



*Scarlet Rose*

# Blood Ritual

by  
L. Rosario

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## Dedication

This one is for Tonya. I can't thank you enough, hon!

As I stepped out of the cave, the heat from the roaring bonfire caressed my flesh. I had changed out of my jeans and t-shirt and into a rather skimpy dress that looked more like a slip than anything else. The black silk caught between my thighs as I walked and was shockingly cool in contrast to the nearby flames. Beneath my feet, the packed clay was warm, and all around me were the musical sounds of the night.

Halting, I dropped my head back and closed my eyes to take it all in. Insects clicked and chirped, small rodents scuffled about, and leaves rustled in the slight breeze.

“Sylvia.”

The soft caress of my name invaded my calm, and I opened my eyes to focus on the moon through the wispy clouds. Somewhere in the distance a coyote howled, sending a shiver down my spine, and I couldn’t help but think it was the perfect night for a blood ritual.

“Sylvia.”

I shivered again. Only *he* had the power to say my name in a way that instantly tightened my skin and made my heart race.

Looking through the fire, my breath caught. There, on the other side, he waited, and emotions swelled within me. It was impossible to explain, but from the first moment I laid eyes on him standing in a circle of moonlight, looking like he should be the ruler of the night, I knew I’d spend the rest of my life loving him. The passing months had done nothing to dim my feelings, and eagerness swept through me.

Amidst the shadowy red rocks, his pale hair and light clothing stood out like a beacon, and although anxious to be at his side, I took a moment to drink in the sight. An ivory button-down shirt,

undone to his waist, splayed open over his chest, while butterscotch leather molded across his muscular thighs. Dancing flames hid his features, but it had taken only one unforgettable night to emblazon them in my mind forever.

He held out his hand, and I went, as if pulled by an imaginary string. Behind him, cloaked in shadows, stood the coven. They watched me step around the fire to join their master, and I wondered what lay behind their blank expressions. Approval? Disapproval? Was I only one false step away from being ripped to shreds and feasted upon?

Their opinion of me, whatever it might be, ceased to matter the moment I placed my fingers in their master's cool palm. He tugged me forward and I fell against his hard chest. One leather clad thigh wedged itself between my legs, and sparks of awareness ricocheted low in my belly.

The fire blazed hot at my back, but it failed to singe like the intense sexual energy of the man before me. Taking advantage of his unbuttoned shirt, I placed my trembling fingers against his chest, above his heart. If it beat, I could not detect it.

He gazed down at me while brushing wayward curls back from my face. Fire illuminated his features. The blue of his eyes burned brighter than I'd ever seen, his skin glowed like smooth marble, and his sensual mouth was stained with blood.

Unable to stop myself, I reached up to brush the tips of my fingers over his full bottom lip. The blood was fresh enough to wet my skin, an indication his human servant was not too far away.

The soft caress of his hand over my cheek pulled my attention from his mouth. "You are so beautiful, Sylvia," he said in the dark seductive voice I could never tire of hearing. "In death you will be even more so."

I blinked at the choice of words. Tonight was indeed about death. *My* death. Was I truly ready to die for this man? If the roles were reversed, would he die for me?

“I would do anything you asked of me,” he said, able to read my thoughts with no effort whatsoever. “Command me now, and I will gladly die all over again, just for you.”

I couldn’t breathe. The naked honesty in his eyes left little doubt as to the passion behind his words, and my reasons for being here were reaffirmed. In my heart I knew this man would never lie to me, just as I knew my safe haven was his strong embrace.

His touch flitted over my mouth, and he grinned just enough to show a flash of white teeth and a hint of fangs. “Are you ready?”

I wasn’t afraid, but still my heart stuttered and my lungs burned. So transfixed by his stare, I failed to hear movement behind me until it was too late. Cold hands gripped my shoulders and pulled me back. The shock of no longer being pressed to comforting flesh and muscle left me feeling naked and vulnerable. Unsure of what my captor intended, I struggled, but the grip only tightened with renewed effort to keep me still.

