "You are lovers?" I asked.

"Yes," Bernard replied.

"These past hundred years," Pietro added with pride.

I allowed myself a wry smile. "I have a lover. A mortal man whose life may be in danger if I do not fulfil my Father's wishes. In order to protect him, I need your help."

"Our help?"

I could tell I had amazed them with that last statement. "My Father has ordered your deaths. I am to be your executioner."

Now Pietro's snarl was not as quiet as before. "You think you can take us, Demon?"

"I told you my name is Constantine."

"I don't care what your name is —"

"Pietro, calm yourself." Bernard again put a steadying hand on his lover's arm. "I don't think Constantine plans on trying to kill us." His dark blue eyes studied me carefully, and I felt his mind probing mine. In order to satisfy his curiosity, I let him in. "Ah," he murmured. "Now I understand. Gustav...he is very handsome."

"And a wonderful human being," I said quickly. "I almost lost him once. I couldn't bear it if what is to happen would take him from me again."

"Just what is going to happen?" Bernard asked.

"I think you already know the answer to that."

"He truly has that kind of power?"

I nodded. "His power is already shaping the future. Heads of governments are only too eager to listen to him."

"But surely the people cannot want yet another war," Pietro said, with a heavy sigh.

"This will be a religious war," I told them. "He will use the unrest and suspicion that already exists between East and West. The clash of cultures and religion has already proven to have catastrophic effects on the human psyche. There is so much hatred among the extremists on all sides."

"Are you saying you disagree with what he plans to do?"

I nodded. "There was a time when I thought that my only purpose in life was to be at his side when he led the armies of conflict to their final battle. I thought my heart would swell with pride when all nations would bow down before him. This is what I thought I was born for...but now... now, I sense in him something of the charlatan."

Bernard frowned thoughtfully. "You mean, he is not the Antichrist?"

"I think he wants us to believe he is. But what he is, is no more than I am — a demon — a very old demon, with some very impressive powers. But is he the Antichrist? I never thought I would ever say this, but no, I don't believe he is."

Pietro looked at me warily. "How do we know you are telling us the truth?"

"I have opened my mind to Bernard, and I will to you also, if it will convince you that what I say is the truth."

He looked at Bernard, who nodded, then turned to me. "What is it you want us to do?"

"I want you both to leave here immediately, before it's too late. If you stay, and I don't kill you, his men will."

"Why are you sparing us?"

"Because I want you to protect Gustav, and because what I must do, will most likely result in my death. When that happens, I want to know he is safe."

Bernard's sardonic smile showed the tips of his fangs. "And you would trust vampires to protect him?"

"I know you are followers of Marcus Verano."

Pietro gasped. "You know of Marcus? But how?"

"Marcus exists even in demon lore." I laughed without much humour as I continued. "His philosophy of compassion is talked of, if not conformed to. For that reason, yes, I trust you with Gustav's life."

"Then we will do our best to ensure his safety."

"I will tell him I want him to meet two friends of mine—"

"After dark."

"After dark—of course. And when you are sure he is no longer in any danger, I would ask that you allow him to forget you—and all that has happened."

"And what of his memories of you?"

I felt the tears well in my eyes as I replied, "If all I hope for fails, he must forget he ever knew me."

Chapter Eight

Bernard

Naturally, I immediately formed a mind link with Marcus to inform him of all that had transpired that day. He was surprised but said that he would inform the Vampire Council of this new development.

Do you think you can trust Constantine? he asked

Because of his love for his mortal companion, Gustav, yes I believe we can trust him.

Have you spoken with the mortal yet?

No. Pietro and I will meet with him at the café he and Constantine frequent. We will be introduced as old friends of the family. Constantine does not want to alarm him unnecessarily – at first anyway.

Be careful then, old friend. Watch out for those who might already know of this plan.

His warning was well taken, for I was already worried that what Constantine planned might just be known to the Pope and his henchmen. If indeed he was not what he purported to be, then his need for total dominance of those who might usurp him might just force him to take quicker action than he intended. Yet, Constantine seemed secure in his mind that he had not been spied upon or followed as we approached the café that night.

We returned to the Vatican archival library one last time to pick up a few of our belongings. A risky move, yes, but we knew that if in any danger, we could use our vampire speed and agility to escape quite easily. Pietro nudged my arm as I was rifling through a stack of papers I had been using to document my findings on vampire lore.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Cardinal Firenze approach. A large, rotund man, he was difficult to miss, and truth to tell, I had always liked him and so was glad that we could at least say our goodbyes to him.

“Bernard, Pietro, you are working late.”

“Actually, your eminence, this is our last night in the archives,” I told him. “Pietro and I have secured positions elsewhere.”

"But I am sorry to hear that," he replied with some sincerity. "You have always been the most dedicated of our employees here. So many changes here of late." He eyed us appraisingly. "Would this have anything to do with the new Holy Father?" Pietro and I cast uneasy glances at each other, and Firenze sighed. "I thought it might. So many good people are leaving, unable to stomach what is happening here. I pray to God each day and night that He will put an end to it."

"An end to it?" I asked.

"Surely you have noticed how Pius has deviated from the teachings of the Church, and has surrounded himself with, what I can only describe as, thugs."

If he only knew the truth.

"Many of us are in disagreement with his worldly philosophy but are powerless to have change his ways. The man fancies himself a celebrity as if this was Hollywood and he the leading star." He shook his head sadly. "We are losing the sanctity of this most holy place. Such vulgarity and self-aggrandisement have no place in God's house."

"I am sure that God will rectify things in His own way," I said, trying to placate the old man.

He nodded, then raised his hand to bless us both. "Go with God, both of you," he murmured. "I pray that your new positions are happy ones."

And with that, he passed on his way. Pietro and I beat a hasty retreat out into the darkness and on to our appointment with Constantine and his mortal lover.

"Just as well holy blessings don't have the effect on us as many people think they do," Pietro said with some irony as we hurried through the darkened streets. "But it did give me a shiver or two," he added with a chuckle.

But what the Cardinal had said made me wonder just how many in the Vatican felt the same way. Not in hundreds of years had a Pope ever been dethroned from the most powerful position on earth. Could it really come about now?

* * * *

Gustav was every bit as charming as an amorous Constantine had told us he was. I began to wonder just how much of the demon remained in Constantine. Was it his love for

Gustav that had made him change his mind about his Father's claims to be the Antichrist? It was obvious to both Pietro and me that Constantine was deeply in love with his mortal lover – and Gustav...well, his eyes shone with joy each time he looked at our demon ally.

Of course, we did not forget the element of danger that now surrounded all of us. When Pope Pius discovered that his son had let us escape his death sentence, he would no doubt seek to hunt us down and finish the job. What his punishment would be for Constantine, I shuddered to think. But for the moment at least, all this had to be hidden from Gustav. If we were to be his protectors, it had to be done without his knowledge of the reasons for it. However, it seemed Constantine had other ideas.

"Gustav," he said quietly, taking his hand after he had introduced us to him. "There are certain things that now I feel you should know..."

Pietro and I exchanged worried glances. "Constantine," I said. "Is this wise? If you are about to reveal the truth of yourself, and perhaps Pietro and I, should we not go somewhere less public?"

Gustav looked at him sharply and gave out a nervous laugh. "The truth of yourself? What are you going to spring on me this time?"

Constantine gazed at me for a moment or two, then he said, "You are right, of course. Can we go to your apartment, Gustav? It's only a short walk from here."

"Sure..." Gustav gave Pietro and me a worried smile. "Don't keep me in suspense too long, though. You've got me on edge."

I knew that whatever possibilities Gustav was thinking of at that moment, what he was about to hear would stretch the boundaries of his imaginings for all time.

Once we were seated in his small but comfortable apartment, and he had politely offered us some wine which we gladly accepted, I could not but feel that this was not a good idea. I found myself reaching out to Marcus, bringing his mind to the awareness of what was happening. To my surprise, he did not seem agitated about what Constantine was about to divulge.

Perhaps it is for the best, his voice whispered in my mind. The mortal boy is stronger than you think. Probe his mind gently. Although he loves Constantine, he is already aware of the fact that there are problems in knowing him.

"Gustav..." Constantine's voice was low and husky with emotion.

"Wait." Gustav looked at Pietro and me. "This is going to sound rude, but it might be easier if Constantine and I were alone. I mean, I really don't know you, and –"

"No, Gustav," Constantine said, more clearly now. "They must hear this in order to protect you when I am gone."

"Protect me? From what? Where are you going?" Gustav now looked at us for explanations.

"Listen to him," I said quietly. "Try to open your mind to the impossible."

Gustav looked at us all, from one to the other, as if he could see the answers to his many questions in our serious expressions. Then he shrugged, and said, "Go on, then."

Constantine drew a deep breath, and I felt sympathy for him as he prepared to disclose his secret life to the man he loved and could now lose in the glimmer of an eye. Just how many mortals are willing to overlook the fact that their boyfriend is a demon? Not many.

"Gustav," he began again. "You know that I am close to His Holiness, Pope Pius. What you do not know is that I am, in fact, his son."

To say Gustav looked surprised by this revelation is putting it mildly, to say the least. His eyebrows shot up almost into his hairline, his jaw dropped – then he let out a great shout of laughter.

"Oh, Constantine – that's it? Do you know how many young men and women are going about Rome declaring just that? It's no secret that the handsomest Pope ever has had a string of mistresses over the years – some of them were bound to produce offspring!" He ignored our looks of surprise at his outburst and leaned closer to Constantine. "Now when I think about it," he murmured. "There is a resemblance."

Constantine shook his head. "I am his only son, Gustav. The Pope is sterile and cannot impregnate a woman without...help."

"What kind of help?"

"In vitro fertilisation, during which a spell was cast over the eggs and sperm."

"A spell?"

"Yes. This is the most difficult part of what I have to tell you, Gustav. You see, I should not really exist. I am an aberration. A monster conceived in a Petri dish by a master of the black arts."

Gustav seemed to recoil at those words. He sat back in his chair, his face pale, the corner of his mouth twitching nervously. He looked quickly at Pietro and me—perhaps to see if we were in on what had to be a joke of some kind. When he saw that we were staring back at him with no hint of humour in our expressions, he grew even paler.

Bernard... I heard Marcus murmur in my mind. Perhaps now would be a good time to soothe his mind. Use your powers to make him feel he is not in imminent danger.

I reached out to Gustav, probing his mind, and found a maelstrom of confusion and fear racing through his brain. Gently, I used my vampire power of seduction, normally used to dispel a mortal's fear of being confronted by one of us, but this time to calm him in the face of what Constantine was now telling him. The moment when he discovered Pietro and my true identities would certainly require another dose, but right then I concentrated on the matter at hand. I relaxed a little as I saw the colour return to his cheeks and his composure ease a little.

"How can you call yourself a monster, Constantine?" he asked, his voice steady and firm again. "Surely, you don't believe what some evil person told you?"

"Unfortunately, it is true, my love. I know that the subjects of black magic, wizardry and demons are thought to belong in fantasy stories, but there is another world out there, Gustav, not so far away from what you perceive as the only reality. Believe me, if I could change any of this, I would. My existence was brought about for one purpose only—to aid our present Pope achieve his ultimate goal."

"Which is?"

"To rule the world...as the Antichrist."

"Oh, come on!" Gustav again looked incredulous. "That old fairy story? There is no such person as the Antichrist, Constantine. It's a fable dreamed up by some dried up old kill-joys to scare us into walking the straight and narrow. I stopped believing in all that years ago."

