
VAMPIRES OF NOCTRA: BLOOD BOUNTY

by

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Vampires Of Noctra: Blood Bounty
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Siren's Nocturne

Chapter 1

The man beneath Donté writhed and cried out, a fragile human life in the throes of passion as the vampire captain fed. At last Donté withdrew his fangs from the pulsing artery in the thickly muscled neck. Blood spurted and fat droplets landed on his lips before he could seal the punctures completely with his healing saliva. Finally, the seepage slowed and Donté swiped at the remaining crimson trail lingering across Vasily's throat, shoulder, and smooth, defined chest.

As second mate, there were few on Captain Donté Lucienne's ship, *Night Stalker*, with more authority. Vasily had once been a Russian sailor, scooped from the deadly sea, now serving a vampire captain with no allegiance to any country other than the Caribbean vampire colony of Noctra.

There was no doubt the man served his vampire master with all the loyalty Donté could require in a crewmember. A ripple of sleek muscle shimmered as the young Russian readjusted his position, arms stretched at a wide angular vee to the sculpted headboard of Donté's bed. The captain gazed down at him, his cock still buried inside Vasily's tight hole. The mate's eyes were closed, his mouth slack. He was a man caught in the erotic vise of his vampire master's pleasure.

Donté felt the tight heat of Vasily's passage wrapped around his prick, sucking him deep inside. The infusion of Vasily's blood thrummed through Donté's body, rejuvenating him, engorging hard dick and hungry veins with new passion. And then Donté shifted his lean hips. He began to rock, his cock frictioning in and out of the slick, hot channel. Donté saw the shadow of Vasily's eyes roll, head dropped back, jaw slack, and his lusty moans drenched the atmosphere of the cabin.

"Open your eyes, Vasily," Donté commanded.

As though weighted by hidden forces, Vasily's eyelids slowly lifted. Donté studied the unfocused, dilated pupils that almost completely obliterated stark white, as the vampire thrust his hips. Droplets of salty sweat decorated the golden, naked body. Donté leaned forward to trace a moist path over the sailor's chest, circling each erect nipple, razing sharp teeth across resilient human flesh.

The vampire slowed his rhythm and circled his hips. Vasily cried out. Donté lifted up, reaching between their hard bodies to grasp the stone-hard prick of the young sailor. Human, hot and needy.

As the ship rocked and swayed, Donté synchronized his rhythm with that of the ship as he thrust into and undulated against Vasily's delectable body. He reached up to where Vasily's arms were shackled about his head and stroked a finger along the warm, supple flesh of the sailor's rigid, ropy forearm, tracing the path of a particularly fat, purple vein. Vasily shuddered beneath Donté.

"Please, Captain."

Donté stroked a tongue over Vasily's bulging pecs, tugged on a nipple, chewing at it lightly. Vasily's cries crescendoed and dropped, rose again and again, like surging waves lapping at the hull of the *Night Stalker*. Needy, in delirium, far removed from reality.

Donté's fangs sank into the supple muscle of Vasily's chest and the young man cried out, spurning his seed into Donté's hand. The vampire supped on his youthful, vibrant lifeblood, his cock buried in Vasily's ass.

Donté slowly extracted his fangs and swirled his tongue over the puncture marks, leaving faint red indentations in his wake. He studied Vasily's chest, admiring the tracks decorated across his warm flesh. Every sailor in his crew sported the vampire piercings upon their skin, each crewmember having been personally handpicked by either Donté or Donté's vampire sire, Captain Sterling Savoir, to serve as members of their respective crews.

Human, well-mannered, beautiful young men, all committed to serving the vampire masters of Noctra Island.

Donté smoothed a hand over the piercings, listened to the thundering heartbeat, the shallow breaths of his lover for the night. This was the second time he'd fed from Vasily in less than a fortnight and he would savor tonight. His blood was too rich, too addictive. If he fed from him once more before the next full moon, he was likely to draw the young man too close to the crossover. He dared not take the chance.

Pulling his still hard cock from inside Vasily, he lifted from the bed and walked over to the table. It was early yet, hardly a stroke after midnight, and he planned to savor his young sailor until the first misty fingers of dawn cut through the night. At the rate Donté was going he might not last if he didn't slow down. Sips only, no more than a pint of Vasily's blood or he'd push him too close to the edge. Donté poured some of the finely aged French burgundy into a goblet.

He took a moment to glance up, pinning the other bound man on the opposite side of the room beneath a hard stare.

"Do you see what you're missing?" Not quite all of his crew were as well mannered as he liked. "You could have been where he is, Velvet, if you hadn't disobeyed my command."

Velvet, a gunner's mate of unique precision and fortitude, was stretched out, hands manacled high above his head, his hard cock and heavy balls harnessed, a lead weight swinging with each surge of the ship, two more weights tugged at his distended tits.

Velvet was as beautiful as any of the men on the ship, and most of the time he listened to orders. Tonight called for discipline in Velvet's case. A hair trigger temper requiring a strong hand, he'd been less than humble, so certain he'd be the one to entertain the captain tonight. Well, Velvet was entertaining the master all right, but not in the way the rebellious young sailor expected.

Donté would not tolerate jealousy, or assumption, among his crew. The captain treated all of his mates equally and he would not have any of them attempting to usurp his authority and causing dissension on the ship. One day, Velvet would learn his place. Or else spend more time on the wall than in the captain's bed.

Donté walked over to Velvet and trailed his cool fingertips over the man's sweat-soaked chest. He hefted one of the weights in the palm of his hand and then allowed it to drop away. He heard Velvet's long drawn out hiss as it dragged against a tit.

Dropping his head, he razed his sharp teeth over Velvet's flesh. Lines of red tracked his path. But he didn't sink them into his flesh. He didn't feed.

"Please, Master, I'm sorry for what I did. I'll never do it again."

"I wish I believed you, Velvet. But this isn't the first time, is it? Not even the second. You're smart enough to make first gunner, but your temper and lack of self-control are your downfall. Be thankful I didn't turn you over to Margan and have him assign you to the bilge pump tonight-- wallowing in stinking water for a night might teach you a lesson. That might have been a more fitting punishment. We'll see what a night of discipline on my wall will do for your manners."

Donté swung away, ignoring the pleading look in the beautiful sailor's whiskey-colored eyes. Swift discipline and heavy bondage was the only thing Velvet understood. For at least a short time. Sterling handled this one with a firmer hand. Sterling would have had him strapped to the main mast, a discipline wedge shoved up his ass, and a hundred lashes to stripe his back. Savoir was a much sterner taskmaster when it came to discipline. Unfortunately Sterling and the *Black Star* hadn't been due to leave Noctra for another month and, as usual, the beautiful gunner had gotten Donté to agree to take him on. His blood was some of the richest among the human residents of Noctra, and his skill with the cannon exceeded by few. If only his temperament better aligned with his name, they all would be much better off.

Yet both Sterling and Donté liked a challenge now and then, which is why Velvet was allowed to remain. Velvet might be a bit of a scallywag in many ways, but he was just too luscious to exile. Donté walked over to the big white cat lying on a stretch of crimson and cream Persian rug in a corner of the room. He leaned down to pet the huge Bengal outcast.

"You'll keep him in line, won't you? Too bad he doesn't have your understanding of self-preservation." The snow-white, almost totally stripeless tiger leaned into the stroke of the vampire. Few animals on the mainland accepted the touch of a vampire. But Khan was different--he was as cursed as any vampire, and his connection to the vampire was unique.

Donté turned his attention back to Vasily still stretched out on the bed, eyes closed. Picking up the goblet, he moved back to his lusty donor for the evening. Gently lifting Vasily's head, he tipped the goblet and allowed some of the wine to trickle into his mouth.

Vasily's eyelids fluttered opened and he gulped at the wine until the goblet was empty.

"That's better, sweeting. The color is returning to your face. Are you feeling more yourself?"

Donté set the goblet on the nightstand and picked up the wet cloth from the mauve-colored porcelain basin and bathed Vasily's stomach and flaccid penis. Returning the cloth to the bowl, he leaned toward Vasily and pressed his lips to the young man's. Vasily's mouth parted and Donté thrust his tongue deep inside. The rattle of the chains binding Vasily to the bed bled through the needy moans as the sexy young sailor shifted and arched begging for his master's touch. Donté heard a whimper from the other side of the room. A deep, warning growl from Khan. He ignored Velvet. There would be time enough to decide what to do about him later. For now, he was simply a decoration on his wall, reminded of his place by Khan.

"Would you like something to eat before we continue?"

Vasily looked up at him with worshipful eyes. "Whatever you want, Captain."

Donté couldn't help smiling. Vasily was a good boy and very respectful. A week of serving on the *Night Stalker* and Vasily had no qualms about turning his back on his past life. Of offering his blood and service to the Noctra vampires.

Donté rose and stepped to the table at the center of the room where a tray of food rested. He didn't partake, but he had to maintain the strength of his two human lovers. He picked up a thick slice of bread and a small wedge of cheese and returned to the bed. He hand-fed Vasily slowly, with drugging kisses in between until his sweet supplicant finished the bread and cheese. By then, Vasily's cock was thick and hard, bobbing against his flat abdomen. Yes, he was revived and appeared more than ready to serve his master once more.

Donté picked up the oil to prepare Vasily's passage. A snarl curled his lip when a knock sounded at the door. Donté glared at the root of his irritation. Who dared to interrupt? Swift punishment would be exacted for the defiance of his standing orders...unless it was an emergency. He set down the bottle of oil and rose from the bed.

"Enter," he roared with the force of a fierce gale. After a moment of hesitation, the door slowly opened. It was Jupiter, his first mate, who edged his way into the cabin. He looked straight at the captain, neither sliding a sidelong glance toward Velvet, nor toward the bed where Vasily, his second mate, was stretched out.

"Permission to speak, Cap'n."

Donté waved a hand in the air. "What is it? This better be important."

"We've spied someone in the water, sir. The men are about to bring him on board. I thought you'd want to be informed."

All of Donté's crew had preternatural eyesight--one of the dark gifts of human service to the vampires of Noctra. Although the black sloop skimmed through the ocean in the dead of night, it might as well have been daylight for their sharp eyesight.

"Does he look promising?" Donté dressed quickly, donning a pair of black breeches and then pulling on a white linen shirt.

"Hard to tell, sir. He was a ways out. Margan send two men out to retrieve him. Looks to be a survivor from another downed ship."

Was there any other kind this far out to sea? Most of Donté's crew were survivors from sacrifices to the dangerous, unpredictable seas. Many on the very verge of drowning or being eaten alive by hungry sharks, or worse. Men who'd been thankful for the captain's beneficence in saving them from a fate far worse than their untimely death in the surging waters.

There'd been a storm the previous night, which might cause a ship to founder. Donté straightened after pulling on the second black leather thigh-high boot.

"Have Liam see to my men, Jupiter." He glanced over at Velvet. "Leave him for another hour and then release him. In the meantime, take gentle care of Vasily. I've fed well and he may be light-headed. I don't want him up and around before he's recovered."

Jupiter nodded. "Yes, Cap'n."

Donté returned to the bed, leaned down, and kissed Vasily. "Another night, sweeting." Then he strode out of the cabin, along the passage and headed to the main deck.

As Donté stepped onto the deck Margan and Onyx hauled a very bedraggled man onto the deck with help from several of the sailors. The stranger collapsed against the railing, salt water splashing onto the deck. It was hard to tell much about him considering the exhausted state of the man, but from first glance he certainly looked...intriguing.

The crew made way for the captain to get through. Several of the men held torches, providing a soft glow of light. Donté nudged the half-drowned man with the point of his well-polished black boot. The eyelids of the young man splayed out on the deck fluttered opened. *What stunning blue eyes*, was Donté first thought. Clear and sparkling like the sea, framed with long sooty lashes. Yes, definitely worth an interrupted hour of his time.

The young man staring up at Donté looked shaken, yet alert.

"What's your name, lad?"

Donté saw his pink tongue dart out to wet his lips. "Templeton, sir. Skye Templeton. I was on the merchant ship, *Topaz*, heading back from the West Indies when a storm hit."

Skye. Donté liked the sound of the name. He dropped down onto his haunches and studied the young man carefully. He pushed back a thick lock of wet hair and Skye shuddered.

"Well, you're safe now. We'll get you back to land. What sort of goods were you carrying?"

"Spices, and silks, Captain. All gone down with the ship."

"So, you're a merchant then? Or were you perhaps one of the crew?" By the looks of his damaged and wet clothing, he was a gentleman of some

means. Even wet they seemed to be a cut of fine quality material.

He saw the look in Skye's eyes falter, his glance swiftly taking in the men hovering around, and then flitted back to the captain. Donté saw one of his hands move to his hip. A reflex action. At another time there might have been a pistol, or a sword, perhaps.

Donté's curiosity was aroused. Was the young man just a merchant, or something more? Skye allowed his hand to drop back down. Definitely not a stupid man. Very much a man of some intelligence--and caution. Donté liked that. He had a feeling it might be a bit of a challenge getting this young man to submit and join his crew. As a connoisseur of fine human flesh and blood, just by looking at the self-professed merchant, he bet the young man's blood was a very expensive vintage of life-giving fluid. Definitely a prize he was not going to toss back to the sea.

Donté rose to his feet and held out a hand. Skye seemed to consider for a moment and then hesitantly accepted the offer, and Donté easily brought him to his feet. Inches separated them. He could feel the heat of the young man even through the wet, clinging layers of his clothes. He smelled of the salty ocean, of youth, and vitality. Exhausted to be sure, but Donté had a feeling it wouldn't take much to get him back on his feet.

Donté held his gaze for long moments. The quiet night was broken only by the creaking of the ship and the flapping of the sails in the strong wind. His gaze dropped to Skye's finely defined lips, traced over the tightly stretched pale skin highlighted in full lunar ambiance and warm firelight. His blue eyes were shadowed, dark half-moons beneath them. If it hadn't been for that--

Skye stepped away and the spell was broken. Donté could sense the young man's wariness. But he appeared interested. Maybe intrigued might be a better word.

"Onyx, take our exhausted friend and assign him a berth below. And find him some dry clothes. Check with Nathan and get him something to eat." He turned back to Skye. "We'll talk later."