“Bruise her flesh, and you will suffer for it.” There was nothing seductive about his voice now as he issued the threat. Power oozed from every pore and his gaze clashed with the vampire at my back.

My captor’s hands slackened. “Forgive me, master.” The apology barely received a nod before his master’s attention shifted toward the coven.

“If there is anyone present who disagrees with the choice I have made, speak now.”

For a moment no one stirred as shock and unease distorted their features. Then suddenly a soft murmur rose among them, and a woman stepped forward. She was tall, elegant, and clad in a body-hugging white sheath that showed off her voluptuous curves. Long red hair snaked over her shoulders, seemingly alive with its own inner fire, and her skin glowed with an ethereal quality I would expect to encounter only in books. She lowered her head, but her focus remained fixed on her master.

Peering through thick sooty lashes, she licked her lips and

waited for the rumbling voices behind her to cease. Eventually there was silence, and her voice rang out with a lyrical accent. “If I might speak, master?”

Her question earned her nothing more than a curt nod and an arched brow.

She appeared undeterred. “The coven believes your queen should be chosen from within.”

“The coven, Nadia? Or you?”

If his question rankled, it failed to show on her lovely face. “To bring new blood inside will weaken us and make us vulnerable.”

“And I assume you are prepared to offer yourself.”

Nadia’s face bloomed with hope, and she lifted her head to stare her master dead in the eyes. Again she licked her lips, drawing undue attention to their pouty fullness. “If you will have me, I’d be honored to serve as your queen.”

*Over my dead body!*

I struggled to rip free of my captor, wanting to leap over the fire and claw out Nadia’s exotic dark eyes. How dare she presume so much? *I* was his chosen queen, and he would be mine for all eternity. Nadia could take her hopes, dreams, and ambitions and go straight to hell.

Her gaze met mine, and my boiling emotions bled into my face. In a few hours I’d be her queen, surely that gave me the right to stare her down. For several tense moments she simply stared back. Finally, she tucked her chin to her chest and melted among the others with a quiet, “Forgive me, I misspoke.”

Startled by, yet comfortable with my newfound authority, I turned to find approval stamped upon the face of my future king. “Let us do this now.” The strength of my tone delighted me. “Make me your queen.”

“Your eagerness pleases me,” he said, closing the scant distance between us. He was near enough to touch, but I couldn’t free my arms to do so. Inhaling deeply, I breathed in the essence of him



instead. Mixed with the flavor of smoke, his musky scent almost made me groan out loud, and my body reacted with a fierceness that would have had me on my knees if not for my captor's grip.

I'd been denied my lover's touch for a full month in preparation for tonight's ritual, and I hungered for it...for *him*, so desperately it hurt.

A knowing smirk played at the corner of his mouth as his gaze moved past me. "Take her to the altar," he ordered.

Obedying, my captor nudged me in the direction of the stone slab. When I finally stood before the altar, a great deal of my eagerness slipped away. "I don't know if I can do this," I barely whispered, but of course he heard me, as clearly as if I shouted out loud.

The hands at my shoulders fell away to be replaced by a familiar touch. Turning, I melted into his embrace, and he brushed his lips over my hair. "I am scared," I admitted into the silky edge of his collar. I nuzzled closer to inhale his scent again.

"There is nothing to fear." He eased back to cup my face. Our eyes met and my fear receded.

Although he had the ability to manipulate my thoughts and feelings, he never would. What I felt when in his presence was much too powerful to be the result of magic or trickery. It was very real, and I surrendered to it quite willingly. Looking into his eyes, my fear vanished for one reason and one reason only; with him, I truly had no reason to be afraid.

"Kiss me," I said softly.

He denied me with a shake of his head.

"Just once," I nearly begged.

Lowering his face, he feathered his mouth across mine. I tasted the blood on his skin, and it reminded me of all I had agreed to become a part of.