"You may be right about that, at least," Constantine said, glancing for a moment at Pietro and me. "All my life I believed that the man I called Father and Master was what he proclaimed himself to be, but recently, my mind has been filled with doubt. He might actually have convinced himself of it, or perhaps when he was a child, his head was filled

with the delusion. But the fact remains, that I am what I told you. I am not fully human, and our two friends here..."

Here it comes, I thought. Quickly, I reached out once more, this time seducing Gustav into the belief that although what he was about to hear should terrify him beyond all reason, he would accept this latest revelation with a calm acceptance.

"Our two friends here are vampires."

Gustav's head swivelled in our direction. For a long moment, he stared at us, his eyes wide not with fear, but with seeming interest.

Your powers have grown strong, Bernard.

Thanks to you, Marcus, I replied.

Constantine looked the more surprised by Gustav's reaction or non-reaction, as it turned out to be.

"Vampires?" Gustav looked at each one of us with the beginning of a wry smile playing on his lips. "I'm alone in a room with a demon and two vampires. Why am I not running screaming into the night?"

"You have him in your thrall," Constantine murmured.

I nodded. "It seemed like a good idea."

"You are not in any danger," Pietro hurried to tell him. "It is Constantine's wish that we protect you should his plan go awry."

"His plan? Your plan?" he added, staring at Constantine.

"Not so much a plan, more a betrayal. At least, that is how my Father will see it." Constantine stood and picked up the wine bottle from the kitchen counter. While he filled our glasses, he continued, "Bernard and Pietro informed Marcus Verano of their suspicions regarding my part in all of this."

"Who's he...this Marcus?"

"A Master Vampire. Very powerful, very old, though to look at him he appears to be not yet thirty. He has many followers, among them, our friends here. Marcus informed the Vampire Council, which in turn sent a message to my Father saying they will thwart any attempt he makes to fulfil his ambitions. He sees them as a very real threat – which they are. They have already taken down the Wizard Brotherhood, the men who gave my Father his powers."

"Wait...wait a minute..." Gustav was shaking his head in disbelief. "This is all for real? A Vampire Council, Wizards...demons – why does no one know of these things?"

"Some do," I said quietly. "And some are made to forget. There are those in governments who know. Very few, of course."

"And they don't go around selling their stories to the highest bidder?" Gustav marvelled. "My God, think what the tabloids could make of this."

"We have safeguards to prevent that from ever happening."

He gave me a hard stare. "I just bet you do."

Marcus was right. This mortal was stronger than he appeared to be. I had lessened my control over his mind while we talked, and now his rational outlook was taking over. He believed us, but he did not trust us – Constantine perhaps. What he knew of vampires, based, of course, on myth and conjecture, made him wary of Pietro and me. I felt it was time that we took our leave.

"Pietro," I said, standing up. "Why don't we let Gustav and Constantine have some time alone now? If you need us..." I handed Gustav a slip of paper. "This is our address and number. For reasons of which you may be aware, we are only available between sunset and dawn." I smiled thinly. "I do have a cell on which you can leave a message if need be."

He managed a small smile in return. "Vampires with cell phones. Who knew?"

* * * *

Constantine

After the vampires left, a heavy silence fell between Gustav and me. While he poured himself another glass of wine, I cleared my throat, then asked, "Does this change how you feel about me?"

The chuckle that escaped his lips sounded more sardonic than perhaps he intended. Perhaps...

"Constantine," he said, after draining his glass and pouring yet another. "Of course, it changes how I feel about you. How could it not? One moment, you're my sweet and tender lover, now you say you're a demon. What next, I wonder." He stared at me for a full moment

before he added, "And why the hell aren't I scared out of my wits of you? Have you cast a spell on me?"

"I can't cast spells."

"Well, that's something, at least. What can you do?"

"Not much, I'm afraid," I said, trying to sound humorous. "I can't fly like a vampire can nor can I disappear in the blink of an eye. I am almost as strong though, and I don't have to drink blood to stay alive. I can read minds, but I can't hold you in my thrall like a vampire."

"Can you read my mind, now?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And what am I thinking?"

"That you should never have become involved with me. That you should run from here, screaming into the night—"

"Liar..." He walked towards me slowly and stopped when his mouth was only a tantalising inch from mine. "What am I thinking now?"

I felt my eyes well with tears. "Gustav..." My voice broke as I read his thoughts. "You must not love me as much. I am a monster—"

"A monster who sheds tears?" He smiled as he wiped my cheek with his thumb. "Not much of a monster, Constantine."

"Gustav, please listen to me—"

His lips silenced me while his body pressed to mine filled me with an overpowering need to possess him.

"Gustav," I mumbled into his open mouth.

"*Ich liebe dich*," he said, pulling back slightly to gaze into my eyes. "I love you, and nothing will ever change that. In my eyes, you are no monster. You are the same wonderful man I fell in love with the first time I laid eyes on you."

He pulled open my shirt and bent to kiss my chest, lingering over each nipple, licking and nibbling until I writhed with pleasure against his hard arousal. I picked him up in my arms and carried him to his bed. He clung to me, his warm, moist lips searching every part of my face, my neck and my shoulders. Together, we fell upon the bed, ripping off each other's clothes in a frenzy of lust and desire. I almost wept as he arched his smooth and supple body to mine. The warmth of his skin, the sweetness of his lips was like an aphrodisiac to my

senses. My need for him overpowered me, making me want to devour him, to taste and feel every part of him. As he reached for a condom, I stayed his hand with mine.

"Now that you know the truth of me, you should also know I carry no human disease. There is no need for protection when I fuck you."

His eyes held mine for a long moment. I knew he wondered just how much he could trust me. Above all else, I wanted that trust. He grasped my cock and wound his legs around my waist, guiding me to the entrance of his sweet core.

"Lube," he whispered, with a small smile. "That's not going in me without some help."

I reached for the tube and smeared my fingers liberally with the slick substance. Carefully, I inserted one, then two fingers, letting him squirm over them, opening himself for me. I wanted to be gentle with him. To hurt him, to see pain etched on his lovely face as before when I fucked him for the first time, was not what I desired. Yet, as I entered him, his breath caught in his chest and his hands clutched at my shoulders in seeming protest.

I started to pull back, but he murmured, "No," and tightened his legs around me, holding me locked to him. I pushed slowly forward, and he sighed as I slid in. He raised his hips to give me greater access, and I groaned with pleasure, feeling the heat of his flesh engulf my throbbing erection. His sphincter muscles tightened over my cock, drawing me deeper inside him. I lowered my head to capture his sweet lips with mine, and his mouth opened to allow my tongue access to his moist warmth. Rapture suffused my body as the thrill of his kiss went on and on, a kiss that held us both in its sensuous spell.

"Constantine," he whispered into my mouth. "I love you, my Constantine."

Unable to hold back, I groaned as my climax overwhelmed me. Wave after wave of ecstasy swept through my blood as I erupted inside him. He clung to me, arms and legs wrapped around my body, pressing himself into me as though he was willing to pass his flesh through mine. He let out a smothered cry against my lips as his orgasm took him, and our mouths met in a bruising kiss as a torrent of semen spurted up between our torsos. I cradled him in my arms, whispering, crooning my words of love in his ear, while he nuzzled my throat and slipped deeper into my embrace. Despite all the uncertainty that surrounded us, I don't think I had ever felt as happy as I did at that moment.

Later, as he lay in my arms, his warm lips gently tickling my chest, he murmured, "Your mother, Constantine...who was she?"

"I'm afraid, I don't know," I replied, stroking his hair. "I want to believe she was a warm and loving person, for sometimes inside me, I can feel her influence."

He raised his head and looked at me then kissed my chin. "How so?" he asked.

"I am a demon, as I told you. I should be devoid of all humanity, uncaring, without compassion—and yet, I am not. It's as though her genes were stronger than my father's, and imbued me with those human traits I should not have."

"Have you ever wanted to know who she was...or is?"

"Many times, but those who created and nurtured me, made sure I knew nothing of my past until I was in my teens. By then, I was resigned to my fate...until I met you."

"And now?"

"And now, my sweet Gustav, all I long for is to spend the rest of my life with you."

"Then that's what must happen—"

"But first, I must stop the mad man."

"Constantine..."

"Hush, my love." I bent to kiss his lips. "One power I did not tell you of..." I passed my hand over his eyes. "Sleep now, and if I am able, I will return to you."

Chapter Nine

Bernard

In the days that followed our meeting with Constantine and Gustav, I waited for some news from the Vatican. I don't really know what I was expecting—an assassination attempt, a scandalous revelation, some dissension amongst the cardinals, something. I just did not know what. But nothing unusual transpired, and I began to wonder if either Constantine had been silenced by his father, or if he had decided not to act against him.

"We could ask Gustav," Pietro said, growing impatient with my wondering.

"Yes, we could," I agreed. "But do you not find this silence strange? I mean, we've been gone from the Vatican for several days, no one has called to ask why we have not been in attendance."

"Probably because the Pope presumes his son has carried out his orders, and that we are now dead. He most likely has forbidden anyone to try to find out what has happened to us."

"Mmm...maybe." But I was not convinced. The Pope's decrees were not always adhered to by everyone—just as in any corporation, some of the 'underlings' loved to fly in the face of authority. One or two of the other archival attendants had been quite friendly and chatty. It seemed strange to me that they had not bothered to call.

At that moment, I could not know that the Pope himself had taken care of anyone who might 'miss' us. All memory of us had been taken from their minds. Nor could I know that even as we spoke, Constantine was a prisoner within the Vatican walls, and that the Pope's sentence upon him was death.

What I did know, however, was that his mind was closed to me. I had hoped to probe his thoughts in order that I might know just how far he had proceeded with his plan to confront his father and threaten to make public his fraudulent claims.

"Call Gustav," Pietro said, interrupting my thoughts. "He might have heard something."

I sighed. I didn't want to tell him that I had been searching Gustav's mind for just that kind of information. Pietro, even though he was a vampire, had some old-fashioned ideals about not invading a mortal's privacy. Gustav's mind, though filled with thoughts of Constantine, held no answers to my questions, being blurred as they were by the memory of their last love-making. I suppose I shouldn't have dwelled on those passionate visions, but oh well, I'm only non-human. Sighing again, I picked up the phone and punched in Gustav's number.

"Hello?"

"Gustav, it's Bernard."

"Oh. You have some news of him?"

"No. Pietro and I were wondering if you'd heard anything."

"Nothing..." He was silent for a moment or two. "What are you and Pietro doing?"

Would it come as a total surprise to him to know that vampires did exactly as humans when at home?

"Kicking back, as they say in America."

He chuckled. "I don't see you as the kicking-back type, Bernard. I figured you'd be poring over some book or other. Have you had dinner yet?"

"We don't have...dinner, Gustav."

"Oh, right." This time his laughter was a tad nervous. "Silly of me."

"Did you want to come over?"

"Would you mind? There's no one else I can talk to about any of this. I...I'll bring some wine."

As I put the phone down, I voiced my surprise to Pietro. "Gustav is on his way over. He really is quite a remarkable young man."

Pietro scowled at me. "Yes, well don't go getting any ideas."

"I wasn't. What I meant was that he doesn't seem fazed by the fact that you and I are vampires – you know, the scary undead, the Dracula contingent."

"Well, he's probably still basking in the thrall you cast over him. Besides, I've heard it mentioned, here and there, that humans find us quite sexy."

"Not only humans," I said, with a sly smile. "I happen to find you quite sexy."

"You'd better." He returned my smile and kissed my cheek. "Now demons... They're something else."

"Yes. I have to admit I find Constantine's change of heart surprising, don't you?"

He nodded. "I don't know that much about demons, but from what you've told me, he isn't acting like your regular evil one. Could his love for Gustav make that much of a change in him?"