Onyx stepped forward. "Aye-aye, Cap'n, right away." He looked at Skye. "Follow me and we'll get you settled." He headed toward the companionway that led to the lower decks. Donté watched Skye stumble after him, then he turned back to the rest of the crew.

"Back to work. The night's still young." The rest of the men quickly dispersed.

The hold overflowed with bounty and he'd planned to head back to Noctra soon. Maybe a few more days out might not be such a bad thing. It might serve him well to search the area for any other lost souls. Or evidence that a downed ship really had existed.

But right now he had two other sailors who deserved his attention. There were still a few hours left to the evening. He might even release Velvet and allow him into his bed. Donté felt rather pleased just now with the addition of young Skye Templeton. And he was hungry.

His men would not let Skye Templeton out of their sights until they could gauge the young man's intentions. They might try to fuck him for the fun of it, but they would fight to the man to protect their vampire captain. One thing Donté knew he could count on was the loyalty of his crew.

Play hard, fight rough, and yield to their vampire master. Would he gain another willing suppliant? Only time would tell.

Donté opened the polished wooden door to his cabin. Vasily had been unchained and was sitting up on the edge of the bed a glass of wine in one hand and a wedge of cheese in the other. It appeared Liam was just about to attend to the gunner chained to the captain's wall. Velvet was still bound, his cock deep purple, hard and bobbing, the weight still dancing above the floorboards, his nipples clamped, his body stretched tight, blood pulsing thickly through every fiber. Donté could hear the thundering beat of his heart.

"Thank you, Liam. You may go. I'll attend to Velvet."

"Yes, Cap'n." Without delay Liam left the cabin. Donté watched him leave, admiring the breadth of his shoulders. Another excellent specimen of manhood attached to his crew as his gaze dropped to the sweet, tight ass of the man as he walked out the door. He should make better use of the young carpenter, who happened to be particularly adept with his hands.

As the door closed Donté turned to look at Vasily. His heartbeat was strong as well, not quite as thunderous as Velvet's, but still sounding fully recovered from his earlier...exertions.

They were both beautifully angelic in their own way, with more of a fallen angel appeal. Both with silky, black braided locks that dusted their shoulders, and bronzed skin from long hours of work on deck during daylight.

Donté took good care of his human servants and they glowed with health and vibrancy. He took great pride in the humans who served him. Loyalty was not something that could be bought or beaten into men. Respect was earned. His men gave trust and loyalty because he respected their humanness. But he ruled his ship with iron command.

It had been a long voyage and everyone was ready to get back to Noctra. Just a few more days and he'd give the order. But not just yet.

He gazed hungrily at his two beautiful young men. "Shall we continue, gentlemen? I suddenly have a voracious appetite once again and I'll need

both of you to satisfy my thirst."

Chapter 2

"Bloody hell!" Skye watched blood leak from the stinging slice in his thumb and brought the injured digit up to his mouth, but another's hand stayed him.

"Not just yet," the ship's cook said. He turned Skye's thumb and held a thimble-sized pewter cup to catch the droplets of crimson blood that dripped from the slash. Skye tried to pull his hand away, but Nathan held it firmly in place, squeezing expertly to milk the small wound.

"Ow. What are you doing?"

"Nothing for you to worry about. Just catching the drips. The pressure will help to slow it. It'll stop soon, never fear."

Skye watched the fat crimson drips land in the cup. It wasn't long before it stopped bleeding and Nathan handed Skye a strip of white linen cloth to wrap around the small injury.

"Not done much cooking, have you, lad?"

No exactly true, but he would let the lie stand. "No, not much." Skye watched Nathan, wondering what the man was going to do with the cup containing his blood. Nathan carried it to the counter on the other side of the room and set it on a tray.

"Ah, well, you'll learn. You seem like a smart young'un."

"How long have you been with the captain?"

Nathan slid a glance in his direction. For all his beauty, his eyes were strangely filmed and Skye wondered how he could see with any clarity. Although by looking at him from a distance one might assume him to be a man in his late twenties, the ship's cook seemed a lot more mature than he looked, often talking like a man well beyond his years.

"Long enough, lad. You don't seem like a man who's had to turn his hand to rough work. I sense you wear the cloak of well-born about your shoulders."

"How is it you can see? Begging your pardon, but your eyes..."

Nathan smiled and nodded. "Most make the same mistake. I've the sight, boy. Sure and it doesn't come on me often, but I was born this way. Me mum and the village in Cornwall I called home always feared me. I was maybe seventeen when they'd had enough."

"What happened?" Skye watched as Nathan stirred the pot on the stove. Nathan looked at Skye, but it was hard to believe the man actually saw him. Such strange, yet striking features. The ghostly translucent blue of his gaze made him appear like someone from the fae world.

"The mayor's son took sick. I told me mum it would happen and she told the mayor's wife. Unfortunately, he did."

"And they blamed you?"

"Who else? They came for me in the dead of night. Trussed me up and took me out and tossed me into the sea. There was talk of a sea serpent trolling the waters killing the fishermen of our village. I guess they thought if they handed over someone touched like me, the monster would leave them be."

"So they just tossed you overboard?"

"Aye, they did that. And made as quick a getaway as they could. It was the cap'n who saved me. Hauled me out of the waters and killed the bloody monster. Eight long, windy legs it had and big as a small fishing vessel. I've never seen anything of its like before. Or at least I hadn't until I joined the cap'n's crew."

"You've seen other sea monsters? I thought they weren't real, only yarns spun by fishermen and sailors."

"Aye, they're real enough. You'll find lots out here that many a man will scoff at on land. But they're true." He pointed a finger at his chest. "I seen them meself. I know they're true."

"You say Captain Lucienne saved you? He seems very young to have battled such a monster and lived."

Nathan stopped stirring and peered at Skye. "Don't be underestimating the cap'n, lad. He's more man than any ten I've ever met. We're all alive because of him. And what about you, boy? What do you know of the sea?"

Skye knew he should tread carefully. How much should he tell these strange men about his background?

"My father had an interest in the spices we were carrying. I begged my father to let me accompany the captain on this trip, as I hadn't been to sea before. I wanted to see something of the world."

"Aye. And yer Da folded to your bobbery I take it."

Skye smiled. "I guess I did create a bit of an uproar. But, the captain was a friend of his from school. He'd thought I'd be safe with him."

"And I expect you were, until the end."

How far dared he take the lie? "Yes. Until the end."

Nathan turned around to fully face him. The man's strange eyes focused on Skye, locking Skye's gaze in place. He couldn't look away no matter how badly he wanted to do so. Suddenly, Nathan pivoted around to the tray containing the thimbleful of Skye's blood, breaking the iron connection between them. Skye watched him add a bottle of wine and a cut glass goblet, then tilted his head Skye's way.

"You know what he be, don't ye? You've heard the talk?"

"You mean the captain. I've overhead the men. Why aren't you all afraid of him? Why do you stay?"

"His kind ain't what you'd expect, boy. Stay with us for a bit and you'll see that he's not like the tales you've heard. We're all connected, though he's not made us like himself. We all stay of our own free will." His focus narrowed. "And we'll protect him from any that would do him harm."

"You'd protect a vampire."

Nathan nodded. "Aye, to the last man." He held the tray out toward Skye. "Well, then, you can be taking this to the captain's quarters."

"He's going to drink my blood? What does he need my blood for? Doesn't he get enough from the rest of you?"

"Aye, your blood. Don't think we'll be trusting you just yet, young sir. We're not keen on trusting strangers right off. It's just a nip for him to judge your intent."

"But-- "

Nathan handed him the tray. Something about his expression made Skye want to turn and run. The unfocused look seemed cold, yet mesmerizing, drawing him in. It took all his strength to turn away.

"Have you something to hide? Cap'n's a special man, young Templeton. You'll soon see the rightness of it." Nathan cupped Skye's jaw.

Skye used all his self-control not to shrink away. It wasn't that he didn't enjoy the touch of a man, it was just *this* man, this crewmember.

"He likes you, boy. Play your cards right and he might ask you to join us. You'd do well to consider the offer."

"You think I'd join a crew of pirates led by a vampire?"

Nathan chuckled and then his hand dropped away. "Not just any pirates. We're Noctra...pirates. None better, none smarter, none more powerful than us. As I said, you'd do well to think about it. Now take this to the captain. He'll be about ready to rise. Be quick about it."

There wasn't much choice. Skye picked up the tray, turned and left the galley kitchen, heading along the passageway toward the captain's quarters. He'd heard the hesitation in Nathan's words. These weren't just pirates--they were vampirates--or at least served one. And that was a totally different species from the natural order in the human world. He'd now been on the ship three days and he'd begun to understand the nocturnal routine. If routine it could be called. Most of the regular work occurred at night rather than during the day. He'd known this mission would be a challenge and he might not come back alive, but he hadn't expected to be sexually aroused not only by the members of the crew, but by the captain as well.

Sleeping was not an easy feat to accomplish. He was assigned a hammock down in the hull. Close quarters to be sure with eighty-odd men on board, half on duty, half off, at any given time. The atmosphere was hot and dense, and surprisingly smelled of sex, rather than moldering food stores and wet wood as were the aromas found on most ships. He soon realized the sleeping quarters weren't exactly used for sleeping. In the dark of night he could hear the moans of the men, two to a hammock, sometimes three. They were sounds of sex, shadows undulating, the rhythmic creak of rope as hammocks swayed with the momentum of the ship and men fucking.

If the sailors weren't working, they were fucking, and it didn't seem to matter who fucked whom. It wasn't just the state of the ship, but the men themselves. It was a ship under the glamour of dark possession.

But no one had propositioned him yet. And he was thankful for that. Because the sounds of lust had him eager to join them, his cock hard against his leg, not a bit of respite. Almost from the moment he'd set foot on board his dick had remained as hard and stiff as the mainmast. He dared not ease himself with one of the crew. He had to focus on his mission and suffocate this urge for personal gratification. Who knew which of them he might have to kill if it came down to it? He couldn't allow himself to get that close.

In the darkness, he'd taken to gaining his own relief as he listened to the others, without engaging in direct intimacy with any members of the crew. At least it was something. Using his hand, he'd stroked up and down the hot, throbbing shaft as he'd listened to the men, the sounds of kissing, licking, and sucking loud to his ears. Every night more of the same until he thought he would go crazy from the lust that spread through him.

The other thing he noticed were the small scars marking the crew. Not just on their necks but over their whole body. Yet they weren't pale and lifeless. He'd never seen a crew so fit as these men--each and every one. Not a single man seemed diseased or maimed. All in perfect health, each one a perfect specimen of manhood in his own way. Almost more temptation than a lusty soldier should be required to resist.

But Skye wasn't here for fucking. He was charged with a different agenda, as long as he was able to hide his mission from the vampire captain until the time was right.

He rounded a corner of the passageway and stopped abruptly. He should be used to the sight by now. One of the crew pistoning his cock into the ass of the other. Draped across the ladder Skye needed to climb to get to the captain's quarters.

Both of them big and broad, chests naked, with navy-colored slop pants pooled on the floor at their feet. One bald, the other with red-gold braided hair, both clean-shaven. The bald man had his hands fisted around the ladder; the other's grip was fastened to the bald man's hips, grinding into him.

Skye recognized the one doing the fucking as Jupiter, the second in command to Captain Lucienne. Skye couldn't help looking at the defined muscles of his ass rippling like strong, peaking ocean waves with each stroke of his cock.

Soon his movements grew faster and faster until he stiffened and cried out. Skye held his breath, stepping back into the shadows, his own hard log thickening painfully against his leg. Since coming aboard this ship it felt like he hadn't had a moment's peace from a raging erection of one sort or the other.

The sailor finally lifted away. He pulled up and refastened his pants. The bald man turned to face Jupiter. The taller man leaned down and fastened his mouth over the sailor's, forcing him back against the ladder. Skye had no idea how much longer they planned to stay there, but he had to get past them one way or the other. He had to assume the captain wouldn't be pleased about waiting for his wine.

Jupiter pulled the sailor away from the ladder and shoved him up against the wall, locking him in place with his body. He turned his head and looked straight at Skye through the darkness of the passageway.

"Get going then," he growled. "Unless you want some of the same."

Skye stepped over the discarded pants at the base of the ladder. He wasn't interested in a confrontation just at the moment. "Captain's waiting," he mumbled as he balanced the tray and hurried up the ladder.

"I expect he is. You let me know when you're ready for a good fucking, boy, and I'll be more than happy to break you in to the crew." Jupiter's amused voice followed in his wake.

Skye didn't even want to think about having the first mate's huge cock reaming him out. He had a feeling it wouldn't be easy...or painless. His gaze blurred as he had visions of the man driving his prick into Skye's ass. His hands began to shake and he almost dropped the tray. He forced himself to focus.

His attention centered on the thimble filled with his blood. He didn't dare let the captain have it. One thing he knew from his time with the general, never let a vampire taste your blood. But how was he going to explain if Nathan should question him later?

He stood in the passageway for a long time trying to come to some resolution. And then he saw the answer scurry not a foot away from him. Blood that wouldn't tie Skye to the vampire. Wouldn't allow the captain to see into Skye's mind to determine his purpose on the ship.

He looked along the passageway and determined he was alone. He dumped the thimble into a bucket of water setting at the side of the passage and then followed the shadowy scuttle of tiny feet into a small storeroom to the left. Having been trained to hunt and kill vermin, and kill quickly, the rat was dead within seconds. Easier than Skye's usual two-footed prey.

He took what he needed to replenish the thimble and tossed the small corpse into a corner. He'd seen a black cat or two on the ship since his arrival and figured they'd clean up the remains. Whatever happened, he dared not let the vampire drink his blood, no matter how small an amount it was.

He picked up the tray and headed in the direction of the captain's cabin. Skye's heart hammered in his chest when he finally reached the correct door. He knocked before opening it, then lifted the latch and entered.

The pirate, Captain Donté Lucienne was legend, feared by most seamen. Word had it he was bloodthirsty and took no prisoners, only bounty, leaving a long trail of blood behind him. No better than the fabled sea monsters, and his reputation had grown to larger than life. How much was myth and how much truth was something Skye was about to discover.

But there was also another story, one Skye knew by heart. Donté was one of the vampires who lived on the mythical island of Noctra--a place no one had yet been able to locate.