Not content with a mere taste, I flicked my tongue out to lick his bottom lip clean. He allowed it for a moment, then pulled back,

looking satisfied and yet as hungry as me. "Together you and I will be invincible."

"Yes," I sighed while licking the flavor of the brief kiss away.

With a soft growl, he swooped down to capture my mouth, and this time it was much more than a brief teasing contact. His tongue delved deep then retreated, only to repeat the action over and over until my hips picked up the rhythm and I rocked against him. He sipped at my lips and sucked at my tongue, summoning a shuddering moan from deep inside me.

Steadying myself, my hands on his shoulders, I caressed the hard muscle through the fabric of his shirt, but I needed to touch the body that haunted my dreams. Clutching fistfuls of silk, I shoved it off his shoulders. Where the heat of the fire reached his flesh, he was hot to the touch, and I spread my fingers wide to absorb as much as possible.

The shirt slithered down his arms, exposing him to my eager hands. While he continued to make sweet love to my mouth, I roamed over the texture of his bare chest. The sparse smattering of hair that dusted his pectorals tickled my palms before I moved lower to follow the dense trail that disappeared into his waistband. The supple leather pants laced up the front, and I longed to rip them open and plunge my hand inside to take hold of the rigid erection pressed to my belly.

"Sylvia," he whispered and kissed a warm wet path over my chin and down toward my neck. "I need to taste you." There was desperation in his tone, then his fangs pierced my flesh.

My legs almost buckled under the intense rush of blood through my veins to feed his hunger.

Gathering me in his arms, he laid me out atop the hard stone. The altar, he had called it. A place of sacrifice, and I was more than ready to be taken.

Still sucking at my neck, he grabbed the hem of my dress and bunched it up around my waist. I barely had time to register the

reality of how exposed I was before he placed his hand between my legs. I whimpered at the contact and bucked against his palm. It had been too long, but as much as I wanted to have his fingers moving inside me, I didn't want to come. Not yet.

Blindly, I reached for him and twisted my hands in his hair. Arching, I offered more of my neck and all of my blood, anything to make him cease the torment below. He drank deep and hard while easing the dress higher to bare my breasts. The cool night air blended with the heat from the fire to make me shiver. For just a moment, his mouth abandoned my neck, and he stripped the dress up and over my head.

Naked and feeling like a wanton goddess, I arched up, reveling in the feel of his hungry gaze devouring me. Throwing my head back, I cupped my breasts in a bold offer to have him suckle them.

"I've taken enough for now." His ravenous tone belied the words, but he made no move to take what I offered. Cradling my head, he lifted me so I could look him in the eye. Fresh blood stained his mouth, and bloodlust roared to life inside me, reminding me why I was the chosen queen. I reached out, thinking to drag his face closer so I could lick it clean, but he captured my hand before I could touch him.

"Your bloodlust is not the reason." Settling my hand at my side, he placed the tip of his finger over the wound on my neck. "I have encountered many who share your hunger, but none possessed the desire to go further. None looked beyond the ecstasy of my bite to find the man. Until you."

He moved his blood stained finger down my neck, across my collar bone, and toward my breast, leaving a warm trail in its wake. "You are the only one strong enough to stand by my side," he continued. "The only woman I ever wanted with an urgency that has the power to frighten me."

Such words should be spoken in private, but I forced myself to ignore the watchful coven. Voicing his deepest emotions was not

something this man did often or easily, and I wasn't foolish enough to do anything that might ruin this precious moment. Holding my breath, I silently hoped to hear the one word yet to be spoken between us.

His lids lowered, but not before I glimpsed enough to realize my deepest desires were known to him. Laying a hand over my breast, he flexed his fingers. His cold palm pebbled my nipple, and I caught my breath as good old fashioned lust warred with my need to hear I was loved. It was just a word, after all, and I knew from personal experience not to put too much faith in words.