"Perhaps. That and the fact his mother was human, and as he mentioned, her genes may have been stronger than his father's."

"What does Marcus think?"

"He tends to go along with Constantine's change of heart—for the time being anyway. He'll be here tomorrow. He is to be the Vampire Council's emissary."

"Then he'll be meeting with Pius. I can't wait to hear what he'll have to say about that."

"Perhaps he'll be able to locate Constantine at the same time."

A knock at the door stilled our conversation. Gustav. He hesitated on the doorstep for a moment.

"Can I come in?" he asked, holding out a bottle of wine as if it were an offering of some sort.

"Of course."

"I've been reading some vampire lore," he said, after smiling pleasantly at Pietro. "You need an invitation before you can enter a human's home. I wondered if that worked in reverse."

Pietro and I chuckled.

"No, you need no invitation to enter," I told him. "However, if we felt the need to protect ourselves from you, or anyone for that matter, we can set up unseen barriers that would prevent you from entering."

"That's interesting. I don't think that was in the book."

"Probably because it wasn't written by a vampire," Pietro said, taking Gustav's coat. "Is it cold outside?"

"Yes," he said, rubbing his hands together. I could tell he didn't think it was much warmer in our apartment, either.

"Sorry. I'll light the fire. We feel neither the cold nor the warmth."

"Oh. That must be strange."

"You get used to it," Pietro said. "Go sit by the fire while I pour us some wine."

"So, no word yet from Constantine," he remarked, holding his hands out to warm them over the flickering flames. "Should I be worried?"

I couldn't quite meet his earnest gaze as I replied. "He did say we might not hear from him right away. But one piece of good news—our friend, Marcus, will be here tomorrow as emissary for the Vampire Council. He will meet with Constantine's father, and we're hoping he will have some news of him then."

Gustav tried to smile, but I could see the tears glisten in his eyes. "How crazy is this?" he murmured. "Why did I have to fall in love with a man who's involved in this kind of madness? Why can't I just find the will to run from him and pretend none of this ever happened?"

Pietro handed him a glass of wine then sat near him. "May I tell you a story? I promise to keep it short, and I think it may help you." Without waiting for Gustav to say yes or no, Pietro continued. "A hundred years ago, I met Bernard, and for me, it was love at first sight. My father was very ill at the time, and Bernard was a great source of comfort to me. My love for him deepened with every passing day, and when he told me what he was, a vampire, I found it mattered not at all to me. Despite the fact that I should have—as you put it when you discovered the truth of Constantine—run screaming into the night, just like you, I did not. Just like your love for Constantine, my love for Bernard kept me from being afraid of him. Even though I knew that at that moment, my life, along with my body, was firmly in his hands, I knew innately that he would never harm me.

"Constantine loves you, Gustav. I can't pretend to know much about demons, but I sense that his human side is stronger, and for that reason, I believe he will do everything in his power to keep you safe. The fact that he respects Marcus Verano enough to have us protect you, tells me that Constantine is no ordinary demon."

Gustav gazed into Pietro's eyes for a long moment, then he sighed and nodded. "Thank you for that. I'm just finding all of this difficult to rationalise. When I'm with him, it's easy to forget what he is. How can a demon be so loving, and...well, you know what I mean?"

"We know," I said, brushing away the vision Gustav's mind had brought me of him and Constantine making love. "And we know your mind is eager to reject what, for you, has

always been fantasy, unreal. But that alternate world does exist, and it is filled with both good and evil, not unlike the 'real' world you inhabit."

Gustav shook his head as he gazed at both Pietro and me. "If anyone had ever told me that one day, I'd be sitting having a glass of wine with two vampires who were trying to console me over the fact that my boyfriend, who just happens to be a demon, is in some kind of danger... Why, that would have been good for a long hard laugh!"

"It is hard to believe, we know," Pietro said, quietly. "But try not to think of him being in danger. He may have come to some compromise with his father."

I didn't want to say anything to contradict Pietro, knowing that he was trying to put Gustav's mind at ease, but the chances of Constantine and his father finding compromise were minimal at best. Constantine wanted his father to put aside his plans to control man's destiny, something Pius believed himself born to do. That kind of belief, nurtured over hundreds of years, would be very hard to shake.

All we could hope for, at this point was that Marcus would be successful in convincing Pius that his plans would be resisted by every other supernatural power in the world.

* * * *

Marcus, accompanied by Joseph, arrived the following night. The Lady Andorra had given them her hillside palazzo, while they were in Rome. Pietro and I went to meet them there, and Marcus surprised me by asking us to accompany him and Joseph at their meeting with Pius.

"You know more of this situation than anyone else," he said. "And he will be made aware that we know of his plan to silence you both. I want to make as many chinks in his armour as I can. He thinks he's indestructible, that nothing can get in the way of what he considers is his destiny, but Constantine's rebellion, and now the Vampire Council's interference, might just make him feel a little less invincible."

"From what Constantine told us, his arrogance might be his biggest chink in his armour," Pietro remarked.

"But he does have several strong-arm men in attendance at all times," I warned. "And like Constantine, they are demons..."

Marcus shrugged. "I don't think he's likely to resort to violence while we're in the Vatican."

"And if he does," Joseph added, "we're more than a match for them. Demons are not immortals."

"But we're dealing with the man who knows our weaknesses, too," I protested. "If the meeting does not go well, he will not hesitate to make an example of us."

"We might be just a little difficult for him to explain," Marcus said.

"But surely that's the reason the meeting is clandestine," I persisted. "Who knows of it apart from us and his immediate followers?"

"Your caution is well taken, Bernard, but this meeting is crucial. Members of the Vampire Council will be linked to my mind during the process. If it goes badly, they will know they must take immediate action."

Joseph said, "The demons Pius surrounds himself with will be immobilised by us. Their minds will be shut down until we gain control."

"And you're sure he is not aware of this plan?"

"Fairly sure." Marcus smiled wryly. "There is an element of risk, of course, Bernard. But it won't be the first time we've faced that together."

"Nor the last, I'm sure," I muttered.

* * * *

Pope Pius, the Imposter, as I now thought of him, was seated on a grand chair surrounded by his 'advisors' when we entered his private chambers. For obvious reasons this could not be an open meeting. All cardinals, priests and other attendants not in his innermost circle were not present. Pius wore a fine robe of scarlet and a sneer on his face. Jumping into his mind for a second before he closed off any further probing, I had to suppress a chuckle at the thought I had captured.

He was jealous of Marcus!

True, Pius was a handsome man, and it was easy to see why the media had played on that aspect of his appearance, likening him to popular movie stars of a bygone age, but, simply put, he paled in comparison to Marcus' noble beauty and bearing. Marcus had a

serenity about him that enhanced his striking good looks to the point that all about him were diminished in appeal. If the Vampire Council had meant to intimidate Pius, they could not have sent a more able emissary than Marcus Verano. Dressed in a black suit and a white silk, polo neck shirt, he was the epitome of elegance and beauty, as always.

"So, Vampire..." Pius frowned heavily as he glared at Marcus. "You have a message to deliver?"

Marcus inclined his head slightly in an effort to appear respectful of the man's position—if only on the surface.

"I have a message from the members of the Vampire Council," Marcus said in an even tone. "After much deliberation about the news they received as to your plans and aspirations, they find it necessary to inform you that they will condemn and oppose any attempt by you to make a reality of bible prophecy. That is, the superstition involving the end of days."

"Superstition?" Pius chuckled softly. "Do you know what the true believers would do to you for that blasphemy?"

"Oh, come now, Pius." Marcus smiled, as if at a fellow conspirator. "You and I, and everyone here, know that particular prophecy was fulfilled hundreds of years ago with the fall of Rome. Armageddon may come, but most likely it will be caused by the greed of mankind, not at the whim of a man masquerading as the Antichrist."

An angry growl went up from the demons that stood close to Pius. He silenced them with a wave of his hand then leaned forward in his chair to glare with a barely suppressed fury at Marcus.

"You dare to suggest I am not who I say I am?" he hissed.

"And just who is it that you say you are, Pius?" Marcus asked, calmly, completely ignoring Pius' rage. "Do you really think the people are going to accept the highest official of the Roman Catholic Church as the Antichrist? Don't you think they might just question their faith if the man they revere as God's apostle, is in fact, his most diabolical enemy?"

"They will not be apprised of that until it is too late!"

"And that is why we are here," Marcus said. "To warn you that if you do not put aside these power plays, we will announce to the world that you are in fact, a demon—a several hundred years old demon, and that you once before held this office under a different name."

“And who would believe you, Vampire? Someone or something that people, the world over, scoff at as a mere myth—or fodder for fantasy. When would you deliver your message? On Halloween?”

“Don’t be naïve, Pius,” Marcus replied calmly. “You must be aware that there are mortals who know of our existence, and who would find your ambition dangerous to their own welfare.”

“I already have all those of any consequence in the palm of my hand,” Pius sneered. “You think they will listen to your Vampire Council? I am more powerful than all of you. Put me to the test, right now, and you will see that your threats cannot sway my will!”

“Where is your son, Constantine?” Marcus asked abruptly.

“What is that to you?”

“I should like to ask him what changed his mind about you. What did he see that transformed you from Messiah to charlatan in his eyes?”

“Be careful, Vampire,” Pius rasped, his eyes narrowing to hateful slits. “Remember, no one knows you are here. I can dispose of you and your friends in an instant, and no one will be any the wiser.”

Marcus chuckled. “You could try, I suppose. But if you think these few demons are any match for me and my companions, you are deluding yourself. If you doubt my word, send them against us, and I promise we will be gentle.”

“Fool!” Pius roared, giving the signal to his demon guards that they should attack. His expression as absolutely nothing happened was worth every piece of gold stored in the Vatican’s vaults. “Attack them, I said,” he yelled. Still the demons stood as if transfixed, staring at him with unseeing eyes.

Marcus sighed and shrugged his shoulders. “You see, Pius, or is it Enrico—or yet again, perhaps, Alexander? So many names in your lifetime and, yet, you remain the same twisted ghoul you always were, without very much intelligence.”

His face as pale as ivory, Pius stood, trembling with rage at this insult. “You will not live to see another sunset, Vampire,” he snarled. “You and all your companions will be dust before this night is over!”

I heard Pietro gasp as Pius disappeared, then Marcus and Joseph mounted the dais that housed his chair. There was no sign of him in the room nor was there any sign of a trapdoor or other escape route.

“He really did vanish in a puff of smoke,” Pietro said, with a light laugh.

“Joseph...” Marcus took one of the demons by the arm and led him towards us. “Free his mind of the thrall you placed on him. We need some information. I have a feeling he’s gone to where Constantine is held prisoner—most likely to vent his rage on his traitorous son.”

Joseph swept his hand in front of the demon’s eyes, then leaned in close. “You know me,” he murmured softly. “I am your friend. Tell me, where is Constantine?”

“In his room,” the demon replied quite affably.

“Can you take me there?”

The demon nodded and smiled at us. The effect was both chilling and comical, but we had no time to wonder at it. The demon walked smartly out of the reception room with all of us at his heels. He led us down several long corridors, and I could sense Marcus checking every door, every hallway we passed, gauging our chances of escape should this end up being a trap. You never know with demons...

Our guide stopped at one of the heavy oak doors and rapped on it a short staccato of three knocks. The door swung open, and Marcus pushed a startled demon aside, gaining all of us entry into the room. The demon snarled and made to attack us, but Marcus held him at bay with a small gesture of his hand.

Constantine stared at us from the other side of the room. He was gagged and tied to a chair. His dark eyes widened and lit with hope on seeing us then closed as his body jerked and spasmed in obvious pain.