His main mission was to discover the location of the vampire stronghold. Skye had taken on this suicidal mission because killing Donté and all the vampires of Noctra was a personal matter. Very personal. And he fully intended to succeed. That is, if the vampire didn't kill him first.

What did surprise him was the nature of the crew on this ship. He'd expected to find more vampires, but as far as he could tell, Donté was the only undead. The remainder were all humans. Not ordinary humans by any means, but still living, breathing, heart-pumping humans. And they were all men loyal to their vampire captain.

His gaze widened once he was inside the captain's cabin. He shouldn't have been surprised, not from what he'd already overheard.

A naked sailor was stretched out on the captain's bed and Lucienne leaned over him, his mouth fastened to the sailor's neck. The look in the man's eyes was something Skye had never seen before. Like a moment of sublime ecstasy.

His feet were rooted to the spot as Skye watched Captain Lucienne feed from the sailor. Skye knew he should be horrified by the scene, but instead he was held mesmerized by the eroticism playing out in the shadows of the bed.

Donté wore black breeches and a loose white linen shirt dotted with specks of red blood. His hand splayed along the side of the sailor's face, his long fingers stroking his victim's jaw in a soothing manner. The sailor's eyes fluttered closed, his jaw went slack, and Captain Lucienne lifted away, licking the last drops from his lips.

He eased the man back against the pillows.

"Come in, Mr. Templeton. You can set the tray on the table."

Then he looked at Skye. His black pupils seemed larger than any human's, not a speck of white visible. His fangs looked razor sharp. So much the visage of a blood-sucking vampire, yet oddly, a breathtakingly beautiful aura beyond anything Skye had ever seen before. Vampire, and yet not. Porcelain skin of such aching beauty, like nothing he'd ever seen before. So very different from the monsters Skye had disposed of in the past. He almost seemed...more than human rather than less. The unexpected ache of arousal rose quickly to the surface.

The desire flooding inside him horrified Skye more than the act of watching Donté feed from the sailor. He could not allow himself to succumb to the captain's mesmerizing attraction. He had been warned that it could happen, and he'd been so certain that it wouldn't. How naïve he had been.

He set the tray on the table and then quickly stepped away.

"Good, wine will help to revive him. You're just in time." It almost seemed he floated over to the table to pour some wine into a goblet and then just as effortlessly returned to the bed. He held the glass to the sailor's lips.

Skye was afraid at first that the sailor was dead. But then he saw him gulp at the wine, draining the contents. Donté leaned down and whispered something to the man. He stroked his face with his long, pale fingers. Skye had visions of those beautiful hands stroking over his own body, could almost feel the touch. Then the man's eyes closed and Skye saw the deep rise and fall of his chest.

"He'll sleep now. I'm always so ravenous when I first awaken. It's good that Liam is a strong man."

Skye looked closer at the man lying on the bed and realized it was the ship's master carpenter in the captain's bed. He'd helped him with a repair to the deck just the other day.

Donté stood and faced Skye. "I assume you know what I am, Mr. Templeton."

Skye took a step back and found himself up against the door. One moment Donté was next to the bed, the next his body was pressed against Skye's. Skye felt a cold chill race along his spine.

"Answer me, Mr. Templeton."

"I-I've heard rumors. You're a-a vampire. Are you going to kill me?" If he did, Skye's mission would have ended in failure. Not the first agent not to return by any means.

Donté's deep laughter echoed through the room. "Is that what you think I have planned for you?" He cupped Skye's jaw. "Not at all." His black gaze studied Skye closely. "How are you settling in, Mr. Templeton? My crew enjoy a good fuck and a rousing fight. If not one, then the other. Would you like to join those who serve me and my ship, Mr. Templeton?"

"What will you do to me?"

"Whatever you want, my boy. I find you quite beautiful, as well as intelligent, and I think you'd be an asset to my crew. I'm certain they would enjoy you. I know I would." He swept his hand down Skye's arm, and then over his hip, stopping at the prominent erection between his legs. "Ahh, you're not so unmoved as you'd like me to believe, are you?"

"I don't know what you mean. I don't want to suck anyone's blood."

"No one's asking you to. None of my men are vampires. I'm the only one who feeds on board this ship. You would simply be another to provide sustenance--if you wish."

"So you do mean to kill me."

"Does any of my crew look dead to you? In fact, I would say they're probably healthier than many a crew you may have encountered."

"I'm not like them."

Donté smiled and leaned closer. "Not yet. Are you a virgin, Mr. Templeton? I do enjoy a virgin now and then."

"No, Captain, I'm not." At least that was a truthful statement.

"Well, maybe that's just as well." Finally, he released Skye and returned to the table. He picked up the small pewter cup and sniffed at the contents. He looked at Skye, narrowing his unsettling gaze.

"There's something you're not telling me, isn't there? Did you think you could fool me? I wonder why? What are you afraid I'm going to find out?" He tossed the thimble across the room.

The vampire was shrewd--maybe more so than Sky had anticipated. He had come up against many vampires working with the general. But none quite like Donté. Skye knew he was out of his depth. And it was going to take all his skill and cunning to beat Donté Lucienne.

Chapter 3

Donté studied the young man standing before him. He liked his games of cat and mouse as well as any vampire did. And Skye Templeton was ripe for the game. He was definitely hiding something, but it wasn't the substituted thimble of blood that told him that. It was the smell of the young man, and the swift rush of the blood pumping through his veins.

"Hmmm. What are you trying to hide from me, Mr. Templeton? I wonder." Unlike the others whose minds were easily read, this young man had a brick wall slammed down on his thoughts. That was a learned skill not always successful. But Skye Templeton was not of the usual ilk. His block was one Donté seemed unable to break through. He was indeed very strong-minded. Donté liked the challenge.

"What makes you think I'm trying to hide anything?"

"Why don't you want me to sample your blood? I'm not asking to lay open your vein. Just a drop to determine your honesty. Is that so much to ask?" He watched Skye closely. It had been a long time since he'd had a young man like Skye on board his ship. At least fifty years or so.

But there were other ways to test his honesty. If Skye thought blood alone would allow Donté to measure his worth, he was about to discover how mistaken he was. Carrib vampires were not made as continent vampires were. Their powers extended farther into the world of the occult. He narrowed his focus, reached into Skye's aura. It was something he could do without the exchange of blood. A man of unique gifts had taught him how to tune into the essence of a man without making the normal connection of vampire and supplicant.

The colors were intriguing as he watched the sexual red shimmer grow. It surprised Donté because he still also sensed the fight for his control, the fear that he was going to lose it. Which, of course, eventually he would. Donté knew very well the stretch of his powers over humans. Especially intelligent young men such as Skye Templeton. They presented such a lovely challenge. They fought so earnestly. And fell so hard.

"You knew about me before you came aboard my ship."

Skye looked him straight in the eyes. "There have always been tales of the vampirates. But like sea monsters, no one really knows what's true and what's not."

He was a brave young man, but Donté heard the rush of blood through his veins, the very loud pounding of his heartbeat. He dropped a hand onto Skye's shoulder, glided down his arm and then lifted Skye's bandaged hand toward his lips.

"How did this happen?" Slowly, he unwound the bandage to reveal the newly sealed cut slicing the pad of his thumb. "Nasty thing. I can't have you getting sick, now can I?"

Skye's breathing slowed, almost stopping, his breaths shallow, his wide blue eyes on Donté's hands as the bandage pulled away. The white cloth drifted to the floor and Donté again raised Skye's hand to his lips. He watched the aura around Skye brighten, vibrant red intermingled with murky gray as the young man fought his attraction to the dangerous vampirate captain.

"What are you going to do?"

Donté licked across the two-inch long wound, tasting the metallic texture of newly-formed scar tissue that sealed the knife wound. His tongue lingered, swirling over Skye's flesh. He licked along the length of each aristocratic digit. Sucked the thumb into his mouth, then slowly released it.

Skye's pupils dilated almost completely. The red of his aura now dominated the gray. He pulled the boy into his arms, almost as though they prepared to waltz. He held the injured hand up, bared his fangs, and then hesitated.

He turned his gaze to Skye's beautiful face. Angular and pale, high cheekbones, hollowed cheeks. Pink lips trembling.

The arm linked around Skye's body pulled him closer, pressed groin to groin. The unexpectedly strong surge of lust that swept through Donté almost floored him. His fangs ached to bury into the sweet, pliant flesh, to taste the rich blood that flowed through Skye's veins. To have Skye Templeton on his knees, begging to be taken.

"Captain," he whispered.

"Yes, lad," Donté murmured.

"Do you consider yourself a good person?"

The question took Donté by surprise. His gaze shot to Skye's face. He saw submission there, but there was something else as well. Something deeper, a level of defiance he tried to hide. To own this man's soul would be worth far more than all the others combined.

"A good person?" Once. Maybe. A long time ago, when he truly was human. But that was a faraway place and distant time. Before the rebellion. Before his sire had turned him. Not that he'd had a choice. Which is one of the reasons he refused to turn another. They had no idea the purgatory of the undead life he lived. Eternity wasn't as glorious an existence as humans were led to believe.

He turned his attention to the hand with the slender angry bloodline mark, brushed his lips across the throbbing heat of the wound. "I like to think I am a fair man. Not necessarily good."

"How many humans have you killed? Do you remember all their names?"

Again, he turned his head to look at the intriguing young man. He wrenched Skye's arm behind his back, drawing him closer still.

"Is that why you're here, lad? To avenge a supposed wrong I've committed? Or do you believe yourself a vampire hunter? Ready to lay down your life for the chance to kill one of my kind?"

Skye opened his pretty mouth as though to say something, and then seemed to think better of it. Donté smiled. He was so human. So lovely.

Donté leaned closer. "Do you want to kill me, Skye? Do you think you're the first? Do you think I care what their names were before I disposed of them? Before I bled them dry?"

"I--I d-don't--" Skye's voice trailed away.

"You would not be the first to have attempted to board my ship under false pretenses. Was there even a distressed ship? We've seen no sign of one. You're playing a dangerous game, lad, very dangerous. I will say you are certainly the first to intrigue me in many years. I think I want to keep you, Skye Templeton. We'll see how long my interest in you lasts."

Swiftly he turned and razed his fangs across the palm of Skye's hand without piercing his flesh. Just enough pressure to prove his control. The young man struggled for a moment, attempting to free his hand, and then he stilled as Donté licked his palm, soothing the heat of the red tracks left in his wake. He turned his attention back to Skye, pushed him up against the wall and then ripped his shirt open, baring smooth, hot flesh beneath.

"So perfect, so beautiful," he whispered. He looked into Skye's eyes and saw stark fear blended with molten desire. Donté saw the battle raging inside him. He smoothed his hands over Skye's torso, enjoying the feel of his unblemished skin. He bared his teeth, prepared for the first breach of unmarred flesh, marking him for all to see.

He shredded the shirt and tossed it aside. Succulent, rippling muscle met his gaze. Taut and bronzed flesh. Pulsing veins rich with energizing blood. More than anything else he wanted to taste this man, to own him. To make him bleed for Donté and no one else.

To fuck him and brand him.

He watched as Skye slowly tilted his head, eyes fastened to Donté's, exposing the pulsing artery decorating his throat. The desire to taste Skye burned deep, raging through him--taste his flesh and his blood. Just a sip would never be enough.

He wanted to linger over his new treasure, to sup leisurely and elegantly. Donté bowed closer, inhaling his scent.

"Captain!"

"Bloody damn," he said under his breath as he leaned away and Skye slid to the floor, eyes closed.

Donté stalked to the door and pulled it open. "What is it?"

Jupiter stood there, cutlass gripped in his hand. "Onyx spied a set of sails. Looks to be a French brigantine he says. I thought you'd want to know. There's no flag and by the look of her appears to be a zombie ship."

"The one we've been tracking?"

Jupiter shook his head. "Can't say yet. Without her colors. But the stench of voodoo is in the air."

"Raise the French flag until we're closer, in case you're wrong. When we're alongside strike our colors, but not before she's disabled. Issue the weapons to the men. One pouch of salt and two axes to each man. None to survive. Have you determined if it's Zoliel?"

"She's riding low in the water, heavy with cargo it looks like. We're lighter and faster, Captain. We've more guns by the look of her. We've sixteen to her twelve. We should overtake her quickly."

Donté stepped away from the door. "Then do it. Issue the orders. Are the gunners prepared?" The *Night Stalker* was fitted with more than enough guns to take down a zombie ship.

"Aye, Cap'n. All's in readiness. We'll be prepared to board her and make swift work of the monsters." Jupiter saluted and left the cabin.

Donté spun away, traded his white shirt for black and tucked it into his breeches. He strapped on a belt, then yanked on his boots. He grabbed for his cutlass and ax, and slipped an ivory handled knife into his belt.

Khan growled and Donté walked over to the big cat and knelt down. He cupped his chin and looked deep into the tiger's eyes, connecting with him on a deeper, primal level.

"Settle down, Khan. We'll prevail as always. Easy." Once the big cat calmed, he rose and turned to face Skye who had risen and stood motionless on the other side of the room, still looking a bit shattered by what had just occurred. Too bad they'd been interrupted.

The blast of cannons shook the ship.

Boom. Boom. Boom.

The battle had already begun. Pistols were no good against a ship full of zombies. But the cannons could at least disable a ship until they could come alongside, run lines, and board her. The scourge of the seas for both merchants and vampires were the zombie crews. The very monsters he hunted night after night.

Donté looked at Skye. "I don't want you in the middle of this. Until I can gauge your usefulness, and your loyalties, I want you to stay below. Stay here with Liam. He's not strong enough to join the fight."

"Who are we fighting? A merchant ship? More spoils? More deaths?"

The smile Donté gave him was cold, just like his dead heart. "Aye, it's a merchant ship all right. And we're about to scuttle her if the night is with us. Do as I order and you'll be safe enough."

Leaving the cabin, Donté headed for the main deck. Smoke filled the air. Crewmen raced back and forth, hauling sails, preparing for battle.

He made his way to the upper deck to get a better idea of their position. He found Jupiter there and he grabbed the telescope from him and eyed their prey. They were close, so close. They'd be alongside sooner than he'd expected. And then his gaze lifted to the upper deck of their prey. Just as he espied someone, there was a loud blast, and then a roar of broken wood, loud as a felled house, as the main mast toppled across the deck.