Actions spoke so much louder.

Propping my weight on my elbows to stare down at the pale rise of my breasts, I followed the trail of blood straight to his hand. I wanted his mouth to take that path. I wanted my nipple snared between his teeth. I wanted--

My thoughts fractured into a thousand pieces as he moved his hand and leaned down to torment my nipple with quick flicks of his tongue.

"Oh...God..." I moaned and arched against his mouth, but not to offer blood. My knees fell open in an age old plea, and the fire's heat scorched my sex. I moaned again, shocked by the ferocity of the sound. "Please...take me now."

It no longer mattered how many eyes watched us, or that when dawn arrived I would no longer be among the living. The only thing that mattered was my need to feel this man's body moving over and into mine.

"Not yet," he said against my breast, his teeth scraped my sensitive nipple, causing me to cry out.

"Yes, now." Lashing out, I twisted my fingers in the lacing of his pants, and tugged frantically. My awkward movements snapped the string, and I bit back an anguished sound.

"Easy, my love."

The endearment tempered my madness and enabled him to pry

my fingers from his fly. Curling my nails into the hard stone, I watched as he slid the damaged cord free. The butter soft leather parted, but with the fire at his back, his body was hidden in shadows. Another tormented sound escaped me, and I reached out to take hold of his fly to shove it farther apart. "I need you," I said. "Now."

It was not in my nature to beg, but I'd get down on my knees for this man, and he knew it.

"Sylvia," he cautioned and wrapped his fingers around my wrist as I attempted to delve into his gaping pants. "We must exchange blood first. Our pleasure will come soon enough, I promise."

I bit my lip in frustration and focused my gaze on the ridge of flesh outlined in tight leather. I wasn't one to pout either, but I certainly felt like doing so now. When I looked up, the amusement on his face surprised me. Normally, he wore a mask of power, but I liked the crooked grin and smiling eyes so much more. They made it easy enough to see the man he had once been, and I wagered he had been quite the charmer.

Wondering what it might gain me to beg *and* pout, I dropped my lashes and stuck my bottom lip out just a little. His chuckle was rich music to my ears, and to my delight he released my wrist, allowing me to live out the fantasy I'd been having since clapping eyes on his sexy pants.

I wedged my hand down the snug front and heard his low vibrating hum of pleasure as I coiled my fingers around his length. He tossed his head back, and I half expected to hear him howl at the moon. Thinking such a response would be beyond sexy, I vowed to make it happen at some point in the future, but not now.

Right now I had a much different goal in mind, and it involved the delicious treat clasped in my hand.

"Your hunger is threatening to affect everyone present, my dear," he teased. Ignoring him, I rolled to my side and grabbed a

fistful of leather in my free hand. I struggled to work the stubborn fabric over his hips, and eventually I was rewarded for my efforts when his erection sprang free. After a long look, I scooted down the stone and took him in my mouth.

A deep moan filled the air, but I wasn't sure if it was mine or his. Sliding my fist to the base of his penis, I angled to take him deeper. A rare breath escaped his lungs, and he tangled his fingers in my hair to pull me away before I could attempt to swallow him whole.

"Enough," he snarled.

Fighting the grip he had on my hair, I gazed up and swept my tongue over my lips. He shook his head. "I require all of my strength to complete the ritual, and you'll drain me in no time with that devilish mouth of yours."

I smiled a private smile and once more feasted on the sight of his jutting penis. He was only a tongue length away, but another tug at my hair stopped me from leaning forward and forced my attention upward once again. His expression left no room for discussion, and it was clear that for now, I needed to behave.

Reluctantly, I unwrapped my fingers from around him and rolled onto my back, shaking his hands free of my hair as I did so. Spreading my arms out at my sides, I ignored the rough edge of the stone as it bit into my elbows, and stared over at him. "I'm yours." His eyes turned a dangerous shade of blue in response to those two very simple words. "Do what you will, master."