I heard Pietro whisper, “What’s happening to him?”

“He’s being tortured,” Joseph said, his eyes scanning the room. He fixed the demon guard with a hard stare. “Give me what you hold in your hand.” He glanced at us. “It’s a remote. Constantine must be wired somehow to receive electrical impulses.” He strode towards the demon who began pounding on the remote buttons, causing Constantine to groan aloud from the pain inflicted on him. Joseph punched the demon in the face, sending him reeling across the room and dropping the remote in the process.

"If you'd given it to me when I asked, that would not have been necessary," Joseph told the unconscious demon, bending to pick up the remote.

Pietro and I hurried to untie Constantine. "Marcus and Joseph are responsible for your rescue," I said, pulling on the ropes that bound him to the chair.

"Thank you," he gasped. "But you are all in great danger here. My Father told me none of you will leave here alive."

"We will deal with that threat when the need arises," Marcus said, eyeing Constantine carefully. I knew he was probing his mind. Marcus was not about to take anything for granted, no matter how sincere the Pope's son now appeared to be. "Why is he doing this to you?"

"Because he feels I have betrayed him — which, of course, I have." He shook his head in slow disbelief. "I understand his anger. I have thrown in his face all that he ever gave me. I was created to aid him in his ambition, and now, I have turned my back on him." Constantine looked at Marcus and shrugged. "Quite honestly, I'm surprised I am still alive."

"Perhaps he cannot bring himself to actually kill you, his own son," I said.

"Perhaps..." Constantine did not seem convinced. "But another reason might be that he is not quite finished with me. He might think he can bring me back to his side."

"And can he?" Joseph asked quietly.

"No. Nothing would persuade me to help him now that I know he has lied to me and to all who believed in him. He is not what he purports to be."

"But what if he was," Marcus murmured, his eyes never leaving Constantine's. "What if he was indeed the Antichrist? Would that bring you back to his side?"

"After what he threatened to do to Gustav?" he exclaimed. "Never."

The sound of a cough behind us made us all look towards the door. Our demon guide, still under Joseph's thrall, pointed into the hall. "Someone's coming," he said, mildly.

"Close the door, and lock it," Joseph instructed him.

"Now what?" Pietro asked, with a worried look at all of us. "Do we fly out of here, or stay and fight?"

Before anyone could say another word, there came a loud hammering at the door. "Open up," someone yelled. "Vatican Security. You must open up immediately!"

“Not likely,” Marcus said. “There is not a chance of that being the Vatican Security. Pius would never take the risk of them finding out just who is in here. How would he explain away the presence of four vampires in company with his son and two of his bodyguards?”

“Open up!”

“Looks like we fly out of here. Quickly,” Marcus added as a tremendous crash sounded in our ears and the door shook on its hinges. “Constantine, Joseph and I will carry you.”

Joseph took the demon in his thrall by the arm. “Do not open the door, and when they eventually enter, you will have no recollection whatsoever of who was here.”

The demon nodded and smiled. Comical, yet chilling, again.

Marcus opened the window with a wave of his hand. “Close it behind you,” he instructed me. “Let them wonder for a while just how we escaped.”

He and Joseph grabbed Constantine by each arm, then lifted off, sailing through the open window with us right behind them. After I closed the window, I paused, hovering outside to watch with some satisfaction as several demons burst into the room, weapons drawn, only to find one of their own smiling foolishly at them and another stretched out unconscious on the floor.

Chapter Ten

Constantine

The vampires took me to the comparative safety of a friend's palazzo in the hills outside the city. I was worried about Gustav, knowing it would not take my Father very long to find out where he lived and use him as bait in order to get me to give myself up. Pietro and Bernard immediately offered to go to his apartment and bring him to the villa. While they were gone, Marcus and Joseph questioned me as to what my Father's plans were. I knew this was inevitable, and since I had already betrayed him to the point where he wanted me dead, I saw no sense in holding anything back.

"It's a simple plan really," I told them. "He has already ascended to the Pontiff's throne. From there he can issue his proclamations to the faithful masses. His speeches will become more militant as time goes by—over a period of years. As governments fall, or are changed by the electorate, he will ensure that those who replace them are his minions. Eventually, every country will be ruled by him. Those who oppose him will be disposed of before they can become a real threat."

"You said over a period of years," Marcus remarked. "How many years?"

"Decades, possibly hundreds of years. He is immortal, after all—"

"He is not immortal, Constantine," Joseph interrupted. "If he thinks he is, he is mistaken. Demons live a long time but are not immortal."

Marcus nodded. "Joseph is correct. Of all supernatural beings, only vampires can live forever—if we are not destroyed by physical means. Your father has already lived several hundreds of years. I would not give him that much more time."

I blinked in surprise. "But he says he will live forever. That is why he has waited so long before making his move."

Marcus and Joseph exchanged glances. "Could it be he's found some elixir to prolong his life?" Joseph asked.

"Possibly." Marcus shrugged slightly. "But the more likely answer is arrogance. You said he believes himself to be the Antichrist, but I got a different feeling about that when we

met him face to face. I think he knows he is not but is determined to act out the part. What he is, is a megalomaniac—and a very powerful one. Not only does he believe himself to be above the law, he is able to convince others of it. He is no different from countless others in history who have wanted to rule the world and kill all who would get in the way of their success. Hitler, for instance, is a perfect example—except, he did not have supernatural powers. There, Pius has the edge. He has the power to sway even the most sceptical of minds, and that will be our biggest obstacle to overcome.”

“What are his weaknesses?” I asked.

“You mean, apart from his arrogance?” Marcus smiled ruefully. “I would think his lifespan. Unless, as Joseph suggests, he may have found some means of prolonging his life, I would hazard a guess that he has very little time left on this earth.”

I gaped at him. “Are you serious? How can he not know this?”

“Perhaps he has blinded himself to the possibility of his death. Or, somewhere along the way, he was told he would live forever. I don’t know, Constantine. But I do know that as a demon, he will die eventually. Something I have not said before...when we were close to him, my vampire senses smelled the scent of corruption. I believe he is already dying, and that could make him all the more dangerous.”

I fell silent, thinking over what Marcus had just said. Could he be wrong? I wondered. The old man who had created me, Bartholomew, was now long dead, but had he not said that the brew he concocted gave everlasting life? Or had he simply been lying to my Father? With two evil men involved in something as heinous as this, lies and wizardry went hand in hand.

“You’re thinking that the Wizard Brotherhood may have had something to do with this,” Joseph said, no doubt reading my mind.

I nodded. “The old man responsible for my birth got his powers from them. Could they perhaps have given my Father the gift of eternal life?”

“Unlikely, as they could not give it to themselves,” Marcus pointed out. “No, your father is not immortal, Constantine.”

I looked up as Bernard and Pietro returned with my beloved Gustav. I stood, and he ran into my arms, holding me tight and kissing my neck.

"Bernard and Pietro told me what had happened to you, and what you father tried to do," he said in a rush of words. "You must never go back there. We'll leave Rome – stay with my friends in Berlin..."

"Gustav..." I held him to calm him. "These men are here to help. They are friends of Bernard and Pietro."

He turned to look at Marcus and Joseph. "Vampires, also?"

Marcus nodded. "I am Marcus Verano, and this is Joseph Meyer."

Gustav studied them both for a moment. "You are both very handsome. Are there no ugly vampires?"

"One or two," Marcus replied solemnly.

Gustav laughed and relaxed in my arms. He held out a tentative hand to the vampires, and as Marcus grasped his hand, I felt a pulse of energy course through Gustav's body. I met Marcus' steady gaze and knew he had given Gustav a special gift, acceptance and a lack of fear of the strange beings who surrounded him.

"You will both stay here tonight," Marcus said. "I have communicated your presence to the Lady Andorra, and she bids you welcome."

"My thanks to the Lady Andorra," I said. "But what if my Father discovers where we are? I don't want Gustav's safety compromised."

"I'll be safe with you," Gustav murmured, with the assurance of one who trusts too much.

"You'll be well guarded tonight," Marcus assured me. "We four will keep watch until dawn. The villa is alarmed, and there are several escape routes should that be necessary. Don't worry, Constantine, I think your father will be too busy trying to find out how we could control his demons as easily as we did. He is not feeling quite as invincible at this moment."

The room Marcus escorted us to was fine indeed. After he had bid us goodnight, I pulled Gustav into my arms and held him pressed to me for a long time. How had it come to this? I wondered, my mind bleak with despair. I should never have allowed Gustav to become involved in this madness. I should have stayed away from him after the first time we broke up.

"I know what you're thinking," he said softly in my ear. "It's too late now to send me away. I'm in this as deeply as you."

I groaned and held him even tighter. "I know, and I hate myself for allowing this to happen. Danger is not something I am a stranger to, but I've never had to protect anyone from it before. Now, all I can think of is keeping you safe."

"That's funny..." He kissed me gently. "Because that's all I think of too—to protect you from whatever your father can send against you. If anything happened to you now, Constantine, I just don't know what I'd do."

Our mouths meshed with a passion that was born of lust, of desire and of need, and with an underlying wish to be all things to one another. In my mind, I echoed his words, for I too would be desolate without him. The thought of never holding him again, never touching his soft curls or kissing his sweet lips again, filled me with an almost overpowering despair. I trembled in his arms, and he held me pressed tight against him.

"Make love to me, please," he whispered. "But not as though it will never happen again. Love me, as if we were going to spend the rest of our lives together—without desperation, without the thought that we might never see each other again. For I know we will, Constantine. All this will pass, and you will be free to go wherever you wish—and hopefully, take me with you."

This last part he said with a little smile, and I loved him all the more for it. "For you, my love, I will believe that we can prevail. With the vampires' help, we at least have a good chance."

"Better than good." He kissed me again as we tugged at each other's clothes, throwing them aside then falling onto the big bed, our bodies securely intertwined. "Now, less talk and more love."

The heart within me that I had long thought incapable of love now swelled with rapture at his words. He alone had the power to fill my blood with a passionate hunger that wanted to devour him, to take him slowly until he cried out for release, to hold him forever in my arms and never let him go.

His hands roamed my body, stroking, caressing, his lips teasing my flesh with tiny, tingling kisses. His tongue skimmed across my chest, his teeth biting gently, making me writhe and gasp from the ecstasy he brought me. He moved between my legs and caught the

head of my cock in his mouth, his tongue swirling over the crown, probing at the slit while he licked up my essence. I groaned and caressed his head and face while he sucked and laved my hot shaft with his saliva. Fearing I would come too soon and wanting to prolong our lovemaking, I reached down and without effort lifted him so that he sat astride my thighs. He smiled down at me, licking his lips.

"You taste so good," he whispered, leaning over me, letting the glistening tip of his cock touch my lips. Greedily, I sucked him into my mouth so that I could savour the salty sweetness of his juice on my tongue. I cupped the rounded swell of his bottom with the palms of my hands, stroking the smooth, warm skin as his hips moved to a sensuous rhythm. He smiled down at me as he slowly fucked my mouth, his eyes filled with a pagan-like gleam that aroused me even more than I thought possible. My hands caressed the smooth sides of his torso, bringing small gasps of pleasure from his lips. He slipped from my mouth and laid his sweet body over me, cupping my face between his hands. His lips moved slowly over my mouth, brushing, teasing while his eyes gazed into mine. Those eyes, so clear and blue were indeed the mirror to his soul, for in them, I could see the love he felt for me even as his mind opened and I could hear the words as clearly as if he had murmured them in my ear.