"Are the men ready?" Donté shouted without taking his attention off the French ship. His men scented the blood of victory as they heaved grappling irons across the sea to dig into the wood. Mixed with the smoke was the sulfurous stink of grenades and bombs tossed to the other ship. He heard the triumphant yell of his men.

"Aye, we're ready, Cap'n," shouted Jupiter over the rising roar of the men. "We've fought enough of them to take heed."

"Make certain they know none will be turned. If any of them fall, they will not suffer."

"They know that, Cap'n, there's no need to remind them. They know you'll care for them right and proper."

"Make ready to board then," Donté yelled, pulling his sword from its sheath and raising it about his head. "They're sluggish and mindless. They only follow the orders of their puppet master. Move swiftly and with determination. Take no chances."

He turned to Jupiter. "Watch for Zoliel. He's the one we want even more than the zombies he manipulates. Find the puppeteer."

"Aye-aye, Cap'n."

"Make sure men guard the boarding planks and watch the ropes. We want no zombies crossing to the *Night Stalker*."

"Orders already given, Cap'n."

Donté watched as the ropes were heaved across to the other ship, and planks spanned the distance between the two ships. His men, axes raised, knives clutched between their teeth, charged toward the French ship eager to destroy the enemy.

Donté went down the steps and crossed the deck of the *Night Stalker*, reaching down to grab a second ax before he launched himself onto the other ship. There would be no survivors.

One fleeting thought went to the delectable blue-eyed boy he'd left in his cabin and then his attention turned fully on the throng of undead awaiting their doom. Sluggish beasts, flaking dead flesh, slow-witted, easily led. Easily killed.

They swarmed onto the main deck, mindless and vacant-eyed, but they were nowhere near fast enough to repel the powerful, skilled pirates overtaking their ship. Donté swung his right arm, and jabbed with his left, heads rolling, bodies folding. Onward, moving slowly toward the main deck, seeking the one man whose death could put an end to the zombie infestation of the vampire seas of the Caribbean. Through the shouts and screams, blood and eye-burning smoke, vaulting over moldering bodies and rolling heads, he finally scaled to the upper deck.

One human awaited him--throat slit, blood seeping. Blood flowed from between his fingers clutched over the wound, and the other hand reached toward the sea. With his preternatural sight, far in the distance Donté spotted a thick white mist form into the shape of a raven and then it disappeared.

Shape-shifting voodoo bastard. The taste was bitter as he watched it disappear into the dark of night. Too fast, too far for Donté to follow.

"Bloody damnation," Donté raged.

Fiery hate and anger filled him as he stared down at the dying man whose life slowly ebbed away. The light in his eyes dimmed, a last whoosh of breath, and the luster of his humanity was doused forever. Another lost opportunity to gain information on Zoliel's whereabouts. The crazed witch doctor had slipped through his hands once again.

"Clavius Zoliel, one day you will not elude me!" he yelled into the surging wind.

He heard the splashes of water and grunts of his men as they hoisted the undead bodies into the salty sea. Not enough. Not nearly enough. His attention moved to one of the undead, still dressed in the ragged uniform of a French soldier. Would that he had been able to save them before Zoliel turned them to his own dark purpose.

The terrible truth was that even if he had killed Zoliel, there would have been another to take his place. There always was.

"Cap'n," Jupiter joined him on the upper deck of the dying ship.

It was a moment before Donté turned to look at him. Small cuts littered his body, but nothing serious that Donté could see. They would heal quickly without any scars left behind, thanks to the bit of vampire blood in his system. Only the vampire's marks ever remained.

"They're all disposed of?" Donté asked.

"Yes, Cap'n. Looks to be over a hundred of 'em."

"A hundred less for the bastard's zombie army." He turned to look at his second in command. "And my men?"

He saw the answer in Jupiter's eyes. Dammit. So many times they managed to come away unscathed. Zombies were slow, dim-witted creatures and it wasn't difficult to beat them. But now and again, they managed to surprise one of his crew.

"Who is it?"

"Gordon, Captain. One of the bastards was hiding in a lower deck passageway. He caught Gordon in the shoulder." The only type of wound even Donté couldn't heal. A zombie's bite. He paused for a moment, Jupiter's gaze sliding from Donté's.

"He wants you to be the one to do it, Captain. I think you'd best come now."

Gordon was one of the newest members of Donté's crew. He was small and wiry, quick on his feet. And young. Typically he worked as cabin boy as there were no children in Donté's crew. A small man, yet angelic in looks, he'd worked as a powder monkey on his last ship, part of the gun crew, and one of the least enviable positions on a ship, used and abused. Rescued from the water, he was the lone survivor of a raging storm that had torn his ship asunder, easy pickings for Zoliel. Gordon had managed to get off the ship before Zoliel and his smaller zombie crew boarded and took it over, claiming what remained of the crew for his own. Gordon had been smart enough to realize what Zoliel was.

Gordon's skill was with the dagger, not so good with the sword or strength of the ax. He'd come under Donté's spell almost immediately upon joining the ship. Too young to die such a terrible death.

Donté was tired, so tired of all the death. He leaned down to pick up an ax and turned back to Jupiter.

"Take me to him. I'll make it as quick as I can." He shouldn't have been part of the boarding party. Shouldn't have been anywhere near the French vessel. Damn, there were nights when he hated this hellish command. More some nights than others. This being one of the bad ones. He owed Gordon a good death. A brave lad even if he hadn't followed Donté's orders.

Chapter 4

Donté found the fallen sailor on the lower deck of the ship, several of his crewmates standing protectively around him. A pool of blood oozed from beneath him, spreading across the deck, mixing with the remains of the zombies. Shiny and black, more the look of fresh tar than tainted blood.

His men made way as Donté approached. His boots tracked a path through the blood-drenched deck. He gazed down at the pale features, already beginning to change, the zombie gray spreading across his expression. Hollowed cheeks, eyes that reflected the inner struggle to fight the virus of zombie control already beginning to take hold of him.

And there was no cure. Nothing to stop the spread of living death about to claim its next victim. Except for one. Donté stroked a hand through the sweat-slickened white-blond hair of the lovely young man, once so eager to join the vampire's crew.

He'd not spoken a word of English when he was first brought on board the *Night Stalker*. His native language was Dutch and he'd been aboard one of the Dutch West Indies ships. He'd provided Donté with the coordinates of his ship and the *Night Stalker* had managed to track them down. Bits and pieces of Gordon's ship floated on the water, They tracked Zoleil's zombie ship only a short distance more. Yet, Zoleil had once again escaped.

Donté's men had seized the cargo and then set the ship ablaze after tossing the dismembered zombies into the salty sea. Young Gordon had been horrified at his first encounter with Zoleil's zombie crew. Some of them had been men he'd served with and known for several years. The young man had escaped the zombie infestation once. But not this time.

Gordon clamped a hand around Donté's wrist. "Do it, Captain. Do it quickly. I-I'm not afraid."

Donté recognized the statement for the lie it was. The boy feared just as all men did, especially knowing the zombie virus already spread through his body.

"Aye, lad, I'll make it as quick as I can. A moment of pain and it will be done. We've no priest aboard the *Night Stalker* to ease your way--I hope you've made your peace as best you can."

"You've been a good captain to serve, sir. Vampire or human. I don't regret joining you." The corner of his bloodless mouth quirked upward. "I just wish it could have been for longer. I wanted to take more of the bastards with me."

"Aye, lad. Now close your eyes."

"No, sir. I'm not a coward. Do what you must."

"You've served me well, Gordon. You'll be missed."

Gordon slid a glance past Donté. "You boys have a drink on me when I'm gone." There were low murmurs among the crew offering him Godspeed to the other side wherever it might lead.

Within that space of a second, as Gordon's attention was on the crew behind him, Donté pulled back his arm, and like a shot, punched through Gordon's chest and latched onto his warm, beating heart. Before Gordon was fully aware of what was happening, Donté ripped the heart from his flesh.

Gordon's eyes widened and then Donté saw the sparkle of life ooze from them, watched them go dull and lifeless.

The heart still beat against the palm of his hand. The living dead. He held the organ until the rhythm altered. He knew what he had to do. Slowly, he rose from Gordon's side and walked across the deck. He held his arm out, crushed the heart and then opened his fist. He watched as the mangled organ was swallowed up by the surging black sea below.

"Cap'n?"

Donté didn't turn to look at Jupiter. He watched the angry, hissing foam lap at the ship's hull. The sea hid so much. If he thought too deeply about the number of ships and living dead that he and his crew had destroyed it would drive him insane. But then, could he say he wasn't insane

already?

"See to your duty, Jupiter. Handle him gently. He was a brave man and deserves to be treated well by those of us who remain."

"Aye, Cap'n. We'll see to the deed."

It had been a long night. Yet another bloody bounty to add to the many. He felt the tears slide down his face. Too many dead and still it went on with no end in sight. Perhaps he'd been out to sea this trip for too long. He needed to return to Noctra. He needed rest.

His gaze turned to the sky. The first wisps of a new dawn were just beginning to emerge along the horizon. It was time for him to return to his own ship, to the cabin that served as his coffin in daylight.

Donté heard his men behind him. The soft murmur of voices as they bent to the task of dismembering one of their own. With zombies they could take no chances.

Donté remembered the first zombie he'd killed. It was on his Uncle René's plantation in St. Domingue in 1796. He remembered the horror of it. Of the first taste of Zoliel's madness on his uncle's plantation. Of his own lover who had warned him about the witch doctor's plans. He remembered little of how he'd made his way to Tortuga after the uprising on the plantation. *Mon dieu*, the horror of it. Even now, some seventy-five years later, he could still taste the fear and revulsion of what had taken place on that terrible, blood-curdling night.

Each death of one of his crew re-awakened the memories, reminding him of the monstrous events on the night he'd been set the task of destroying his own family. Men who had been turned zombies by the black magic of the voodoo shape-shifter Zoliel.

He spun away from the memory. The one problem with being vampire was that he couldn't get drunk in the normal way a man would use to numb the memories of his past. No, to drown the memories for him took the blood of many. To gorge himself on the sweet taste of his crew.

His focus turned to the black beacon of his own ship and stilled as his attention caught the sight of a man with blond hair off to the left, standing next to the boarding plank. Skye Templeton, holding a blood streaked ax in his hand. Staring at Donté.

"Jupiter!"

"Yes, Cap'n."

"The Templeton lad. Did he fight tonight?"

"Aye, Captain. He was one that helped to keep the bastards from crossing the planks to our ship."

Skye Templeton was still a man of question. Who was he? Donté felt there was more to the young man than he let on. Was he just a shipwrecked merchant that happened upon the *Night Stalker*? Or was he a spy sent to kill the vampire captain? It wouldn't be the first time and Donté doubted it would be the last.

This fixation on the attractive castaway would likely lead to his own demise. A glimpse into his powerful aura told Donté more than Templeton probably wanted him to know. And obviously he knew his way around weapons as well as ships which bespoke of the man being more than a simple merchant.

"The sun is on the rise, Cap'n. We'll see to the remainder of what needs to be done here."

Donté nodded. He'd done little bloodletting tonight and he felt a bit lightheaded. It would probably be best for him to rest and then feed at first dusk. He hadn't the stomach for more blood tonight.

"Be certain that not a bit of this zombie ship remains. Retrieve the captain's log and have Velvet deliver it to my cabin at dusk."

"Aye, Cap'n."

Donté hadn't partaken of Velvet's blood in some time. Velvet would be a good diversion to help take his mind off tonight's events.

He stepped onto one of the wide planks connecting the ships. He looked down at the swirling sea below. Deep, silent, and churning. He could hear the slap of the waves as they beat at the wooden hulls. The water itself hypnotized him. What ghostly voices would rise up to bemoan their deadly fate if he listened close enough? A gust of wind howled as though in answer.

"Cap'n? Are there any other orders?"

Donté shook himself out of the reveries. He looked over his shoulder at Jupiter. "No. That's all. I'll speak with you this evening." He strode across the wooden plank and jumped onto the deck.

Skye stood before him, studiously watching him with an expression Donté was unable to penetrate. He was too tired to try to decipher the man's thoughts at the moment. Nor was he in the mood for games or duels.

"Why?" he asked Skye, pointing to the blood and hair-encrusted axe.

Skye shrugged. "It seemed the thing to do at the time."

"Do you know what they are? What they were?"

This time when Skye looked at Donté, the vampire captain saw confusion swirling within the blueness of his pupils. "No. I-I thought--"

Ah, revelation swept through Donté. "The axe was for me, wasn't it?"

Skye looked him square in the eye. "I thought you meant to kill all those people. You're a vampire, what else was I supposed to think?"

"My reputation. They all think the vampires of Noctra sail the seas in search of victims to gorge our thirst. Isn't that right?" Skye's hands tightened around the axe handle.

"What else are we supposed to think? Vampires trail a heavy reputation of killing in order to appease their hunger."

Donté started at him for a long time. His instincts told him Skye had been sent here to kill him. So why did he hesitate to have done with Templeton right this minute?

He nodded to the axe. "Well, here you are. And here I am. So why don't you finish the deed you've come here to do?"

"How do you know I was sent to kill you?"

Donté shrugged. "You wouldn't be the first."

"What happened to the others?"

Donté looked back across to the other ship. "A few are now part of my crew. The others," he looked down at the water. "A few have found everlasting peace or hell, depending on your perspective."

"You're a vampire. You have everlasting life."

Donté watched as Skye swung the axe from his shoulder and dropped it to the deck. Donté looked down at the discarded weapon and almost felt a twinge of regret. What he wouldn't give to have all of this done and over with. There was so little he found pleasure in any more. So many lovers dead, so many of his crew sacrificed. He felt the first heat of dawn's fingers against his neck. All he had to do was remain on deck and it would be over with once and for all. He looked at Skye.

"You could have killed me tonight. My focus was on the undead on the ship. My men might have thought it an accident in the surge of bloodlust and they would have let you go."

"Yes. That's true."

"So, why didn't you?" He was curious to know the young man's answer. There was something that intrigued him about Skye Templeton. This was a strong, intelligent man, rather unlike the rest of his crew. Most of them had spent their lives following the orders of others. But not this one. He definitely felt a strong attraction for the man--and it was more than his blood. Yet, his attention was drawn to the purple vein pulsing in Skye's neck.