Closing my eyes, I waited.

Rough hands took hold of my ankles at the same time my arms were pinned above my head. Fear washed over me, and my eyes snapped open. Instinctively I fought, but there was nothing I could do against the strength of two vampires. Not yet, anyway.

"Be still, Sylvia."

Be still? I was splayed out on a stone altar and suddenly more frightened than I'd ever been, and he commanded me to be still?

He threaded his left hand in my hair and settled his right over my belly. I ceased to struggle, trusting in the belief that he would never do a thing to hurt me. Our eyes met as he brushed his mouth across mine, and unease gave way to desire.

With a slight smile toying at his lips, he leaned toward my neck. His hair dusted over my upper chest, and I sighed when his tongue lashed out to prepare me for his bite. Anticipation coursed through me, but with the first painful sting of his teeth, I realized this bite would not be like all the others I had willingly succumbed to. For the first time, I fought against the feel of his mouth sucking at my throat.

“Be still,” he said again against my neck. The sound of his voice made the blood in my veins flow faster, and he drank until my skin grew cold and clammy. Not even the fire could warm me now.

Moaning softly, I attempted to struggle, wanting the ritual to stop. I no longer wished to be a part of this, but it was too late. With a will of its own, my body surrendered to the painful ecstasy of his bite. Blending with the rough sound of my panting, the fire hissed and spit, the coven whispered in hushed voices, and my heart ceased to beat.

I came to, feeling as if my limbs were made of stone.

Rolling my head, I winced at the pain in my neck and saw him standing at my side. He had shed what remained of his clothing, but even the glory of his body could not dim my discomfort.

Meeting his gaze, I attempted to speak, but words refused to form. Fresh fear gripped my gut, and I reached for his hand in silent appeal.

“I will keep you safe,” he promised, then released my hand after a brief reassuring squeeze. Beckoning a nearby coven member forward, he lifted the man’s wrist to his mouth and sank his teeth into the vulnerable underside. Holding my gaze, he drank for several moments, then pulled his mouth away with a violence that

ripped at the vampire's skin.

Blood sprayed from the wound, and several drops landed on my icy skin. Immediately, I tried to rub the marks away but only managed to smear the vampire blood.

"You will bathe in his blood, and that of the others," my master said while urging the lesser vampire closer. Lifting the man's arm above my chest, he squeezed blood from the wound, and it dripped down at an alarming rate. In moments my breasts were covered.

Dismissing the man, he spread the thickness into my skin, his gaze fixed on mine the whole time. Something about what was happening should have disturbed me, but the feel of his blood soaked hands running over my breasts made me burn with awareness, and I didn't want him to stop. Too soon, he stepped away to beckon another vampire forward.

One by one, they came to my side to spill their blood until my body glistened red in the firelight. Overcome by the feel and aroma of so much blood, I was helpless to stop the hunger that welled within me. I wanted to lick myself clean and take every drop inside.

Perhaps in response to my thoughts, my lover shooed the last coven member away and leaned down to lick a path from my naval to the hollow of my throat, his tongue teasing all the way, forcing hunger and lust to become one. He kissed the wounds on either side of my neck then placed his mouth against mine.

"Taste the blood of those whom you shall rule," he commanded.

Staring deep into his eyes, I swept my tongue across the seam of his lips. The mixed blood tasted like fine decadent wine, and instantly I craved more. Parting my lips, I took his mouth in a frenzied kiss and shoved my tongue past his teeth. Inside and out, he tasted like blood, and I feared my hunger would drive me insane if not appeased soon.

With his fingers tangled in my hair, he eased me away. "Patience, my queen." Releasing me, he stepped back and spread his arms out wide. Mesmerized, I watched the flames lick over his



flesh and longed for the chance to do the same.

“Come forward and give me your blood, so that I may become one with my queen.” His voice rang out with clear command, and the coven moved as one to encircle him.