With a groan, I tightened my arms around him and rolled him over onto his back, showering his face and lips with hot and urgent kisses. He responded to my silent need by winding his legs around me and lifting himself into my arms. I leaned back holding him pressed to me while he settled onto my lap, guiding my raging erection into the cleft between his buttocks. He spat into his hand then lubricated the head of my cock with his saliva. His eyes locked on mine, he slowly lowered himself onto my shaft, his breath catching in his chest as he took all of me inside him. He sighed and smiled into my eyes as he felt my hard, hot flesh glide over his prostrate. His arms tightened about my neck, and our mouths met in an all consuming kiss that almost brought me to climax. The scent of him, the softness of his lips, the sensation of his tongue passing over mine, probing, caressing every part of my mouth was almost too much pleasure to bear. I moaned into his mouth as he moved up and down the length of my straining cock. Each time I thrust into the silken heat of his core I was brought to the brink of pure ecstasy. We clung to one another, words and thoughts of love passing between us. Vows to never be parted, to remain constant and in love for the rest of

our lives fell from my lips as I was carried into the euphoria of the thrill and rapture he brought me.

His body shuddered in my arms with the approach of his orgasm. His breathing sounded harsh in my ear. He cried out my name as he came, his hot seed surging up between us. I fell back, holding him tightly pressed to me, then with one final thrust into his depths, I felt the surge of my climax fill him completely. We lay thoroughly spent and sweat soaked in each other's arms for a long time without speaking. Then he raised his head, smiled at me and kissed my chin.

"Constantine, my demon lover," he whispered. "I love you."

Chapter Eleven

Constantine

The summons came the following morning before dawn. Somehow, despite all the barriers I had formed around my subconscious, my Father had managed to penetrate my mind. I worried that Marcus may have been wrong in his assumption that my Father's time was running out. If he was gaining in strength, then surely it meant that he had many more years left to wreak the havoc he intended.

Constantine. His voice in my head made me shudder with apprehension. Not so much for myself, although I knew that if and when we again came face to face, his desire to punish me would supersede any mercy he should show his own flesh and blood. No, my concern was for Gustav. He was a mortal and would be completely unprepared for demonic fury.

Constantine, you must return to the fold. You are my son and, as such, must stand by my side. Come to me now, Constantine, and all will be forgiven. You may rest assured that I will not harm your mortal lover. In fact, bring him to me, so I may bless your union.

I could not stop the snort of derision that escaped me. *He* bless us? Did he mean to completely insult my intelligence?

Father, please... I let my thoughts go out to him without restraint. He had managed to reach me despite my attempts to block our mental communication, therefore, what purpose would there be in trying to hide my true feelings? *You cannot expect me to believe anything you might say to me now, after imprisoning and torturing me. Just state your reasons for this invitation to 'stand by your side', then when I refuse, we can end this charade.*

I felt his anger.

You would ally yourself with the vampires against me, your own Father? Then tell Marcus this... I hold his lover and the one Joseph holds most dear as captive, and they will die a most excruciating death if I do not have his word that he will instruct the Vampire Council that they should take no action against me.

Father, even you would not dare –

Of course, I dare. You think I would let a flock of arrogant undead beings dictate to me? They do not yet realise the extent of my power. Marcus thinks he has the upper hand, but I will prove him wrong – very wrong. If he does not bow the knee to me, he and his lover and all his friends, and best of all, the entire vampire nation, will be annihilated.

Now I thought him quite mad. What power did he think he had to take out all the vampires in the world?

It's really quite simple, Constantine, he said answering my unasked question. All I have to do is to inform the people of the world that vampires walk amongst us. That evil abounds in the most unexpected places – in the quiet neighbourhoods, in the glittering functions they attend, in the highways and byways of all aspects of life. There they are, lurking in the dark shadows, ready to corrupt and destroy all we hold dear. But, I can put an end to this abomination, because I know where they hide, and I know their weaknesses, and how to destroy them. So you see, my dear son, I do not have to lift a finger against Marcus and his ilk. The people will do it for me. Before long, the vampire population will be reduced to a skulking, whimpering few, begging for my mercy.

Beside me, Gustav stirred from his sleep and slipped his arms around me. I held him pressed to me and shuddered with the fear that if I did not heed my Father's wishes, he could be taken from me.

You do well to consider that possibility, Constantine. Forsake me, and I will show you and your mortal no mercy.

Damn him, he was in every corner of my mind. *Very well, I will come to you today – but alone. I don't want Gustav involved in any of this.*

He is already involved. He knows what you are and what Marcus and his confederates are. There is no going back for him.

I have asked the vampires to erase all memories of us from his mind, should things go wrong.

Wrong for whom, my son? There will be no vampires to help your little love.

Then you must give me your word you will not harm him.

Easily given. Now attend me as quickly as possible. We have much to do.

The villa was in darkness when I stole out of the room, leaving Gustav still asleep. Oh, how I hated to leave him there, but just then I had no choice. Marcus had underestimated my Father's powers, and I had no option but to go to him – and betray those who had tried to help.

"You are leaving, Constantine?"

The voice from the darkness startled me. Marcus stood by the window, his tall figure silhouetted against the waning moon. I knew I could not lie to him. He could read my mind even more easily than my Father could.

"My Father has called me," I said, quietly.

"And what do you suppose he will do with you when you go to him?"

"He has promised to leave Gustav be, if I attend him."

"And you believe him, after what he did to you last night? Do you really believe he will spare you this time?" He walked slowly towards me, his hands clasped behind his back, and I could feel him inside my brain, searching for answers...

"So," he said finally. "The Pope has reduced himself to the level of a common criminal – a kidnapper. He has Roger and Micah."

"Yes," I whispered.

"And you were about to leave to do what?" His green eyes hardened with a feral glint. "I thought I could trust you, but it appears I was wrong."

"My only thought is for Gustav's safety," I said in desperation.

"Just as mine must be for Roger and Micah's safety. I would advise you to leave before Joseph is alerted to Micah's captivity. He may not be as forgiving as I –"

"Marcus," I groaned. "I did not want this to happen."

"It will be dawn soon," he said, ignoring my despair. "You know we cannot go in search of our loved ones during the daylight hours. If you really care for Gustav, you will not ally yourself with your Father again. Find out where he is holding Roger and Micah, and pray for your sake and his that they are safe from the light."

"Say you will not harm Gustav."

"Of course not, he is safe with us. Only ensure that those closest to us are also safe. If not, if anything happens to either Roger or Micah, I swear to you that I will hunt you down...both you and your father."

As I stared into the cold green of his eyes, I did not doubt for one moment that he meant what he said, nor could I blame him for his anger. I had thought to betray him, after he had saved my life. For the first time in my life, I felt ashamed. What was happening to me? First, abiding love for another, and now a sense of shame that I had been deemed unworthy in the eyes of a man to whom I owed my life.

"I am sorry," I murmured.

His eyes softened a little. "You are, as my Roger would say, between a rock and a hard place. But you know the path you must take. Do not allow your father to sway your mind. You cannot trust him to keep you or Gustav safe. You must know that."

I nodded. The sound of soft voices in the hall told us Joseph, Bernard and Pietro were returning.

"Go," Marcus said. "I will keep in communication with you. And Constantine, I will know if you, too, are in danger – or if you betray us."

* * * *

The first light of dawn stole across the sky as I approached the Vatican gates. The guards, recognising me, averted their sleepy gaze as I strode past them. Father was already up, holding a conference with a few of his cohorts. He gave me a look of benign satisfaction when I entered the room. Summoning all my mental strength, I held my mind closed against him, and his expression changed to one of irritation on encountering the barrier I had erected between us.

"Constantine, my errant son," he murmured, to the amusement of his demon guards. With a wave of his hand, he dismissed them, leaving us alone. For what seemed an eternity he stared at me, his face blank, empty of either anger or animosity.

"So, you have returned," he said at last.

"You left me little choice," I replied. "The vampires know you are holding their lovers hostage. Marcus sends you a warning –"

"I care not for his warnings!" He stood up suddenly, and before I could react, struck me hard across my face. "Traitor," he barked at me. "Traitor, ingrate, bastard!"

"I am your bastard, Father," I said, wiping away the trickle of blood at my lips. "You commanded me to return, and I have done so. Now, what is it you wish me to do?"

"Oh, foolish, foolish, Constantine..." His eyes lit up with a wicked glow as he sneered at me. "Do you really think I would ever put my trust in you again? You have already proven yourself to be too easily swayed by the promise of a nubile young fuck. Thinking with your dick instead of your brain will be the end of you, my son. Yes, the end of you." He

stared at me for a long moment then chuckled quietly. "I have no need of you now, Constantine. Your usefulness is at an end."

"You mean to kill me?"

"I'm afraid that is exactly what I mean. You and your friends, the vampires, will perish together. I know Marcus will not stand idly by while I hold his lover. He and Joseph will make their move tonight, and when they do, I will be ready for them."

"Your demon guards are no match for vampire strength."

"There will be no need for a test of strength, Constantine." He snickered softly. "I have fashioned an extremely effective weapon against them." He walked slowly back to his gilded chair and sat down, his face wreathed in a satisfied smile. "Bullets of silver were suggested, but they have proven faulty. Sometimes the bullet will pass directly through the vampire's body, and their power to instantly heal before the poison sets in causes the bullet to be ineffective. But a silver-tipped, barbed arrow shot from a crossbow has proven to be lethal. You see, the barbs will prevent the arrow from being pulled out, allowing the silver poison enough time to spread and render the vampires helpless long enough for my guards to finish them off by decapitating them."

"You make it sound as though you have already tested this method of killing."

"I have. Only this morning, we killed one of the young vampires we have in captivity."

His words almost froze my blood. "You mean...?"

His laughter echoed through the chamber. "Oh, Constantine...your expression is priceless. You are wondering which one we killed. The one that Marcus dotes on—or was it Joseph's sweet love?" His eyes narrowed as he stared at me with baleful glee. "And really, my son, why should you care? You have never met either of them."

My mouth had gone dry with apprehension. I tried to penetrate his mind, to find the dreadful answer—which one? Whichever, it mattered not. The vampires' revenge would be swift and terrible.

"You fool!" Before I could stop myself, I had shouted the words at the top of my voice. "You think either Marcus or Joseph will let you live after what you've done? You think a few silver arrows will stop them from tearing you and your guards to pieces?"

"Silence!" He rose from his chair and strode towards me, his hand raised to strike me again. But I grabbed his wrist and stayed the blow. With all my strength, I began to crush the

bones in his wrist. He screamed in agony, and for the first time, as I gazed into his furious pain-filled eyes, I could see his mortality. Marcus was right, my Father would not live forever. With my other hand, I gripped his throat and squeezed, but his screams brought his guards running into the chamber, and they pulled me from him before I could do him grievous harm.

He glared at me in disbelief, his body shaking with pain and rage, his good hand rubbing at his throat. "You have just signed your death warrant," he hissed, choking on the words. "Put him with the others. When the vampires come, they will all die together!"

I was pushed and shoved down the long corridors and flights of steps that led to the old dungeons beneath the Vatican. The guards enjoyed my fall from favour, inflicting as many kicks and punches as they could on the way. I barely felt them, for my mind was filled with the dread of what was to come. Now, I could see my Father for what he truly was—a completely insane megalomaniac. There would be no more reasoning with him, for he was spiralling out of control, and even if the cardinals and others close to him tried to dissuade him from the course of action he planned, he would dismiss them out of hand. Worse...if they voiced their dissension too loudly, it might prove to be their end, just as I was now facing mine.

We stopped outside an oaken door which one of the guards unlocked and pushed open. I was hustled inside the dimly lit cell, then after a few more kicks and punches were rained on me, along with jeers and insults from the brave guards, I was left alone, the door crashing shut behind them. I looked around the deathly quiet cell then almost jumped out of my skin when a voice came from a darkened corner.