"I won't become part of your food stores, Captain."

Donté's attention refocused on Skye's face. "Do you think I need another?" He swept an arm in a semi-circle. "I have a crew of men more than eager to quench my thirst. Willingly. Do you think I need you?"

There was something indefinable in Skye's expression. Donté's attention turned to his mouth. Templeton meant to hold himself apart from the rest of his crew. But there was an element of desire and yet defiance in the way he held himself. A flagrant challenge to the vampire captain to force the young man's submission.

"You will yield to me. Eventually."

Those beautiful lips curved into a smile. A tongue slipped out to wet the elegant fullness. Suddenly, Donté swooped forward and possessed them, curling a hand tightly into the long blond locks. Taking what he wanted, tasting the sweetness of strong defiance in the young merchant's kiss.

Skye pressed forward, off-balancing the vampire, pressing advantage, forcing Donté against the rail, as he took control of the passionate kiss. He thrust his tongue between Donté's lips; his determined hands cupped the vampire's cheeks, facing down the danger of such a predatory master.

If Donté had a heart that beat, it would have drum rolled a fast and furious pace as desire roared for Skye Templeton. He pulled free from Skye's lips and stumbled away. He put the weakness that consumed him down to weariness from the night's battle.

Donté slid his tongue over his lower, engorged lip and felt a trickle of blood and wiped it away.

"You challenge what you have no understanding of," he said. He fought the desire to have this human in his bed right this minute. Bound to it, supping from him at his leisure. Or hanging on his wall, the bite of metal binding him in Donté's presence. There was something in Skye Templeton, something so different and so desirable. So forbidden.

"I'll give you what you need, my captain, all in good time."

"Your blood?"

Skye smiled. But it was a strange look of mastery to the expression. "Your marks will never mar my flesh, Donté Lucienne. But perhaps my marks will decorate yours."

Donté's mind exploded with visions of surrender. He saw the marks Skye spoke of. Saw into the strong mind of the merchant. No, this man was not what he appeared--not at all.

The heat of the dawn rays burned against his back and Donté knew there was no time left. He thought maybe he wasn't ready to end his torment just yet. This duel of seduction must continue at another time.

"We shall see, Templeton, whose marks are best displayed." He bowed his head in salute. "Another time."

"As you wish, Captain."

Donté saw the darkness in Skye Templeton, he saw what could be. And maybe it was what Donté needed. He'd never considered it possible with a human--not now, after all these years. For the first time in a long time, Captain Donté Lucienne trembled with anticipation.

Chapter 5

Several nights after the zombie battle it was considered a night for rest and relaxation. All was quiet, the sea calm and serene. After two days of searching the area for any sign of Zoliel, Captain Lucienne called a halt. The voodoo shape-shifter had disappeared, leaving no clue.

The bounty of the French ship had provided wines, sugars and spices, rice and coffee. There were also extra barrels of water and kegs of rum. And candy, to the delight of many of the crew. But the biggest surprise discovered among the booty Jupiter recovered was a small cache of diamonds hidden amongst the captain's possessions. Most likely they were bound to fill the coffers of the French emperor, Louis Napoleon, to help fund his war against Prussia. According to a copy of *le Figaro*, a French newspaper Jupiter had also discovered on board, France had declared war on Prussia slightly less than a month ago. It must have occurred just after Skye had left on his mission. Instead, the diamonds would be divided among the crew of the *Night Stalker*, which had everyone in a particularly celebratory mood.

Sunday meant rest and recovery even though they were still at sea. The first mate had already given them the word that they'd be returning to Noctra shortly. Clothes were mended and washed, music was played, and rum ran freely. Several wooden tubs were hauled up to the lower deck, and fresh water baths had already begun. They tapped several of the older barrels of water to provide a measure of cleanliness for the crew. It was a luxurious peculiarity important to Captain Lucienne. Lucienne liked his crew as immaculate as possible, even under these circumstances when they were weeks at sea.

Considering the amount of tar and grease, as well as salty sea and rotten food they contended with each day, meeting the strict demands of the captain was by no means an easy task. Pirates were not often known for any particular fastidiousness in their clothing or person, so it was one of the things Skye had found remarkable about this ship and its crew and their dedication to maintaining sanitary conditions aboard the *Night Stalker*. Very strange indeed.

Although there was a skeleton crew on duty to watch for any suspect activity upon the waters and to man the wheel, a majority of the crew laughed and sang and drank on the lower deck. Several men got together with fiddles and harmonicas, and even a concertina managed to make an appearance. Another peculiar difference from the usual pirate stories--sailors on the *Night Stalker* danced naked and lusty, sporting thick, fat erections, not a clothed tight ass in sight. It was a seductive and titillating scene and even Skye was unable to remain apart from the festive atmosphere. He lay soaking in the relatively clean water of one of the vacated tubs, enjoying the sensation of clean flesh for the first time in many days. He leaned back and stared up at the stars.

"Need a hand with yer back there, lad?"

Skye sat up, splashing some of the sudsy water over the sides as he turned to find Nathan standing just behind him. He hovered over Skye, cock bobbing strong and tall against his lean, hard belly, nestled in a thick triangle of dark, curling hairs. His gaze rose upward to encounter the strange, filmy blue gaze of the man staring back at him. Long black hair freshly oiled and braided neatly in thick plaits, threaded with what looked like some of the crimson and gold thread that had been contained in several of the chests they'd brought on board from the French ship. No slick tar or unkempt hair for this crew. Another of the vampire captain's peculiarities. Nathan held a sopping white linen cloth in his right hand and a bar of fragrant French soap in his left.

To Skye, on this night, the intriguing cook looked particularly--desirable. Tonight he didn't want to think about his mission, about the captain, or about vampires and death. He didn't want to think about zombies and dismemberment and whether he would stay or go, turn his back on his duty or forge ahead into the seductive, preternatural unknown of life aboard the *Night Stalker*.

"Aye, Nathan. I could use a bit of help."

"Then shift forward, Templeton, and make room."

Skye did exactly that and for the first time since coming on board the *Night Stalker* he felt the naked, lean, hard body of a crewmember against his own bare flesh. His hard cock pressed against Skye's lower back and raging lust shot through Skye as he anticipated the feel of Nathan's hands on his body. More water splashed over the sides as Nathan settled in behind Skye in the small confines of the wooden tub.

"Ease back, lad. Have you been with any of the others yet?"

"No. A lots been happening, I guess."

Nathan's arms curled around Skye's ribs. A soapy hand rubbed across Skye's chest, focusing on his nipples, driving his desire higher and higher.

"Well, then, I'm your first. I've heard talk. Could be you don't have the Captain's mark on you yet. They be waiting to see if you'll join the crew. Or seek to be put off at one of the outer islands on our way back to Noctra. No point in getting intimate with a landlubber getting off at the first hint of land."

Skye felt a question in that statement but decided to ignore it. His mind was on other things right now. Nathan's hands slid down Skye's body. Along his ribs, downward to skim over his abs and farther still, finally nesting at his groin. His fingers teased the curling hairs surrounding the root of Skye's cock. Skye found himself easing back against Nathan's broad chest, felt his hard prick and couldn't stop from rubbing his ass against the erection, lifting and wedging it between the cheeks of his ass. He lifted up and carefully lowered himself, Nathan's rod now wedged closely against Skye's balls and he began to rub back and forth, enjoying the momentum and closeness of the sailor behind him.

"You want cock, Templeton, all you need do is ask. Any will oblige you. No man amongst us will turn you down. Why aren't ye marked, that's the question they all want answered."

Nathan eased Skye forward onto his knees, following close behind. The tip of his cock dipped at Skye's hole, pressing lightly against the tight ring of muscle.

"I don't know," Skye gasped, wanting to feel the full length of that rigid tool of flesh buried inside him. His hands gripped the edge of the tub, yearning to be fucked. Needing it. Bloody self-control be damned. He hadn't allowed himself to think about sex since leaving the general's house on that foggy London morning so many weeks ago. And he needed this badly. "M-maybe he's waiting for some reason. Maybe he's not sure if he wants me as part of his crew."

Nathan's knob passed through Skye's anal ring and seated inside him. But it wasn't enough. "You know I've the sight, lad. I'm sensing there's more to it than that."

Skye's shoulders hunched forward and he flexed his hips back, trying to force more of the cock inside him. But Nathan's hands fastened at Skye's hips held him fast.

"You'd have to ask him. Will you fuck me, dammit?"

"In good time, lad. All in good time. I've never been one to rush a good fuck. Particularly a hole that's tight as your'n. You ain't given yourself to him yet, have you? He's been looking for something special a long time and I sense it in you. Take the helm, Templeton. You've the blood of warriors, of commanders in your veins. Show him what you've got, that you can be what he needs. More than any of us."

He pushed deeper into Skye's hole. Skye caught his breath at the burning pleasure that surged through him. He wanted it all. He wanted to reach down to grab his own prick, but the water was slippery and his grip on the edge of the tub was all that held him up.

"I'll not let you fall, Templeton. You won't drown on this ship." Skye heard Nathan chuckle behind him. "But you'll have to trust to do it, won't you? Can you let go of the past to greet your destiny?"

Did he dare trust anyone on this ship? Especially if they found out who and what he was. Nathan dipped farther into Skye's channel. Skye's own prick felt totally neglected as it bobbed beneath the surface of the water. Carefully, he unfurled one hand from the lip of the tub and reached down to surround his throbbing erection.

It was in that instant that Nathan slid all the way home. "There you go. Just as it should be." He lodged deep and Skye could feel the weight of Nathan's heavy balls against his flesh. And then his gaze widened as he felt the slap of a wet cloth against his back.

"W-what are you doing?" He'd never felt a man's dick as deeply as he did Nathan's. Fat, thick and hot, filling his rectum.

"Washing your back as I said I'd do. That is what you wanted, ain't it?"

He bowed over the edge of the tub, his hand fisting his length beneath the water and, as Nathan slowly soaped his back and drew the cloth repeatedly along the length of his spine, Skye found the hand riding his prick matched the rhythm along his back.

This man, this cook on a vampire ship, knew better how to seduce a man than anyone he'd encountered in his twenty-five years. Even the general hadn't been such a master seducer as this man was. General Encantro was a man of battle, a true warrior, and liked it rough and hard, never giving an inch. But wasn't each man on this ship unique in his own way?

"You've got a good strong back, Templeton. Broad shoulders to carry a heavy weight." The cloth traced along the breadth of Skye's shoulders. "Aye, a fine one to be sure. Don't waste it, lad."

Skye felt his balls tighten as Nathan made one more pass up his spine and then he was shuddering as he spurted into the water. It was as though all the tension, every speck poured from inside him.

Skye heard the splat of the cloth as it landed on the deck and the thump of the bar of soap. Nathan firmed his grip on his hips, adjusted him, and

then rode him. The friction of his heat surged through Skye, in and out, over and over again. And then long, deep strokes.

"Hard when you need it, soft and sweet when it's right. A fine, tight ass you have, lad."

His strokes shifted to shorter, faster, until finally he plunged forward, spurting deep inside Skye's channel.

"Aye, that's the way fucking should be, Templeton, that's the way." He skirted his hands along Skye's arms, soothing and stroking. He massaged his shoulders, then reached around to caress Skye's prick. "You belong here, Templeton. And when you've finally come to terms with the truth, the rest will all fall into place."

It was with a sense of keen abandonment he felt Nathan ease his cock from inside him. Shortly thereafter he felt Nathan step from the tub. Skye closed his eyes and slumped forward against the tub's edge. For the first time in his life he felt weary and blissful all at the same time.

* * * *

It was several hours later as the stars began to disappear from the sky that Captain Lucienne made his first appearance of the night on the lower deck. Nathan sat on an overturned bucket in a circle of mates as they listened to a yarn spun by Onyx. They'd just finished making several toasts to Gordon, and Skye was feeling particularly relaxed.

Most of the crew had dressed, at least in clean loose fitting, shortened slop breeches. Naked, muscular chests and bare feet seemed to be the norm. Skye sat cross-legged on the deck in front of Nathan as the sailor braided Skye's hair, blending in some of the crimson and gold thread he wore in his own braids.

The captain's presence was felt by all before any of them even realized he was on deck. It was the huge white tiger at his side that Skye saw first, like a ghostly apparition. At first he thought it was because of all the rum he'd drank. And then he realized what he was seeing and he tensed as curling anticipation tightened in his groin. Skye's attention went from the tiger to the man, so elegantly appointed in black satin breeches, gold-embroidered waistcoat, and long black velvet frockcoat edged in cranberry and gold embroidery. He was a man who exuded dark authority. The lethal stark white tiger, eyes of glowing red, seemed a fitting familiar for the predatory yet elegant vampire. Jupiter accompanied him, his gaze taking in the state of the ship and the crew as the two men walked toward the gathering of the men.

Donté came to a halt and his focused, black gaze settled on Skye. For long moments there was complete silence as the two men dueled silently. Donté's gaze seemed to take in the familiarity of Skye's position in front of Nathan. Skye felt Nathan's soothing presence as he stroked a hand over Skye's braided locks, easing some of the tension twisting inside Skye.

Skye set his jaw and glared back at Donté, unwilling to give quarter to the dynamic captain. Skye's focus drifted downward to Donté's lips, remembering their taste. Longing surged inside him like a knife twisted in his gut. It took all his self-control not to rise from his position on the deck and join Donté, offering his blood, his body, or anything Donté wanted.

Stretched, tense moments passed and then Donté's gaze shifted away as he looked over the men seated in the circle. Skye felt like a puppet whose strings had been cut, and he dropped forward. Donté turned aside and said something quietly to Jupiter and then spun around and walked away without a word, quickly blending into the deep darkness of the night. A ghostly flicker of the white tiger was finally swallowed into the murky shadows of the ship.

Jupiter tapped two sailors on the shoulder who sat across from Skye. They quickly rose to their feet, a look of pride and lusty hunger filling their expressions as they followed Jupiter in the wake of the captain.

"Your pride will lose you the prize, Templeton, if you're not careful. Open your heart, boy, and see what's inside. Be true to yourself and don't cling to the thirst for revenge. See the truth."