Despite the heavy weakness of my limbs, I struggled to kneel upon the altar to better see what was happening. With clear eagerness, each member of the coven opened a fresh wound and bled for their master. In no time at all, his skin was as stained as mine.

“Nadia, come.”

My legs began to shake, but I refused to look away now.

Nadia approached her master and bowed her head. Her sheath was now stained with blood, and a wound stood out against the ivory skin of her arm. She bowed her head and clasped her hands in front of her hips. “How may I serve you, master?”

I cringed as her lilting voice filled the air, and wondered if my new duties as queen would include evicting coven members. If so, Nadia’s name was high on the list.

“Administer the wound that will allow your new queen to feed.” Exposing his neck, the king’s meaning was clear to all.

I held my breath, realizing Nadia’s loyalty was being tested. Truthfully I had no desire to watch her sink her teeth into my man, but it seemed an awfully affective way to squelch her ambitions. Biting him to allow me to feed would be viewed as complete acceptance by all who watched.

Nadia moved closer and angled her face toward her master’s neck. “I would be honored,” she murmured while placing her lips against his skin.

I looked away so as not to brand myself with an unwanted image and stared into the fire. Watching this man take what he needed from his human servant was one thing, but to see the grasping Nadia tear into him was quite another. In time, movement and the sound of my king’s voice called to me. With spots dancing in

my eyes, I tilted my chin up to meet his gaze.

“I do not want you on your knees.”

Having forgotten that I knelt upon the altar, I looked down in surprise. My legs protested as I uncurled them to sit at the edge of the stone. He clasped my shoulders to gently move me closer to him. Stepping between my thighs, he framed and lifted my face within his palms. “Blood will bind us together from this moment forward.”

Unsure of what to do, I nodded and hooked my feet behind his thighs to coax him closer. The swollen head of his erection slid through the folds of my sex, making me forget all about my need to drink. Reaching for his hips, I tried to encourage him to slip inside, but he resisted and kissed me with a gentleness that made tears sting behind my lids.

“I knew if I waited long enough, you’d come to me.” He spoke between kisses. “I knew Fate would lead you in the right direction and you would eventually find your home.”

I smiled, recalling the first time we had kissed and how I had told him his embrace felt like coming home. “Let us finish this,” I said, eager to finally be his in every way possible.

“With pleasure,” was his quiet response. Looking over his shoulder toward the coven, he bit out an abrupt, “Leave us.”

Joy consumed me as I watched the others fade into the night. All alone now, our gazes locked, and he lowered his hands from my shoulders to encircle my waist. Holding me in a firm grip, he shifted closer within the cage of my legs, and I stifled a cry as the first few inches of his thickness slid inside. Instantly, my muscles convulsed around the invasion.

“Put your mouth to my neck.”

Taking hold of his shoulders, I stretched to obey and muffled a scream against his skin as he filled me completely with one sure thrust.

“Take my blood, Sylvia.”

It was difficult to concentrate on anything except the maddening friction of his movements as I opened my mouth to suck at his throat. His blood had a taste unlike any other, making me moan as it blanketed my tongue. Biting deeper, I swallowed like a greedy animal and felt the rhythm of his thrusts escalate. The rough stone tore at my backside, and I whimpered softly as the scent of my blood rose between us. I knew any damage done would heal, but that didn't change the fact that it hurt like hell.

In an effort to ignore the pain, I focused on the rich elixir filling my mouth. Getting high on the flavor of it, I was barely aware of being lifted off the altar and laid on the ground, until warm clay touched my back.

Bracing his weight on his hands, my lover eased away to look down into my face. "More comfortable now?"

I licked my lips like a contented cat, then nodded. "Yes, thank you."

He dipped down to kiss me, and his soft hair caressed my cheeks. "Making love on that altar isn't practical, even for a vampire."

"But what about the ritual?" I asked while rooting around under his hair to reclaim his wound.