"Who the hell are you?"

Warily, I crept nearer to the speaker. I could just make out a pale face topped with blond, curly hair and vivid blue eyes that stared at me with suspicion.

"Are you one of them?" he asked

"My name is Constantine."

"Oh, yeah..." This time a different voice came from the shadows. "You're the guy we saw on TV with the Pope."

I peered into the darkness and saw a young, determined face under a mop of auburn hair. I fell on my knees in front of them. "You're both alive," I said, feeling a wave of relief wash over me.

"Not for much longer from what we hear," the blond-haired one said. "Seems like the Pope has blown a fuse."

"You are Roger?"

"That's me, and this is Micah. How come you're in here too?"

"My Father was holding me prisoner until Marcus and Joseph set me free."

"Your father?"

"Pope Pius...he's my Father."

"Wow," the one named Micah gasped. "I thought Popes couldn't have kids."

"Well, none that they will admit to," I said. Roger inched closer to me, and I backed up a little. They were vampires after all.

"Don't worry," he said, reading my mind. "We can't hurt you. We're chained to the wall."

"With silver chains," Micah added. "But anyway, if you're a friend of Marcus and Joseph's, we still wouldn't hurt you."

I smiled. They were both very young vampires. Hurt me, not kill me... Still, I sensed old and powerful blood in both of them. Their strength would be prodigious when fully realised.

"So, what's the deal?" Roger asked. "You haven't explained why you're here."

"My Father feels I have betrayed him."

"And have you?"

"If falling in love with a mortal and wanting to save him from what my Father is planning constitutes betrayal, then I suppose I have betrayed him."

"A mortal?" Micah peered at me. "What are you then?"

"I am a demon."

He stiffened and pulled back from me slightly. "A demon..." He glanced at Roger. "We had our fill of demons just a few months ago."

"Yeah, a creep by the name of Angelo," Roger said. "You know him?"

I shook my head. "No."

"So this mortal, he knows you're a demon?"

"He does now. It was necessary for me to introduce him to Bernard and Pietro, and once their secret was made known to him —"

"He still loves you?"

"Yes, he says he does, and I believe he means it."

"He's got balls," Micah said, with some disbelief, mixed with admiration.

"Well..." Roger nudged him with his elbow. "We still loved our guys when we found out what they were." He pulled on his chains. "So, how do we get outta here? Are Marcus and Joseph going to make a moonlight raid on this place?"

"Yes, I am sure they will, but my Father has planned an ambush."

"Ambush?" Micah scoffed. "Joseph will make mincemeat out of 'em."

"And let's not forget Marcus," Roger said, raising an eyebrow. "And Bernard and Pietro..."

I nodded. "They are formidable, I know. But my Father has devised a weapon that might prove lethal."

"What's that?"

"He has fashioned barbed silver-tipped arrows that can't be pulled out easily."

"Allowing the poison to spread..." Roger and Micah exchanged worried looks. "We have to get out of here before then."

"But how?"

"Okay..." Roger held up his hands to me. "Can you at least break these chains? The silver weakens us."

"Yes, I can do that. Sorry, I didn't think of it before." I gripped the chain in both hands, and snapped the links holding Roger, then did the same for Micah's.

"Ah, better," Roger said, flexing his arms and standing up. He sent some sort of signal to Micah, and suddenly, they faced me, side by side, their lips pulled back in feral snarls, their fangs exposed and threatening. I stepped back, startled, almost falling over my own feet.

Roger and Micah let out great peals of merriment. "Sorry," Roger said, choking on his laughter. "We just couldn't resist!"

I stared at them in amazement. Never had I met two vampires quite like these!

"Just kidding." Micah grinned at me and headed for the door. He pulled on the handle, and to my amazement, it opened. "Can't keep a good vampire down," he muttered, beckoning us both forward.

"Wait," I whispered. "Remember, it's still daylight outside. You're safe here, but up above, where there are windows..."

"Right. We have to stay down here 'til after sunset. Damn..." Roger suddenly was as he must have been before he became a vampire—a slim, cute American boy, vaguely lost and undecided as to what to do next. "What do you suggest?" he asked me.

"Can you reach Marcus with your mind?"

"We've both been trying ever since they hijacked us," he replied. "It feels like there's some kind of barrier here."

"Yeah, it reminds me of the time when Joseph was the Wizards' hostage," Micah said. "Marcus and Joseph couldn't communicate because of some kind of magical barrier they'd put up."

"My Father would know of that," I told them. "He owes much of his power to the Wizard Brotherhood." I paused before I continued. "That's how I was created."

Micah gave me a sympathetic look. "They never did give a shit how they used people." His face clouded. "What they did to Joseph—"

"Time for war stories later," Roger interrupted, squaring his shoulders. "We need to find a way out of here." He grabbed my arm. "Why don't you go warn Marcus? I know it's daytime, but he's always aware of what's goin' on. Can you get out of here unseen?"

I nodded. "I know these secret passages well. They link with the archives above. From there I can make my way to a side exit."

"So go, and make sure he knows about the barbed arrows."

"My Father said he had killed one of you as an experiment," I said. "I'm glad he was lying."

Roger and Micah both looked at me grimly. "That's what we must have heard earlier," Micah said. "Someone screaming in agony..."

"A vampire," Roger added. "We couldn't figure out what was going on...the poor bastard."

Micah pushed me towards the door. "Go, and hurry. There may not be much time left before he wants to try another 'experiment'."

I fled from the cell, running at full tilt down the long passageway to the steps I knew would take me to the archives. Even as I ran, I was aware of the probable futility of my objective. It would be several hours before nightfall, and by that time, my Father would have learned of my escape, and then what would be in store for the two vampires I had left behind in the cell? Perhaps it would be best if I simply took Gustav, and left the city with him. He had mentioned friends in Berlin who would shelter us...

The archival library was almost deserted as I hurried through its cavernous space. I reached the fire exit unseen, then concentrating my demonic power, I pushed open the door without tripping the alarm. Outside, dark clouds scudded overhead, heralding imminent rain, but I made it back to the villa before the cloudburst.

The villa was quiet, Marcus and Joseph both in the deep slumber of the vampire. I ran to the room I had shared with Gustav. He was in the shower, probably wondering where I was and preparing to look for me.

"Gustav," I whispered, so as not to startle him.

The shower door slid open, and his smiling face appeared. "There you are," he exclaimed, shaking water from his hair. "Did you go get us some breakfast?"

"Not exactly... I have some things to tell you."

"All right." He grabbed a towel and stepped out of the shower. I felt my breath catch in my throat at the sight of his lithe, compact body, covered in a fine sheen of dampness.

He leaned into me and kissed my lips. "I missed you," he murmured.

I pulled him into my arms and buried my face in the soft moistness of his neck. My hands caressed his back, stroked his buttocks then found the hot flesh of his burgeoning erection.

"Mmm..." His lips tickled my earlobe. I pulled back suddenly, remembering the reason I had returned.

"We have a problem," I said, releasing him from my arms.

"What is it?" He began drying himself, his eyes locked to mine.

"My Father has Marcus and Joseph's lovers in captivity. He threw me in with them, and they helped me escape. They could not leave with me because of the daylight."

He stared at me, his mouth slightly open. "All this happened while I slept?" he gasped. "Oh, Constantine, why didn't you tell me where you were going? Why leave me in the dark about this?"

"I couldn't tell you," I protested. "You would have wanted to come with me, and there was no way I could allow that. My Father has become a madman. He is going to slaughter the vampires and all who oppose him."

"Then you must tell Marcus and Joseph —"

"What can they do? They're powerless in the daytime. By nightfall, it will be too late —"

"Then, what can we do?"

"You said you had friends in Berlin."

"You mean go there now? Well, yes, we can...but what about Bernard and Pietro? They have become friends to me."

"They are vampires, Gustav."

"And you are a demon." He laughed suddenly, but his eyes held no mirth.

"I'm sorry, Gustav." I touched his face with my fingertips. "If I could only change all of this, I would."

He took my hand in his and kissed it. "I know," he said, running his lips over my fingers. "But you can't change it. It is what it is, and we can't just turn our backs on the others. They helped you escape...twice!"

I nodded. "You're right. Time and again, I have had to fight the untrustworthy demon inside me. But you have to understand. I can't let you put yourself in danger. I will alert Marcus and Joseph to what has transpired, but whatever they plan to do, you cannot be a part of it."

"Just go tell them." He kissed my chin. "Besides, what good would I be, trying to help supernatural creatures?"

* * * *

Marcus and Joseph were sharing the master bedroom in the villa. I tapped on the door, even then half hoping they would not hear me, but immediately Marcus said, "Enter."

They were lying side by side on the big bed, on top of the comforter, and both sat up as I entered the darkened room. Marcus flicked on a bedside lamp as I approached them.

"What has happened, Constantine?"

For a moment, all I could do was stare at them. They were both such beautiful men, and the sight of them together was almost too much for my eyes to behold. Had they ever been lovers? I wondered. Such a union would have been astounding indeed...

"Constantine?"

They were both scrutinising me with wary eyes. I cleared my throat and sat, unbidden, on the edge of the bed. "Roger and Micah are well..." I began.

"But they are held hostage," Joseph interrupted, anger in his voice.

"Yes, bound by silver chains...which I broke off," I added hastily. "They opened the cell door allowing me to escape, but of course, they could not accompany me. They will wait for you until after sunset."

"You can get us in there?"

"It will be difficult, but that is not the biggest problem. My Father has armed his guards with silver-tipped, barbed arrows. The barbs will make the arrows difficult for you to pull out quickly enough to stop the poison from spreading."

"Clever of him," Marcus muttered. "We must make sure none of the arrows strike home."

"But how...?"

"Vampire speed and sleight of hand," Joseph said with a grim smile. He glanced at his watch and groaned. "Four more hours until sunset..."

Marcus sniffed the air. "Do I smell rain?"

I ran to the heavy drapes and peeked out. The sky above was filled with black clouds, and heavy rain fell in sheets against the window panes.

"Yes," I exclaimed. "And the sun is hidden behind thick clouds."

"Then we must go." Both he and Joseph sprang from the bed. In a trice, they were ready and rushing from the room. "I will send word to Bernard to come here and guard the palazzo in case of trouble. Once he is aware of what we are doing—"

"Uh, and just what is it you're doing?" Gustav, now dressed in his shirt and jeans, stood in the living room watching us.

"You're not coming," I blurted, but Marcus took him by the arm and smiled into his eyes. He murmured something I couldn't hear, then Gustav nodded and sat down on the chair Marcus led him to.

"He will wait for us to return," Marcus told me. "Now, we must go."

I glanced anxiously at Gustav who smiled and gave me a little wave. I found myself wishing I had those same powers over him. How easy life would be with a companion so readily acquiesced. Then again, Gustav's fire was one of his charms.

Marcus and Joseph grabbed me by the arms, and we soared into the deluge that poured unceasingly from the blackened skies. In no time I was drenched to the skin, but as I looked from one vampire to the other, the water seemed to skim off their bodies, leaving their hair and clothes with not even a drop upon them.

"Down there," I yelled, indicating the side door that led to the library. We alighted outside the door then pushed our way in. Once again, to my relief, there was no one around to give the alarm, and I quickly led the vampires to the hidden panelled door, beyond which lay the steps to the dungeons.

We fairly flew down the steps, each vampire still holding my arms. Once in the long passage way lined with the cell doors, they released me.

"Which one?" Marcus asked tersely. I could tell he was puzzled by the fact neither he nor Joseph could reach Roger or Micah with their minds now that we were inside the Vatican. Quickly, I ran to the cell where they had been held captive and pushed open the door.