Skye wanted to deny Nathan's words, but something inside him refused to yield.

When the first mists of dawn broke over the water, those that weren't called to duty sought out sleep. Skye shucked his clothes and climbed into a vacant hammock. It wasn't long before, for the first time, another sailor joined him. It was Liam, the master carpenter, who cuddled close, his long, lean body stretched tightly against Skye. Silently, hands stroked and fondled, lips kissed and caressed, murmurs of pleasure reverberated throughout the stifling, hot atmosphere of the sailors' sleeping quarters.

Skye tried to focus on the eager, willing man in his arms. But all he could see was the captain, defiant and magnetic. And all of his crew who were intriguingly not dead because of a vampire's lust, but simply pleased and strong, loyal and protective. And eager to please their vampire captain. In his mind he saw the captain naked with cock primed for fucking. Fangs buried in a neck, feeding with lust and passion. And respect.

He pulled Liam's warm, human body closer, trying to blot out the cool, sleek, dangerous passion building higher and higher for the touch of an undead vampire. A hungry carnal desire he was afraid would completely corrupt his soul, and his mission, before much longer. He licked his lips, remembered the taste of Donté's mouth from the night of the attack, and how it had lingered with him over the last few days and nights. Like water raging against harsh stone the memory wore away his weakening resolve. He could not be falling in love with the very thing he'd been trained to kill.

The quiet night of peace and innocent pleasures was over.

Chapter 6

"What do you know about the captain?" Skye asked Nathan several evenings later as they prepared dinner for the crew. Earlier in the day Skye had helped Liam repair some damage to a hatch. He spent his nights, or days, assisting where they needed an extra hand. If he decided to join the crew, he'd likely be assigned a position. For now each day was a new experience. Not that the nights weren't as well, as now the way seemed to be open for nightly fucks, with his choice of hard bodies to warm his hammock.

Life was not so bad aboard the *Night Stalker*. Except over the last few days the captain seemed to have completely ignored his presence on board. In some ways that irritated Skye. In others, he felt relief. But the image of the captain was never far from his thoughts. Irritatingly so.

Nathan looked across the room at Skye as he stirred a pot of fish stew. It actually smelled quite savory. It had turned out that Nathan was quite a good cook and Skye had learned several good tips while assisting him with some of the meals. At least working in various capacities aboard the *Night Stalker* kept his mind occupied, allowing little time for too much deep thought. Particularly about the captain and Skye's mission on board ship.

He regretted the kiss he'd given Donté on the night of the zombie attack. It felt like something that now bound him to the vampire in ways he could not dismiss. He had no idea what had made him kiss the captain like that, but the desire had surged quickly to drive him to lay his claim to the vampire. And there had been something else about the undead vampire, something that told him exactly what Donté needed from Skye. And it wasn't his human blood.

"What do you want to know? He doesn't share much about his life with the crew. Keeps pretty much to himself."

Skye cut up another carrot and tossed the slices into the pot. He'd always enjoyed a bit of cooking back on the mainland, but it was pretty basic here on the ship compared to the meals he'd concocted for the general. And the utensils and knives were simple designs compared to the silver-plated opulence in the general's London home. It was strange that he hadn't thought much about London since arriving on the *Night Stalker*. Each day, the civilized world he'd known seemed farther and farther away. And there was little about it he missed.

"How long have you been with him?"

Nathan peered at Skye. "Ask a lot of questions, don't you, lad? I been with him nigh onto ten years."

Skye looked him over closely. "You and the others are human, but you don't seem to age. Is it because he takes your blood?"

Nathan shrugged. "Hard to say exactly. Could be because of the island."

"Noctra?"

"Aye. It's located in a strange part of the ocean. Lots of ships lose their way. Those that hunt the cap'n and his kind never find their way to it. Don't ask me why. It's just that strange."

"Where exactly is it located? I'd have thought it would be near Tortuga. Isn't that the pirate stronghold?"

"It ain't Tortuga we call home. Our place be farther north."

"North?"

"Aye." Nathan's expression registered confusion. "I don't know exactly where."

"How can you not know where you sail?"

"When we get close, the cap'n mans the wheel and heads us home. Going in, we learn the way. Coming out, that be another matter. It goes out of our heads. Only thing I can tell you is there be no coastline and miles and miles of strange seaweed as far as the eye can see. Spread out like the golden locks of a mermaid's hair. And just as deadly."

Skye thought about his studies. It sounded to him like Nathan was talking about the horse latitudes in the North Atlantic. Could it be? From what

he'd read there'd been many a lost ship in that area. It was a mysterious part of the ocean few knew much about.

"You're certain? Seaweed?"

"That's all I can remember. Lots of it. The compass don't work right in those waters, but the cap'n, he brings us home to our island safe and sound. The most beautiful place on earth. Clear blue skies and warm water like you've never seen before. A true paradise."

"And the vampires run the colony?"

"Aye, lots of salt and salt water. Keeps the zombies away, if you know what I mean."

"You mean like the monsters from the other night." He'd never seen creatures like them before.

Nathan raised a hand to his temple and rubbed. "No more talk on it. You're making my head ache. We've got to get this grub out to the crew or they'll be having our heads handed to us."

Nathan had given Skye a bit to consider. Islands located in the mysterious North Atlantic. Swirling seas and paradise. And vampires who ran a colony of blood suckers and their human servants. Men who didn't age, a crew who couldn't remember where home was located. It was all too strange.

But in an odd way it made sense. If you were dealing with vampires, that is. When he'd taken on this assignment, he'd accepted it more for personal reasons because of what had happened to his family. But suddenly, especially after the last few days, he wasn't certain of his mission any longer. Was he hunting the right undead? Nothing seemed as clear-cut as it should be. He no longer knew the answer or what path he should take.

"Hey, Templeton." Skye looked at Nathan. "Hand me that vial Jupiter brought in."

Skye looked at the shelf where the bottle rested. "What is it?" He pulled the red bottle from the shelf and handed it to Nathan. Nathan pulled off the cork stopper and poured the contents into the stew. He looked at Skye, but Skye couldn't decipher the expression. Nathan was not a man easily understood.

"Have you seen a doctor on board, lad?"

"Well, no."

"Do you know the why of it?" He set the empty bottle aside and began stirring the stew.

"Well, no. I haven't really had time to consider it."

"It's give and take on this ship, Templeton. We provide the cap'n with what he needs, he protects us."

That didn't make sense to Skye. "What do you mean?"

"He gives us immunity from disease, heals our wounds, gives us strength. In turn, we keep him healthy, and guard his sleep. Give and take. No slackers on board the *Night Stalker*, lad." He turned his eerie focus back on Skye. "He's not drawn from you yet. Nor have given yourself to him, have you?"

And he didn't plan to, but he had no intention of informing Nathan of that fact. "No, I haven't."

"Every meal, you take a bit of him in you. You may not feel it yet, but it's there. He gives freely of himself to protect us all. "

Skye looked at him, unable to comprehend what Nathan was telling him. And then he realized what the red liquid was. *Fuck!*

"Are you saying that everything I've eaten since coming on board has been tainted with Captain Lucienne's blood?" *Christ. Why hadn't he even considered that possibility?*

Nathan nodded. "It won't make you like him, if that's what that look on your face be about."

Why had he not paid closer attention? He tried to wrap his mind around the idea that he'd consumed vampire blood--and on more than one occasion. He tried to calm himself. "Why the hell didn't you tell me this before?"

Nathan shrugged and then picked up the tray with the usual bottle of wine and cut glass goblet and held it out to Skye. "Take the cap'n's tray in. He'll be waiting. I've not upset you, have I, lad? I thought you knew. You've been here helping me most of the time. I've not hidden it from you."

Nathan was right. Skye had never asked him what sort of spices he was putting into the food. Or anything related to its preparation. Skye took the tray. "Don't worry. I'll handle it. There won't be a problem." Even if his stomach did roil at the thought of ingesting vampire blood, he refused to think about the ramifications of such an act.

Nathan stroked the side of his face with the back of his hand, then cupped his jaw, forcing Skye to look at him. "He's not a hard man and Noctra vampires are different from those on the mainland."

"In what way?"

"They don't kill unless pushed to it. Don't force his hand, Templeton."

"I watched him kill that sailor, one of his own men. He tore his heart out."

"You still don't get it, do you?" Nathan shook his head. "For all your proud fighting during the battle, you still don't know what they were. He gave Gordon a warrior's death to be proud of. It had to be done."

"What were they?"

"The living dead. Worse than any vampire could be. Zombies. If you'd been bit by one of them, you'd have been taken care of same as Gordon. Salt and dismemberment are the only things that will silence them forever. And you might live from a vampire's bite, but not from a zombie's. From what I know, Gordon was bit. He'd have turned. And he knew it."

"You're saying he would have become a zombie? Like the ones on the ship?"

Nathan nodded. "Aye, he would. We've seen it happen before. There's no stopping it. The captain did what he had to do. You have no idea how bad it can get. He may be a vampire, he may be demanding, but he's better than the scourge that sails the sea beneath the likes of Clavius Zoliel. That bastard wants to rule the world with a zombie army. He'd make us all like that if he had his way. Vampirates have the best chance of stopping him."

"And who is Clavius Zoliel?"

Nathan waved his hand. "Captain's waiting. I've jabbered enough. Maybe too much."

Skye left the galley and headed toward the captain's quarters. As he reached the gangway he heard moans and thumps, the creaking of wood coming from a corridor leading to the storeroom. He thought better of checking it out. He thought of Nathan. And of Liam, lying in his arms. And he remembered the vampire captain's kiss.

Suddenly, it was all tinged with a different perspective as he thought of the vial of blood Nathan had added to the food. It hadn't taken Skye long to realize on this ship if the men weren't fighting, they were fucking--and the reality of what that meant. On other ships if men weren't fighting, they were gambling and drinking--not fucking the way these men did, nor were they as beautiful.

Is that what vampire blood did to a man? His own cock surged every time he caught sailors in the act. It sometimes seemed like every man on the ship engaged in sex in one form or another. After what Nathan had said, Skye could feel something different about himself. Is it what made him ready to give up his mission without a qualm? Is that what already had him fucking or wanting to fuck every man he saw on this ship? He had to wonder if that also had to do with being the willing servant to a vampire's thirst. Or did it have more to do with the mysterious island of Noctra? Too many questions yet to be answered.

Why had he hesitated in killing Donté? It's what he had come here to do. And he'd had the perfect opportunity, yet he'd not done it. He could make excuses for himself, but the bottom line was that he was attracted to Captain Lucienne and he wanted to learn more about him. He wanted to discover the many facets of the vampire on more intimate terms. And that was a reality as well.

After his parents' deaths, bled to death by vampires, Skye had grown up with hate thrumming through his blood and revenge in his heart. He'd been told it was vampires who'd killed his parents and everyone else on board his father's ship. That was his sole purpose in tracking down the famed vampire killer, General Ignatio Encantro. To learn how to kill them.

At seventeen, Skye had hero-worshipped the general, a man with vast knowledge and courage in hunting vampires. Skye had assisted him countless times in tracking their adversary.

But now, faced with the death of a vampire who would bring Skye much prestige and respect, almost equal to that of General Encantro, he couldn't bring himself to do it. What was he going to do?

He reached the captain's quarters, knocked and then opened the door and stepped inside. The room was dark, except for two candles in brass holders setting on the table. Skye tried to peer through the darkness.

He thought he saw movement in the shadows of the bed. And then he heard the all too familiar groan of pleasure.

"Put the tray on the table," a deep voice said from the recesses of the bed. Another, louder groan erupted from the vicinity of the bed.

As Skye's eyes adjusted to the darkness, he realized one of the crewmembers was beneath Donté. He watched, mesmerized as Donté thrust his hips. His tight breeches were pushed down to just above his knees. Skye recognized the man beneath him. His name was Velvet.

Skye could just make out dark smears of blood on his neck. His hands were bound above his head. And he was naked from what Skye could see.

"Sit down, Templeton. I'll be with you when I'm finished."

"I can come back."

"No. I said sit down. Maybe you'll get a taste for what you've already refused."

The flash of white teeth, a snarl of fangs lit the darkness. Red eyes glowing and then he turned to look down at Velvet.

"Are you here against your will, Velvet? Do I force you to my bed, to allow me to feed?"

"No, Cap'n," Velvet managed to answer, tossing his head back and forth on the pillow.

Skye saw him surge up against Donté. Donté lowered his head to lick across the sailor's open lips, then thrust his tongue inside his mouth. Velvet moaned again.

Skye felt his cock engorge, crushed painfully against the front of his own britches. The sight of Donté and Velvet made him want to join them on the bed, to taste both of them. But more than anything else he wanted to fuck the vampire captain. To make him yield to Skye in a way he was certain he'd never submitted to another human member of his crew. To impress upon the captain more fully that Skye Templeton was not like the other men on this ship.

And so he held himself steady. He knew Donté taunted him. Wanted to break him. And he wasn't going to let that happen. He wanted the vampire captain, but on his terms.

Donté broke the kiss and then leaned down to suck a dark nipple into his mouth, tugging at the dusky flesh. Velvet arched up and Skye saw pure ecstasy cross his face. Donté's cheeks hollowed and Skye knew Donté fed upon the blood of his bound lover.

He wanted to say he felt disgust at the obvious feeding, but he could not. His own nipples screwed tightly with the desire to feel the vampire's teeth puncture his flesh. A sharp, directed phantom pain shot through the point of his nipple as his hunger for the vampire grew.

He watched as Donté flexed his hips, fucking the sailor as he fed from him. Slow and easy. The smell of heat and sex and blood threaded throughout the room, burrowing inside Skye.

In all the couplings he'd witnessed since arriving on the ship, this one sent him careening closest to the edge of his control.

Donté eased his fangs from Velvet's chest. Licked across the puncture marks. His hips never stopped moving as he continued to fuck the man beneath him. He looked at Skye.

"It could be you beneath me now. It could be your blood singing through my veins." He cupped Velvet's face and kissed him again. A deep, passionate kiss that seemed to last forever.

"I've told you, you will not have my blood. I will not take the scars of your vampire hunger."

Donté's thrusts grew more pronounced. He watched Skye as he plunged into Velvet. "The men of my crew know their place."