He tossed his head back to make things easier. "The rules of the ritual can be slightly bent, and I prefer to take you here, on the ground." He shifted his weight to one hand and reached to clasp my thigh. Raising my leg high against his hip, he ground against me until I was forced to forego the pleasure of his blood in order to breathe.

"You must continue to drink, Sylvia."

With a little frustrated growl, I gripped his shoulders and latched onto his neck again. His blood pumped hard and fast, making it difficult to swallow, and all the while he pinned me to the ground with the force of his love making. Whimpers turned to moans, and I slowly became aware of the transformation coming

over me.

The fire danced close by, throwing out heat that felt more intense than it should, and the blood on my skin grew hot enough to sizzle. I writhed at the strange feel of it. Nerve endings I never knew existed called my attention to the man between my legs, and each move he made and every muscle that flexed, shot a new wave of pleasure to my core. I contracted around him in a head long race toward orgasm and wondered if sex as a vampire was always this intense.

If so, I'd never allow this man to leave my bed.

Running my hands down his back, I gripped the taut muscles of his behind to urge him deeper. He complied, and I fought to maintain my precarious bite on his neck. This combination of drinking and mating was a new kind of heaven, to be sure, but I craved more.

Removing my lips from his neck, I licked a path across any skin I could reach and swallowed with a sigh of pleasure. The sweet metallic taste of blood was what I lived for now. It was the one thing that had the power to give me life. I couldn't get enough.

Shifting to once more rest his weight on both hands, my lover stared down through his choppy pale bangs and watched me drag my tongue toward his nipple. I toyed with the hard nub until a shudder of pleasure passed from him to me then released it to bite into the hard muscle above. I could not tear into his skin, and the failure spiked my ire. Giving up, I soothed the teeth marks with a few irritated swipes of my tongue.

No doubt sensing my frustration, he brushed a kiss over my temple then rested his forehead to mine. "All in good time, my queen."

Time, the one thing I would never run out of. Content to wait until I had a lovely pair of fangs, I focused on using my tongue again. I cleaned the blood off his straining biceps, lapped it away from the thick column of his neck, and sucked the underside of his

chin until there was nothing to taste but skin and stubble.

With every drop I consumed, more and more of my old self washed away. The sound of my breathing was barely detectable, my heart still raced, but not with the pounding urgency I might expect, and my skin slid against my lover's body as if fashioned from slick marble.

The ritual was nearly complete; I need only place my mouth at his wound and drink my fill.

The scent called me back, and I turned toward his neck. He shuddered violently as I began to drink again, and his lovemaking took on a new sense of urgency. Still holding tight to the smooth skin of his buttocks, I dug my heels into the ground and lifted my hips to meet each thrust.

"Take it all, Sylvia," he growled into my ear, and I wasn't sure if he referred to the blood spilling into my mouth or the organ grinding hard against my womb.

It didn't matter, because I wanted...no *needed*, all of both.

He circled his hips and my inner muscles clung tight, making the next circle a battle of wills between us. I drank deeper, hoping to hold off the building orgasm, but when he flattened his body against mine and snaked his hands under my bottom to pin my hips tight to his, I was lost.

"Come for me, Sylvia," he coaxed.

The urge to tear my lips from his neck and scream my pleasure at the moon was powerful, but I refused to give up the heady flavor of his blood. It was hot in contrast to our cold bodies, and I relished the warmth of it seeping into my veins.

"Stop fighting it, Sylvie."

The nickname was so out of character and unexpected I smiled against his neck, then gasped as his fingers delved between my buttocks.

"Let me feel your pleasure." He moved a hand toward the place our bodies joined and touched me in a way that made my entire

body go still. After a few breathless moments of wicked torment, his slick fingers once more took firm hold of my behind. Denying me the ability to move, he withdrew nearly all the way out, then plunged straight to the hilt.

I couldn't take anymore. Holding his skin tight in my teeth, I surrendered to the powerful contractions of my climax. Crying out at the intensity caused precious drops of blood to spill from the corner of my mouth, but I was too lost in pleasure to care.