It was empty.

"Constantine." Joseph's voice held more than just a note of warning. "Are you sure this is where you left them?"

"Yes, absolutely sure. Could they too have realised they could venture outside because of the darkened sky?"

Marcus and Joseph exchanged glances. "Roger," Marcus muttered. "He'd be headstrong enough to try it."

"And Micah would not leave him," Joseph added with a rueful shake of his head.

"Still, why cannot we reach them with our minds?" Marcus asked, clearly perplexed.

"The barrier might be in place, even outside the Vatican walls," I suggested.

“Possible...”

“Would they know the way to the Lady Andorra’s palazzo? I asked. “And if so, will Gustav be safe? They do not know him.”

Marcus frowned. “They wouldn’t harm him. They are not ravenous animals, Constantine.”

“But they have not fed for some time.” I could feel a panic rise in my blood.

The two vampires stared at me for a moment, then Joseph said, “Bernard and Pietro are to meet us there. They will ensure Gustav is not harmed.”

Gustav alone with four vampires. This was not the way to put mind at ease!

Chapter Twelve

Bernard

As Pietro and I alighted on the balcony of the Lady Andorra's palazzo, he glanced at me sharply. "Vampires," he muttered.

"Yes...but friendly ones." We strode into the marbled hall, and I chuckled as I saw Roger, Micah and Gustav engaged in deep conversation. "Roger, Micah... Marcus told me you were prisoners," I exclaimed. "They have gone to rescue you."

"That's what I've been trying to tell them," Gustav complained. It amazed me that this young man seemed to be totally at home with the likes of us—even vampires he had not been introduced to. "I told them Constantine was taking Marcus and Joseph to where they were being held."

Roger looked at me with some alarm. "But we can't communicate with them. We've been trying to let them know we're here, and there's nothing coming back."

"I know," I said. "I have tried also. Pius must have learned the Wizards' magic and erected a barrier to confound us."

Micah grabbed Roger's arm. "So, we have to go back. They'll need our help against those barbed arrows Pius has up his sleeve."

I held up my hand. "Wait, wait...we need a plan. We cannot go flying in there without some sort of—"

"Bernard's right," Roger interrupted, zealous as ever. "We know Marcus and Joseph can look after themselves, but just in case, we need to be their reserves—and we need to be sneaky. But first, man, we have got to feed!"

Gustav stepped back, a flicker of uncertainty on his face.

"Don't worry," I told him quickly. "They didn't mean you, Gustav."

"Unless you volunteer, of course," Roger said then chuckled. "Just kidding..."

"No, wait." Gustav looked a little nervous but continued gamely. "People donate blood regularly at the blood bank. How much do you need?"

Micah and Roger exchanged glances. "Uh...well, at least a pint each," Micah said. "And I seem to remember they only take a pint from you when you donate."

"Well, that won't work." Roger grabbed Micah by his arm. "Come on, it'll only take us a few minutes. We'll be right back."

"Wait," Pietro, ever generous, held out his arm. "Bernard and I have fed. You can drink from us."

"Okay, thanks Pietro." Roger looked over at Gustav. "Hey guy, turn around. You don't need to see this."

Gustav did as he was bid, walking to a far corner of the room while Pietro and I fed our fellow vampires. As Micah bent over my wrist and delicately pierced my vein with his fangs, I could not help but smile as I thought just how different these modern vampires were from the likes of myself. Their speech patterns and their way of thinking sometimes made me feel very old indeed. I stroked Micah's hair as he sucked from me. There is nothing quite like the sharing of blood to make those involved feel bonded to one another. Perhaps we should have let Gustav experience this. When I looked up, I saw him staring at us from across the room, his eyes wide with wonder at this strange and, to him, unnatural exchange.

At that moment, Micah released my arm, and with a murmured word of thanks, kissed me gently on the lips. From the moment I'd first met Micah, I had felt an almost familial bond with him—a brotherly love if you will. Perhaps it was because both of us had shared Joseph's blood, or perhaps it was because when I looked at him, I could see myself as a young vampire—a shade uncertain and still a little in awe of what I had become. I could tell he felt this same bond with me, our minds often meeting with warm affection.

"Well, that's better!" Roger grinned over at us, his arm about Pietro's shoulders. "Thanks guys. I feel like a new man—or should I say vampire?"

Micah looked at Gustav and beckoned him over. "All done," he said. "Hope that didn't freak you out too much."

"No, it was quite fascinating, actually," the young German said, nevertheless keeping a small distance between us and him. "I didn't know vampires could drink from one another."

"Oh, yeah," Roger said airily. "You can't get a better brew anywhere else!"

We sat together around the vast table in the dining room, trying to formulate a plan to help Marcus and Joseph, who still remained with Constantine in the Vatican. The clouds had cleared, and a watery sunshine now flooded the city. We had, of course, closed all of the palazzo's shutters and drapes, but we knew that until sunset, our friends were trapped within the Vatican walls. We could only hope they had managed to elude Pius' demon guards and were not themselves now prisoners bound in silver chains.

But, knowing Marcus and Joseph as well as I did, I truly doubted that was their fate. That opinion, although shared by both Micah and Roger, did not help to appease their minds. Sheer weight of numbers might eventually defeat them, and though I did not want to voice my fear, the fact that they were in the company of a demon, made me nervous. Gustav may have taken exception to my doubt of his lover's trustworthiness, so I remained silent and kept those thoughts out of reach of my vampire brothers.

* * * *

Constantine

I had to admit to myself that I was not at all happy with the situation. Outside, when I checked, the rain had ceased, the sky was mostly clear, and the sun made it impossible for Marcus and Joseph to leave which meant, of course, that unless I deserted them, I could not leave either. I cannot deny that a great part of me wanted nothing more than to get the hell out of there, find Gustav and run from Rome as fast as we could. But I knew Gustav would never agree to leaving his newfound friends in danger – vampires or not – and I had to admit that doing so would leave me with feelings of guilt, probably for the rest of my life.

When had I become a demon with a conscience?

Marcus nudged my arm, bringing me back from my gloomy thoughts. He pointed down the long dark passageway. I could see nothing, but it was obvious his preternatural hearing had alerted him to some form of danger.

"What?" I whispered.

"Your father's guards are headed this way—his demon guards." He looked over his shoulder at Joseph. "We better prepare ourselves for some silver-tipped, barbed arrows."

"Surprise is always our best defence," Joseph said.

"Right... Constantine, you stand here in full sight. They will not shoot you. We will take them from above."

Without waiting for me to argue the point, he and Joseph floated up into the darker recesses of the vaulted ceilings that towered over us, hovering over my head, unseen by anyone else beneath them. I wished I had their confidence that the guards would not shoot me. My father had no love for me. My death wouldn't give him a moment of sorrow. Still the guards might hesitate before actually shooting the Pope's son and a fellow demon, especially as there was no sign of the vampires near me. I crossed my fingers just in case.

The guards rounded the corner then came to an abrupt halt when they saw me standing there alone. There were six of them, all carrying lethal-looking crossbows, primed and ready to fire.

"Where are the vampires?" one of them shouted.

"Gone," I replied. "Escaped."

"Escaped how? It is daylight outside. They must still be somewhere in these chambers."

"You're welcome to look."

They eyed me suspiciously, and I could not blame them. After all, they knew me to be a traitor. My father had imprisoned me, twice, and now here I was, once again freed from the cell they had locked me in a few hours earlier. They warily inched forward, bows cocked and trained directly upon my chest. *Thank you, Marcus...*

Suddenly, above them, there was a blur of movement, and two of the demons crumpled to the ground, dead to the world. The others looked around in fear, wondering what had happened to their companions then another one went down then another. One of the two remaining guards squeaked with terror and turned to run. He got no more than two feet, before Joseph dropped in front of him, fangs bared, a vicious snarl contorting his face.

The guard shrieked and staggered backward, colliding with the other. The two of them, lying slumped on top of one another, begged for mercy. I shook my head in disgust. Inappropriate behaviour in the face of adversity! What were these young demons coming to?

Two quick, well-delivered blows to the back of their heads from the vampires rendered the guards unconscious.

"Can we use these?" I asked, pointing at the crossbows scattered about the stone floor.

"We have no need of them," Marcus said. He lifted two of the guards as if they weighed no more than children and threw them into one of the vacant cells. The others were disposed of in similar fashion then Marcus sealed the door. Joseph disarmed the bows, breaking the arrows into useless bits.

"Well, we've evened the odds a little," he said. "Now, if we only knew that Micah and Roger were safe."

"And Gustav," I muttered.

"If he is with them, he is in good hands," Marcus assured me. He glanced at his watch. "Another hour until sunset. We should try to find out what your father's plans are. I sense a quickening of his purpose. His time is running out."

"You mean he will soon die?"

"Unless he has found a way to cheat death, then yes, that is what I mean."

"But how can we be sure he won't live forever," I protested.

Marcus shook his head. "He cannot, Constantine. Regardless of what he believes, he is dying."

"Then, I am at a loss to fathom what he intends. If this is not all for his own glory, to rule the world forever as he told me, why is he going ahead with this monstrous plan? If he dies, who benefits from it?"

The vampires exchanged glances, and I could tell they had no answer for me.

"If only I could enter his mind," Marcus said, half to himself. "If I could find a weakness there, I might be able to answer your question, Constantine. Can you lead us closer to where he might be now?"

"He will be surrounded by guards," I told him. "Most likely awaiting the news of my capture and your deaths," I add wryly. "But he should be in his office with the door locked. He won't want the Vatican staff to know what's going on."

"What if you gave yourself up" Joseph said. "Tell him that you have reconsidered your traitorous actions and now wish to be taken back into the fold."

"He would never believe that," I protested. "And besides, he can read my thoughts as clearly as you can. He would see through me immediately."

"Hmm..." Marcus looked at me with a speculative air I did not like.

"What?" I asked nervously.

"If I hypnotised you into believing that you actually did want to return to your father's side, your thoughts would reflect that, and Pius would be fooled."

"But for how long would I believe it?"

"Until I release you from the spell. I could implant a trigger word in your mind."

"Brilliant, Marcus," Joseph said, thoroughly enthused. "Let's do it!"

"Wait!" I backed away from them. "I should go where my Father could imprison me again or, worse yet, kill me? Where will you two be while I risk my life?"

"Don't worry, we'll be right behind you, or at least, as close as we can get. If you are in any danger, we will immediately come to your aid."

I believed him. Marcus, even though he was a vampire, was a man of his word. Still, could I trust that he and Joseph could come to my aid quickly enough? They thought my Father was dying, and in our earlier confrontation, I had seen weakness in his eyes. Weakness and fear...

"All right," I muttered. "Let's do it."

Marcus gripped my arm and levelled his eyes at mine. So powerful was he that I felt my will evaporate almost immediately. We stood as close as lovers do before making that last move into one another's arms. I could feel his breath upon my lips, and his scent, that unique spicy scent that only comes from vampire blood, filled my nostrils. I became aroused then his mind met mine, and all I could think of was running from this place and throwing myself at my Father's feet to beg his forgiveness, to take me back into his confidence and allow me to aid him in his ambition to rule the world.

"Go now," Marcus said gently, releasing my arm from his powerful grasp. I stared at him and Joseph, hating them for what they represented and the threat they posed to my Father's dreams of conquest. Without a word, I turned on my heel and strode away from them down the long passageways that would lead me to my Father's private quarters. At that moment, I did not know that the vampires followed close behind me. Their presence was now hidden from me by Marcus' will.

Guards at the door tried to prevent me from entering. "Father," I yelled. "Let me in! I have come to beg your forgiveness!"