"I am not one of your crew."

Donté surged into Velvet, a hand wrapped possessively around his cock and then Velvet was crying out with his climax.

"I can smell your lust, Templeton. Strip and join us. Let me show you how good it can be with a vampire."

"I will not be brought beneath your spell, Captain." He rose to his feet and stared at the vampire. "But why don't you come to me and I can show you how it feels to submit? Because I think that's what you really want. To submit to me."

It was a brash statement, one guaranteed to get a rise out of the vampire. Skye saw Donté's eyes flash red in the darkness. He heard a growl and

had to wonder if his life was about to forfeit. Had he gone too far?

Chapter 7

Donté slipped from the bed and re-buttoned his britches. His white linen shirt was spotted with Velvet's blood, but he paid it no mind. He unfastened the cuffs binding Velvet to the bed. The man was only partially conscious.

He inspected the sailor, looking for signs of any undue distress. The man seemed oblivious to anyone else in the room. He would deal with Skye Templeton only after he was certain Velvet was attended to properly.

Donté cared for all of his crew, each and every one important to him, each in his own way. His glance met Skye's look of curiosity--and challenge.

Donté poured out a glass of wine and then returned to the bed. He lifted Velvet's head so he could drink some of the wine.

After a moment he placed a hand over Velvet's eyes and placed a command into his mind. "Sleep, Velvet. Sleep until I awaken you." The vampiric order had the desired effect and within seconds Velvet was sound asleep, soft snores emanating from him.

Rising from the bed he turned to look at Skye. "Why do you continue to challenge me? I feel the lust building inside you. Why do you fight it? You can block me from your mind, but I can see into your heart."

Skye's blue gaze studied the vampire and Donté felt his body respond to the narrowed look. "At least I have a heart," Skye retorted.

Shoulders straight and hands clasped behind his back, the most closed, haughty expression on his face, Skye circled the vampire. Donté struggled with the power, fought to maintain. He was shocked to realize the lad actually thought to intimidate him. This human sought to dominate him--he felt it, saw it in his aura. A glint of respect and curiosity overtook him. He felt a surge of heat against his back and knew Skye stood behind him. Waiting. Felt the danger of the sailor's presence. The challenge to his authority. He could kill the whelp without lifting a finger, didn't he realize that? So why didn't he?

Skye's warm, human hands dropped onto his shoulders. He knew what was to come, knew he should put a halt to the game now. Knew that he wouldn't. He had waited for a man like Skye for decades.

The shirt ripped easily as Skye dragged his hand down the back of the expensive, fragile material. The ragged sound of tearing cloth filled the room. The shirt clung to Donté's arms as he felt the heat of Skye's focus arrow to the white lines of his back. Khan growled.

Donté looked at the big cat. "Be still, Khan." He would have no interference with this duel for control. What came of it--so be it.

"Punishment?" Skye asked as he traced the pads of his fingers over the thin lines adorning Donté's back.

"Not exactly," Donté responded. He shuddered beneath the touch of the human. His fangs ached to taste him, to swallow the power he knew roared through this man's blood. It had been so long since he'd known the touch of such a strong man.

Skye tore the shirt from his body and flung it across the room. "Tell me how."

"It was a long time ago. Too long to remember."

"I doubt that you've forgotten, Captain. Tell me his name."

For some reason, Donté couldn't resist the draw of this man. Something in his voice that commanded. Something that reminded him of a masterful man so long ago. Before he'd become the walking dead.

"His name was Joshua," Donté answered quietly.

"He was your lover?"

"My first lover. I met him when I traveled to my uncle's plantation in St. Domingue."

"He taught you to enjoy the taste of the whip."

"He taught me to please him."

"How much older was he than you? How did you please him?"

Skye continued to trace the scars from Donté's past, reminding the vampire of another life. A time even more taboo than this one.

"He was forty to my twenty. He was a slave on my uncle's plantation. My God, he was beautiful and big and so powerful. I couldn't resist him."

"And you were?"

"A gentleman who wanted a taste of the primal, the forbidden. To be mastered by a man who mastered none. I gave him what he coveted and he provided me what I yearned for." Donté couldn't help laughing as he remembered kneeling at the feet of the huge, muscular slave. He seemed so big, so tall, so deserving of Donté's worship.

Skye pushed Donté toward the wall on the other side of the cabin. Donté heard the jangle of the cuffs he had just removed from Velvet.

Donté allowed himself to be flattened against the wall, permitted his arms to be raised and cuffed, just as Velvet had been that first night Skye had arrived on the *Night Stalker*. But he had to wonder if Skye planned to kill him. And why was Donté letting him do this?

"Where do you keep them?" Skye asked. "The whips you have hidden away. No man with scars like yours would be without at least one in his possession. That kind of hunger wouldn't just disappear."

Donté could already feel his skin tingle. He'd never let any of the other crewmembers use the whip on him. When he'd felt the need, he'd always done it himself, behind closed doors.

But at this moment he felt the manacle of helplessness. And he wanted to feel the full measure of Skye's flavor of discipline.

"Do you know how to use it?" Not all men understood the intricacies of the whip or had the strength to wield it.

Skye unfastened Donté's pants and yanked them down over his hips, exposing his ass, binding his legs.

He reached around to envelope Donté's penis. "You're hard as a rock already, Lucienne. In anticipation? I wonder." He released Lucienne's cock and Donté experienced a twinge of regret. "Yes, I know how to use it. Where is it?" Templeton's voice was rough and demanding and Donté shuddered with desire. He wanted to feel the full force of this man. Needed to know exactly how strong this human truly was.

"In the trunk next to the bed." Why was he trusting this human with his secrets? Exposing his flaws and vulnerabilities?

Skye left him hanging there, totally exposed. Donté could hear him rummaging through the items in the trunk and then there was silence. He could use his abilities to get free, to sense what Skye was doing. He could take his blood without consent.

But for one moment, Donté wanted to feel human, to remember what it was like beneath the hand of a strong, dominant man. To feel that vulnerability and the sting of humanness.

Skye trailed the heavy braided ends of the cat across Donté's shoulders. He allowed them to fall over Donté's shoulder, to tease across his tight nipples. He felt it. *Mon dieu*, he felt it deeper than he'd ever felt the touch of the whip before.

"Is this the one you use, Lucienne? On yourself? I wonder how often you've flayed your own skin in the intimacy of these quarters so the crew wouldn't see?" Donté felt the press of Skye's heat against his back. And then a ball of white cloth was stuffed into his mouth. One of his own silk handkerchiefs. "Is this what you used to muffle your cries? Nothing will compare to what I can give you. Nothing will sear you as deeply. You will crave it. Again and again. And only I can do this for you."

Donté's whole body tingled at the thought of the anticipated sensations. The feeling of helplessness that bled through him. The wounds and the pain wouldn't last because he was vampire. But to even feel the intense sensations of humanity for a split second was something his spirit demanded. Maybe not his soul or his heart, for he had neither. The blackness, the shadow of darkness still wanted to experience dominion of another.

Suddenly one of Skye's hands came down against Donté's flanks and he felt the spin of the sting deep inside. He brought his hand down again and again, across each cheek, and Donté felt the searing heat scale through him.

"Such pale, cold skin, Donté. You should see the flame of crimson spread across your white backside now. How long will it last, do you think? How long before your cold, lifeless body sucks the heat away and all you feel is the empty coldness of your undead heritage once again?"

Donté hated that this man seemed to know him so well. And the sudden coldness struck his back as Skye stepped away. The sharp sting of the cat shouldn't have surprised him, but it did. The tips connected with his upper back, confident and strong. A figure-eight of pain spreading from one shoulder to the other. Then across his ass, swiftly adding to the sensations already spreading through his body. Slowly Skye warmed his cold flesh with ribbons of repeated pain, making Donté feel as though his whole body was suffused with human heat. The spread of welcome pain brought tears to his eyes. Yes, this is what he'd yearned so many years to once against experience.

Skye was right; he was expert at wielding the whip. More so than he ever could have imagined a man to be.

The whipping stopped. "Do you feel the heat now, vampire? Do you feel like you're alive?" He didn't wait for an answer as the strokes flayed again. Harder, faster, and Donté shuddered and yielded beneath the onslaught. He arched as the tips cut him and blood trickled down his back. The pain whirled through him. Fire and flame licked at his skin, every nerve ending alive with feeling.

He remembered the past, the anger of the lash Joshua had used on him.

"How much can you take, aristo?" Joshua had taunted him. It usually occurred just after another slave had been whipped for some small infraction. And Donté would take it until there was nothing left to give. He yearned for the brute force of the whip. He'd never felt so alive as under the heat of Joshua's lash.

And then Joshua would release him, hold him in his arms. Kiss him and fondle him. Tend him. Make love to him.

The cat struck him again and again. The pain claimed him, forcing him beyond the onslaught to a place of ecstasy he'd thought never to touch again. Beyond the demands of his ship, his crew, his sire. Of the living and of the dead.

"Do you know how I learned to wield the whip, vampire? I used it on minions of the vampires we captured. Torture to get them to reveal the hiding places of their masters. So we could find them and kill them."

Slowly, he pulled the damp ball of material from Donté's mouth and tossed aside the sodden fabric. Donté worked his jaw to relive some of the aching tension.

Skye stroked his jaw, then gripped it. "Did you suck him, Lucienne? Did you swallow his cum like a good boy?" Then Skye pressed a hand to Donté's back, smearing the blood. He brought a hand to Donté's face and spread the blood across his cheeks and forehead.

"You can't live without our blood. You would shrivel up and die." He slid a finger across Donté's lips, glossing them with warm, crimson blood. "Your kind consume it without care, murder and destroy for it."

Donté slid his gaze to Skye. "Is that what you mean to do to me, Templeton? Kill me? Murder me?" He passed his tongue across his lips, tasting the blood, savoring the rich texture of the only element of humanness about him. "Am I to be a monument to all you have lost? A sacrifice to your thirst for revenge? Would you kill all of us without a worry as to who the true murderer of your family was?"

"Who said it was my family?"

Donté chuckled. "Who else? You humans. You are all the same. So self-righteous. Yet immortality is what you all hunger for. You're just too weak to be willing to pay the price. But torture? Ah, yes. That you understand and mete out with relish. Particularly to those weaker than yourself. Different than you."

"You're not human."

"And yet you want me, don't you Templeton? You have since the first moment you boarded my ship. You want me and you want my crew. But you're afraid to take us, to yield. Particularly to me."

Skye slid a hand beneath Donté's jaw, forcing his head back. "Do you know what we did after we'd obtained the information we wanted? After I'd given my general what he demanded?" He arched Donté's neck even farther, straining the muscles along Donté's throat. "We made love. Right there, as our prisoner drew his last breath, General Encanto fucked me, praising me for my skill."

"You worshipped him."

"I loved him."

"That wasn't love. He controlled you, manipulated your hero-worship. Molded you into a weapon of destruction. And that's why you're here, isn't it, Skye? As a weapon of the great General Encanto, famed vampire hunter. Who do you think will reap the glory? I doubt it will be you. It will be Encanto who gains more fame, more wealth. He never loved you. He used you."

"You're wrong. He knew I could do this."

"He sent you because you were dispensable to him. He could always get another if you failed. There are always more humans eager to kill our kind. Eager to lick the boots of a man like Encanto."

"No. You don't know what you're talking about."

"I know very well what it means. But something happened, didn't it, Skye? You can't kill me. You found out I may not be what you thought I was. Or maybe I'm more than you expected. Maybe the stories were lies. Maybe all vampires aren't murderers."

"No. No."

Suddenly, Donté yanked the manacles free and he whirled on Skye. How little Templeton knew of vampires if he thought the chains would hold Donté if he truly wanted to be free. He shoved Skye to his knees and anchored him there, looked down upon the angelic countenance of the blond vampire hunter.

"You don't want to kill me, do you?" he said softly. "Not really."

Slowly, Skye looked up at him, his blue eyes uncertain, yet dilated with desire. The whip dropped to the floor. "I gave you only what you wanted."

"But you thought you would use it against me."

An intelligent and wary look entered Skye's expression. "I watched you with the zombies. I watched you with...Gordon, the boy you killed." His gaze narrowed. "What you wanted was to be punished for Gordon's death. And that's what I gave you."

Donté was surprised at how much Skye really had understood. He reached around to his back and scooped up some of the blood still pooled there. Already the wounds were beginning to heal. He spread the blood across Skye's cheeks and over his forehead. He then brushed his blood-painted thumb across his lips.

"Taste what I am, lad. All that I am." He cupped Skye's face. "Taste me." And then his mouth crashed down over Skye's.

Chapter 8

This was not what he'd expected. But then again, Skye didn't know what he'd expected when he'd walked into this room. What he had felt over the last week was the attraction building between himself and Captain Lucienne until it now erupted like a volcano spewing hot, molten lava. How could he have envisioned that it would result in such burning lust?

He tasted the tantalizing undead glacial white fire of vampire as he sucked on Donté's tongue, sealing his mouth to the captain's. He tasted the tang of human blood. He reached up to embrace Donté, felt the welts of years past, the melding of new wounds, the wetness of blood that Skye had drawn.

Donté shoved him backward. The jangle of broken chain rattled as Skye's back hit the floor. He looked up into Donté's piercing ruby eyes, dilated with lust. He saw the hint of pointed white incisors bearing down on him.

And he closed his eyes, awaiting the sting of penetration, the deep, throbbing ache of possession. He suddenly wanted to know what the passionate kiss of a vampire felt like. Why all the men of Donté's crew were addicted to the captain's brand of sexual feeding. Men who were loyal to this vampire captain to the death. He wanted to know what this undead captain was all about. Why Skye couldn't seem to bring himself to kill him. It was his duty to kill any vampire he came in contact with--he'd sworn an oath to do so.

He tipped his head, baring his throat. "Do it," he whispered. "Feed from me." He felt the scrape of sharp teeth against the pulsing vein at his neck. He held his breath, waiting, yearning. Donté's tongue traced slowly along the bulging, blood-engorged purple vein. Skye's heart beat faster.

And then Skye's eyelids snapped up as he felt Donté draw away. The red of his eyes dimmed, the shade deepening.

"Why?" Sharp pain spread across Skye's chest. The pain of rejection shot through him.

Donté's eyes turned black as hard, glittering onyx. "I want you as you are, Templeton. Fully intact. I've never known a man like you. And for a while, I want to enjoy you just as you are. I'll take your blood, at a time of my choosing. For now it is enough to know you belong to me already. If not by our mingled blood, then by mind and body."

"Belong to you?" Skye felt the angry bubbling froth overflow, and a lust for domination roared through him. He thrust Donté away. The captain, constricted by his pants and the slickness of spilled blood on the floor, fell backward unable to right himself.

Skye quickly unfastened his pants and shoved them down his legs. He didn't wait to do more. He didn't wait for an invitation.

He was on Donté, rational thought completely obliterated by burning sexual frenzy. He would show Lucienne who submitted to whom. He whirled him around and shoved him face first. Without giving him a chance to think, he yanked him up onto his knees. A hand came around to encircle the hard, white-marbled length of Donté's prick.

With his other hand he reached up to the table and pulled down the porcelain pitcher containing water. The bowl it was in crashed to the floor.

He poured the water down Donté's back. And then he dragged his finger into the pool of pinkish liquid that puddled beneath them. Setting the pitcher next to him, he plunged his finger into Donté's anus. Skye heard him gasp and then groan. But he didn't fight the penetration.

"How long has it been since you've been fucked by a human, vampire?"

Donté groaned, but no words answered Skye. Skye then added a second finger to the first. How long?" he yelled.

"Not since I was human," Donté finally answered, cries of pleasure drenching his words.

Skye waited not another second. Withdrawing his fingers, he fitted the broad knob of his penis to Donté's hole. The flesh of his prick was deep purple and hot as a branding iron compared to the cool, alabaster texture of Donté's skin. Surging forward, he buried his erection inside Donté's passage.

"*Mon dieu!*" A shudder raced through Donté's body as Skye seated himself fully into his passage. It felt so good to be wrapped so tightly. It was hot and cold friction as he began to move inside him. With his hand he mirrored his thrusts, riding up and down the vampire's rigid penis.

"Yield to you, Captain? I think it's the other way around. You will yield to me."

To Skye's surprise Donté did not struggle to gain his freedom. And something told Skye it would have been very easy for him to fight free. No. Instead he pushed back against Skye's thrusts. Time and again matching Skye's movements, until finally Skye flooded Donté's rectum with his fiery seed. Within moments Skye felt the pulsing release of Donté's cum fill his hand. He milked Donté until the last of his seed poured from him, then he pulled from inside Donté's hole.

Donté dropped to the floor, then rolled over, and looked up at Skye as the young sailor pulled up his pants and fastened them.

Donté reached up and yanked Skye toward him. "You think you are the master. That you have won."

Skye looked into his eyes and locked his jaw. "I'm the type of human you've never encountered. One you can never possess."

"You think so. I will have your blood and your soul." He rolled over until Skye was beneath him. "In my own time. Not yours."

"I'm not like the others."

Donté smiled. "Oh, yes. That much, I know, lad. Which is why I'll keep you. Even knowing you're a hunter. And a minion of Encantro's."

"One day I may kill you." But looking into Donté's eyes, Skye had to wonder if that day would ever come.

"Or I'll kill you," Donté shot back. The captain cupped Skye's face and brought him closer. "There has never been one among my crew like you. Strong in mind as well as body. A true warrior."

"I'll give you what you've been missing, what you've yearned for."

"Your submission?"

Skye chuckled. "I think not. You have plenty of that all around you. I was thinking more along *your* submission."

Skye saw something flicker in Donté's eyes that he couldn't quite read. Was it acceptance? Or something else?

"Velvet must be awakened." Donté rolled away and surged to his feet. He pulled up his pants and refastened them.

Skye stood up as well. He leaned down to pick up the pieces of the broken bowl and set the pitcher back onto the table.

He looked at Donté, who still had blood on his face, but his back was already healed, only the narrow white echoes of old whippings still remained. Skye picked up the cat-o'-nine and laid it carefully on the table.

Donté looked at him from his position beside the bed. "I've never had such a satisfying encounter. But now I thirst." As Skye watched he leaned toward Velvet. "Awaken." Skye barely heard the words. He saw Velvet's eyes open and he slowly sat up.

"Cap'n?" he said as his curious gaze circuited the room and landed on Skye.

Donté straightened away. "Templeton is here to escort you back to your quarters." He helped Velvet to stand. Velvet swayed slightly before righting himself. He reached up to rub the marks on his neck.

Skye almost mirrored his actions, feeling the phantom marks on his own neck, and then thought better of it. He looked at Donté, who stared back at him. Skye could almost feel the blood pumping through his veins. Why hadn't Donté fed from him? Skye's guard had been down and he'd actually begged for him to do so. He had to wonder if he'd ever know the answer or feel the puncture of the vampire's fangs.

"There's blood on your face, Cap'n. Are you hurt?" Velvet asked. And then he peered closer at Skye. "And yours as well. Did something happen?" He brushed a hand across his face. "How long was I out?"

Skye realized he must look peculiar, but for some reason he was proud of the evidence of what had occurred between himself and the captain. Strangely, it made him feel possessive of the vampire.

He wanted to deny the attraction he felt toward the captain. But the longer he was on the ship, the sharper the enchantment. He could not fall in love with this vampire.

"I don't need help getting to my quarters, Cap'n. I'm just fine."

"Those are my orders, Velvet. You always do have a hard time following orders. But this time you'll obey me."

"Yes, Cap'n." Velvet hung his head.

Donté handed him his clothing. "Get dressed."

As Velvet began to dress, Donté poured out a glass of wine. He stepped around the table and handed it to Skye. A tremor passed through Skye as he accepted the glass from the ice-cold hand.

Donté didn't let go. His other hand cupped Skye's neck and drew him close until their lips almost touched.

"You won't leave me," he whispered. "You need me." Their gazes clashed and then surprisingly Skye was the first to look away. Something about this undead pulled at his heart, at his body.

"For now I'll stay," he agreed.

"We shall see. Why I want you, I don't know. Maybe it's the thrill of keeping a vampire hunter close. The tingle of danger."

"But you have that. Every time you battle the zombies."

"Maybe. But not the way it is with you." Donté's lips caressed Skye's until Skye opened his mouth and Donté slipped his tongue inside. It was fast and deep and possessive. And then he pulled away, releasing his hold on the wine glass.

"I'm ready, Cap'n."

Skye turned to look at Velvet, almost forgetting he was in the room. Quickly, he downed the wine and set the glass on the table.

"I'll take him down."

Donté dipped a cloth into the pitcher and then slowly wiped the blood from Skye's face. "The others will question. It would be best to keep this between us."

When he was done, Skye took the pink-tinged cloth from Donté's hand and did the same for the captain.

"As you say, there would be questions."

Donté looked at Skye, their eyes again dueling. Hot passion that surpassed the need for words. Donté's gaze slid to Skye's neck and Skye felt the thunder of his blood.

"Send Margan to me," Donté said and then turned away.

Unexpected jealousy erupted to the surface and Skye swallowed it. He wanted to tell Donté he would provide. But something told him Donté would refuse him yet again.

"Aye, Captain. I'll find him and tell him you want to see him."

What would happen if he stayed on this ship? How much longer before he succumbed completely to the vampire's spell? Already, he was so close. He could still smell the dried blood that Donté had wiped away, a glimmer of power racing through his veins that hadn't been there before.

He watched Donté with Velvet. And he knew he'd already made his decision to become a part of the vampire's crew.

Chapter 9

It was a clear night. Donté looked up at the sky and checked the position of the stars. Soon, they would be home, back on the island of Noctra, safely within the protective vortex. It was not going to be easy explaining about Skye to Sterling, Donté's sire. Donté wasn't even certain that he understood the relationship himself.

The night was quiet, all still except for the comforting creak of the ship and the flapping of the wind-filled sails. Onyx had come to his quarters earlier and now Donté was well fed and looking forward to a night of solitude. Just him and the sea.

"So we're headed for Noctra?"

Donté turned to see Skye standing behind him. "You're learning to approach like a vampire. I didn't hear you."

He tied off the wheel. The seas were quiet and they were on course. Erik, a sailor of particularly keen eyesight even without the vampire blood flowing through his veins, and who climbed like a monkey, was in the crow's nest at the top of the main mast. He would alert them to any signs of unusual activity. Donté turned his full attention to Skye. Even after four weeks on his ship, the man was still an enigma. And even after fucking him, he wanted him more than he had at the beginning.

"I guess I'm learning from you."

Donté studied him in the darkness, his eyes well accustomed to seeing quite clearly on the blackest of nights. Skye was so blond, so flush with life, and so much an opposite to Donté.

Skye turned his face to the stars and Donté's attention fastened on Skye's throat. Donté's newest lover had now been on board the *Night Stalker* for a month and still Donté had not fed from him. He bore no scars from the vampire's hunger.

"Do you still plan to join my crew? There's still time to leave. I can set you loose in one of the rowboats with enough food to last you until you're picked up."

"Well, that would be better than when you found me." He looked at Donté. The vampire couldn't read his thoughts nor gain a sense of his emotions. He still blocked them quite efficiently. If he'd fed from him it would be a different matter. But there was not that connection between vampire and supplicant.

Donté held back from forcing the issue. He didn't quite understand why, but there was a purity in the relationship with Skye that he didn't want tainted. Sometimes he didn't know if it was love or hate, or some odd mixture of the two. But to feed from him would change the relationship in a way he didn't want to happen. At least not yet. Maybe it was the anticipation of what was yet to come. It heightened the sexual aspects of the relationship somehow.

Skye crossed the space between them and lifted a hand to Donté's face. They were almost the same height, and tonight Skye's eyes appeared black and bottomless, reflecting the night.

"Your coldness isn't like the others. I don't know why I'm so drawn to you." He leaned forward and kissed Donté. It wasn't a kiss of possession and domination as often was the case when the two of them came together in sexual battle. It was softer, more intimate. More soul-destroying. Donté leaned into it. But then Skye ended the kiss all too quickly.

"I'll stay," he said. "Until I leave. Or until I die. One or the other."

"You're a fool to come with me, you know that. I may not be able to convince the others of my kind to leave you unscathed. I won't claim you as supplicant, but I can't guarantee the others will honor my decision."

"I've offered myself to you and you've refused."

He stroked Skye's beautiful braided blond hair. The face and body of an angel. The mind of a warrior. He didn't belong in Donté's world. But Donté couldn't bear to let him go.

"I have my reasons. Someday, maybe I'll share them with you." He again claimed Skye's mouth, sucking hungrily at his lips before releasing him.

"How did you become vampire? Who made you?"

Donté hated thinking about the past. There was no purpose in it. Not now.

"I met Savoir on Tortuga, or Turtle Island as you may be familiar with it."

"I thought you were in St. Domingue."

This was the part he didn't want to think about. "There was a slave rebellion on my uncle's plantation. I don't want to go into all the details, but suffice it to say that Joshua cared enough to warn me and get me off the island. I ended up on Tortuga. That's where I met my sire. Where I was turned."

He didn't want to remember how he and Sterling had returned to the plantation years later to kill the remaining zombies, including his uncle and two cousins. It was then he'd discovered the truth about Sterling. And allowed himself to be turned after the horror of the massacre in order to find Zoliel and have his revenge. That desire had turned into so much more than he'd expected.

"And you became a pirate."

"Yes. I became a pirate. It was on one trip when we were looking for the witch doctor that Sterling and I discovered Noctra by accident. It was during a storm and we thought we were lost, but then the island just seemed to appear out of nowhere. It's since been settled by others of our kind--Carrib vampires."

"Carrib? As opposed to?"

"Mainland or continent vampires. The ones you are familiar with."

"There's a difference? That I find hard to believe."

Donté smiled. "Would you care, even if you did know there was a difference? There are English and Spanish, humans of many cultures. You don't think vampires carry some of the flavor of their cultures? That there might be differences?"

"I never thought about it, I guess."

"You assume we are all the same. Maybe you'll discover you can be wrong."

"That I doubt. Vampires kill with no care or concern. They all need to be staked out and beheaded."

Donté looked at him and dropped his arms. The words came from Skye like a sonnet recited from memory. But he sensed there was little heart or emotion behind the words. "I don't know why you stay. Why I--"

"Why you what?"

He could not say the words that seemed to be buried inside him. "I'm a vampire and you're a hunter. They'll come looking for you."

"I doubt it. They'll assume I'm dead. Just like all the others before me. I'm staying because of you. You're more human somehow than the others I've--"

"Destroyed? Will you one day kill me, Skye?"

"Truthfully? I don't know. But for now--" He again claimed Donté's mouth, and for this moment in the middle of the ocean Donté could dream of a different future. "For now, I want you more than I've ever wanted a human. I can't explain it, but I have to stay."

Donté wrapped his arms around Skye--the embodiment of all that he had lost when he became vampire--and all that he yearned to embrace in his future. Until there was no more future.

"How long do you plan to stay up here?" Skye murmured before trailing kisses along Donté's throat.

Donté felt his cock surge hard against his breeches. "Not much longer. Find Jupiter. Send him up to relieve me."

"Aye-aye, Cap'n. As you command." His gaze rose to imprison Donté's. Such a meek and submissive response, but Donté knew it wouldn't last the hour. Just as soon as Donté returned to his quarters.

He lifted Skye's hand to his mouth. Turned it and licked his inner wrist and the throbbing blue vein that pulsed there. Donté could smell the rich blood surging through his veins. His incisors ached to penetrate the succulent flesh.

He scraped lightly along Skye's flesh. Would it be tonight? Would he weaken enough to draw the vampire hunter completely into his world? Sire him as vampire?

He swirled his tongue over the warm beating vein. His gaze lifted to capture Skye's.

"Do it," Skye whispered, his eyes closing, heartbeat racing. "Make me yours. Tonight. Forever."

The yearning to taste the sweet bounty of his young lover's blood spread through Donté. His teeth once more scraped across the fragrant flesh. He closed his eyes and inhaled the sweet scent of his surrender and the tang of the ocean spray. All that he could ever want was laid out before him.

All Donté had to do was claim what was offered by right of his vampire blood. The blood bounty that belonged to him. He owned both the night and the will of this man. How could he resist?

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