The door was flung open, and a demon I recognised, named Nathaniel, glared at me. "Enter," he rasped. "But don't try any trickery, Constantine."

My Father sat on his gilded chair, watching me approach, an amused smile playing on his lips. "Well, well, the prodigal returns," he purred, "and with purer thoughts than before. What has brought about this change of heart, my son?"

"I was wrong to doubt you, Father," I said, with complete sincerity. "I crave your forgiveness and ask that you will accept me back as a loyal follower once more."

"Where are the vampires who released you?" Nathaniel asked, his sneer telling me he did not believe me.

"I don't know," I said truthfully. "They were with me in the passageway then they disappeared. But I don't care where they are." I turned again to my Father. "Just tell me what I must do to win back your favour."

"Well, you could start by killing the vampires, I suppose," he said, laughing lightly. "Do you feel up to the task, Constantine?"

"Anything you ask, I will carry out, or die in the attempt."

"My, my...now that's more like it, eh Nathaniel? Perhaps, Constantine, I will set you the task of killing all vampires. I happen to know there are several more hovering about the place." He and Nathaniel shared some more laughter, and I began to feel that he was playing with me.

"Father, you do not believe I am loyal to you and only you?"

"What makes you think he would?" Nathaniel snarled. "You, his own son, turned against him, betrayed him and joined forces with vampires. Why would he now believe you?"

"Father," I said, ignoring Nathaniel. "You can probe my mind. You will see that I am sincere."

Pius stood and scowled at me. "What I see, Constantine, is a travesty, a mind that is being controlled by a superior force." He waved at me as if to dismiss me. "Come out, Vampires," he yelled. "I know you are here. My power is greater than yours. The darkness of

night will not protect you from me. Come out and be seen for the weak and pathetic beings you are!"

From all sides of the room, demon guards appeared, armed with crossbows strung with the silver-tipped barbed arrows meant to poison the vampires' blood and render them defenceless. I looked around for any sign of the vampires my Father had called on to reveal themselves. I could see nothing.

"Cowards!" He was incensed with rage. He strode down from the dais on which his gilded chair was perched and ranted, "Come out, I command you!"

"Command? A strong word from one so feeble."

He swung round then gasped with shock and outrage as he saw Marcus seated on the gilded chair, Joseph at his side.

"How...?" He staggered back then, squaring his shoulders, he screamed, "Guards! Kill them now!"

A fusillade of arrows was unleashed at the vampires, and as Marcus released my mind from his thrall, I cringed at the sight of all those arrows about to imbed themselves in his and Joseph's beautiful bodies. I gaped as the arrows failed to strike their targets, but hovered in the air, inches away from Marcus and Joseph, before falling to the ground with resounding clatters.

My Father screamed in frustration.

"Again," he shrieked, his voice sounding thin and weak to my ears. While the demon guards fumbled to reload their bows, the air became alive with the sound of bodies flying overhead. I looked up and saw Bernard, Pietro and the two American vampires fairly zooming above me, diving upon the unsuspecting guards and laying them out on the ground.

"No!"

My Father turned to run, but one of the guards had let loose an arrow from his bow. As Roger struck the guard a numbing blow to the side of his head, the arrow flew off course, ricocheted off the stone wall and struck my Father, piercing his heart. With a shriek of pain, he fell backward, stumbled then righted himself, his hands tugging desperately at the arrow imbedded in his flesh. But the barbs he'd had so meticulously fashioned to destroy the vampires now tore at the walls of his heart, and as he wrenched the arrow from his body,

great gouts of blood and pieces of his heart sprayed from him, drenching his robes in gore. He fell to his knees, and before our eyes, began to wither. In a trice, he had aged at least a hundred years. His face, once so smooth and handsome, became a wrinkled mass of loose flesh and brown spots. As I gazed down at him, willing myself to feel some grief, his flesh began to dissolve before my eyes, until all that was left was dust on an empty robe.

“Bastard child!”

I turned at the sounds of hate behind me. Nathaniel, crossbow in hand, confronted me, his face contorted with rage.

“You...spawn of darkness,” he seethed, spittle dripping from his lips. “You have outlasted your usefulness.” The arrow hit me in the middle of my chest. The pain was, at first, negligible, but then the barbs ripped into my flesh, tearing me apart as they passed through my body. I fell to my knees and looked up at him just in time to see Joseph put his hands on either side of Nathaniel’s head and snap his neck.

They gathered around me, these creatures of the night, gazing down at me with concern and compassion. *Gustav*, I thought. *Oh, my love. I will never see you again.*

* * * *

Bernard

We brought Constantine to the Lady Andorra’s palazzo so that Gustav could see him and say goodbye. The poor boy’s eyes were filled with tears and grief as we laid Constantine on a couch in the living room.

“Is there nothing you can do for him?” he beseeched us. “Your supernatural beings who can cheat death, over and over...”

“Demons are not immortal,” Joseph said, with sympathy.

“Gustav...” Marcus laid a hand on the young man’s shoulder. “Only one thing will give him life, but I cannot guarantee he will be whole again.”

“What is that?”

“My blood...but I have never given it to demon-kind before. I cannot be sure how his body will react.”

“Without it?”

“He will die.”

“Oh, Constantine...” Gustav’s body shuddered with grief, and he lay over his lover’s body, kissing his lips in a feeble, but loving, attempt to revive him. “I wish I knew what to do.”

Micah, his face creased with sadness, came to kneel beside him. “Gustav, I know you love him. If I had this decision to make, I would take the chance. The blood Marcus can give him is very powerful. It runs through all our veins and makes us stronger than even most vampires.”

Gustav gazed into Micah’s eyes, searching for hope, and for a moment, I was struck by how amazingly similar they were, and yet, so very different. Both young men, both having had dangerous, life threatening experiences, but only one who was immortal.

“I...I don’t know,” Gustav stammered.

Micah gripped Gustav’s shoulder, pulling him in close, sinking his fangs into the young man’s jugular. Gustav struggled in Micah’s steel-like grip then, in an instant, collapsed against him, giving in to the rapture that accompanies the vampire kiss. As we watched, and I have to admit captivated by what we were seeing, Micah bit his own wrist, and pressed it to Gustav’s lips, urging him to drink. Gustav suckled at Micah’s wrist, drinking down his rich, vampire blood so recently imbued in his body by Joseph, who now stood silently amazed by his young lover’s actions.

When Micah gently eased Gustav from himself, he kissed him on the lips. “The blood we have shared will give you longer life and greater strength. Perhaps now, I have made the decision a little easier for you.”

Totally in Micah’s thrall, Gustav nodded his consent to Marcus who lifted Constantine into his arms as if he weighed no more than a child and carried him from the room.

Some time later, Marcus reappeared and signalled that Gustav should follow him. Curious to know what had transpired, we followed quietly and stood at the foot of the bed where Constantine lay.

“He lives,” Marcus told us, and I heard Gustav whimper with relief as he bent over Constantine to kiss his lips tenderly. “He responded well to the infusion of my blood – and

with no ill effects," Marcus told us. "In his mind, I sensed an end to his confusion over his place in this world. He and Gustav should have a good life together."

"We should leave them alone," Micah said, putting his arm around Joseph's waist and leaning into him. Joseph kissed his brow and whispered something in his ear so softly that even my vampire hearing could not discern what he had said. I presumed he was giving his blessing for what Micah had done earlier. They were so in love, no rebuke could pass from Joseph's lips.

"So," Roger asked, as we settled onto the couches in the palazzo's large and luxurious salon. "How do you suppose the Vatican's going to explain what went down tonight?"

"Not without difficulty," Marcus replied with a wry smile. "Obviously, there can be no statement from the Vampire Council. The Vatican press will have to invent a story to cover the Pope's disappearance."

"It'll take someone with imagination to issue a viable press release," I said, hugging Pietro to my side. I was just glad that all of us had escaped unscathed. "Perhaps now Cardinal Firenze will be made Pope—a far better choice than before."

"Do you think they'll let us have our jobs back?" Pietro asked, kissing my cheek.

"We can only enquire," I replied. "I would like to continue my research."

"So, now that Constantine has your blood, Marcus..." Roger, whom Marcus had told me always had many questions, was asking yet another. "And Gustav shared blood with Micah, where does that leave them? Are they gonna live forever or start sprouting fangs?"

Marcus sighed and rolled his eyes at me then leaned over and kissed Roger on the cheek. "No, they won't live forever. They'll live longer than most, perhaps, but they definitely won't sprout fangs. I thought I had explained that part to you."

"Yeah, you did. I was just hoping—not the fangs so much, but I'd like to think Gustav will be around forever. He's a sweet guy. I'm not so sure about Constantine, though. Demons can be a real pain."

"I think they will be just fine," Marcus said. "If anyone can make Constantine forget his demonic ways, it's Gustav." He paused for a moment. "There is still one problem, however."

"Oh?" Roger looked at him expectantly.

"When Joseph and I were face to face with Pius, I sensed something lurking in the back of his mind."

"Like what?"

"That he was not the one who would attempt to rule the world. That he was merely the forerunner of he who would come after."

"You mean there is another demon out there ready to take his place?" I asked, a kind of horror pricking at my mind.

"Oh, shit," Roger muttered.

"I'm not completely sure," Marcus replied. "What I got from his mind was vague. He was trying to conceal it from me, of course. But there was something there."

"Then we must always be on our guard," I said. "Whoever succeeds Pius, must be scrutinised with great care."

"I don't think it will be the next Pope," Marcus murmured, as though thinking aloud. "Pius should not have died so quickly, and have you ever wondered why he had a son?"

"Constantine?"

"Oh, shit!" Roger yelled. "And you just gave him the kiss of life!"

"But that put him in Marcus' thrall," Pietro said quietly.

Roger grinned. "Right..."

"So if he was not aware of his destiny while his father was alive," I ventured, "it is now unlikely that he ever will be."

"Marcus," Roger said with awe and love colouring his voice, "You are the man. Do you realise what you've done? You've saved the world from the Antichrist!"

Marcus smiled modestly. "You mean, from one who might purport to be —"

"Whatever!" Roger kissed him soundly on the mouth. "You are most definitely my hero!"

After our good-natured laughter had subsided, I looked around the salon. "Where are Joseph and Micah?"

Roger gave me lewd wink. "They had to find a room," he said, still chuckling. "All that blood got them horny."

"Ah, young love," Marcus sighed. "There's nothing quite like it."

"Hmm..." Roger nudged him in the ribs. "I seem to remember this place has a bunch of bedrooms."

"Oh yes," Marcus agreed. "At least, seven or eight..."

"Let's go." Roger jumped to his feet and pulled Marcus off the couch with an amazing show of strength. That young vampire was a constant surprise. "You deserve a hero's reward," he said. "And I know exactly how to honour you!"

Wrapped in each other's arms, they left us, after bidding us a goodnight.

Pietro turned to me. "Young love...does that mean we're too old?"

"Only if you consider six hundred to be too old," I said.

"Huh. That means Marcus is three times older than you, and he fairly flew out of here with Roger. I think we could show them a thing or two."

I chuckled. "We could, but let's keep that thing or two to ourselves, shall we?"

He fell into my arms giggling. "I love you, my vampire. Now, how do we find an empty bedroom?"

About the Author

J.P. Bowie was born in Scotland and toured British theatres in numerous musical shows including Stephen Sondheim's Company.

Emigrated to the States and worked in Las Vegas, Nevada for the magicians Siegfried and Roy as their Head of Wardrobe at the Mirage Hotel. Currently living in Henderson, Nevada.

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J.P. loves to hear from readers. You can find his contact information, website and author biography at <http://www.totalebound.com>.

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