Just as my orgasm began to fade and my mind cleared enough to allow me to think, he repositioned himself to kneel between my thighs. He used his grip on my rear to haul me up against his hips. The position drove him high and deep inside me, and I threw my arms out hoping to find something to cling to. The ground turned to dust as I scraped my nails for purchase.

Not sure when I had closed them, I pried my eyes open, and the sight of him nearly made me come again. His skin was shiny with a mixture of sweat and blood, his muscles stood out along his chest and down his arms, and his features were set in an incredibly sexy mask of concentration. With a hooded gaze, flared nostrils, and parted lips, he was a feast for my eyes.

I couldn't tear my attention away as he jerked against me in search of his own ultimate pleasure. I reached out to grip his arms, causing a smile to quirk his lips. "I love you." The words spilled from my lips, and he froze mid thrust.

Time stood still as we stared at one another. I was a moment away from regretting my rash declaration when he melted with me into the ground and fused our mouths together in a deep searching kiss, flavored with unspoken emotion.

Tears burned my eyes, and I clung to his back as the first wave of his climax crashed over him. Sucking his tongue deep into my mouth, I held him tighter and closer to feel each strong pulse of his release.

He was breathing as heavily as any mortal man by the time he

spilled the last of his seed against my womb. A rare wide smile pulled at his lips as he levered off of me. "My queen." He grazed the tip of his finger over my swollen lips. "It is done."

Unable to speak around the emotions clogging my throat, I nodded and blinked back tears.

Trailing his finger up to my eyes and over each lid, he coaxed them to close. "You must rest now and allow the transformation to complete itself."

His in every way, I had no choice but to obey.

"Sylvia? If you can hear me, wake up."

My eyelids fluttered, then opened. I met the familiar blue gaze of the man at my side and smiled. He returned the gesture with a flash of white teeth. Once I was able to concentrate on something other than the seductive spread of his mouth, it occurred to me I no longer lay atop the warm ground. Soft cotton now caressed my bare back, and I glanced around to find us surrounded by thick velvet bed curtains.

Curious, I reached toward my neck, and my fingers encountered smooth, unmarked flesh. Despite the heavy darkness, I could clearly see the flawless perfection of the rest of my body as well. The blood had been washed away, leaving me rejuvenated and reborn. I felt more alive than ever.

"Where are we?" My voice sounded strange to my ears. It had gained a rich depth to its tone, and it was a change I liked.

"You are right where you belong, in my home. *Our* home."

I smiled at that. "And the others? Does the coven live here as well?"

He nodded and reached for me. "Yes. It is safer if all of us reside in one place, but I assure you my privacy is absolute."

I didn't doubt that for a moment. Rolling toward him, I wound my arms around his neck to pull him close for a kiss. When the embrace threatened to become heated, he eased away and brushed

his lips against the tip of my nose.

“You will find clothing in the wardrobe,” he said as he worked his way out of my arms. “Get dressed and then we’ll go downstairs to address the coven for the first time as king and queen. After that, you’ll need to select a human servant, of which there will be no shortage of volunteers.”

A little daunted by what lay ahead, I simply nodded and watched as he parted the curtains to leave the bed. Soft candlelight flooded the room, and it painted his bare skin with a golden hue. My heart clenched as my gaze traveled over him. All mine; I wanted to shout out loud.

With a lingering look tossed over his shoulder, he left me to my own devices.

The wardrobe was indeed full of clothing, though none of it was mine, and all of it was stuff I’d never choose for myself. Life as a big city freelance photographer offered very few opportunities to wear head to toe black leather, but it might be a nice change from sweats and denim. Bypassing the skirts and dresses, I decided upon a pair of leather pants, scooped neck corset, and high heel boots; all of it black. Every item fit as if tailored to my body, making me wonder how he had managed such a feat.

A quick perusal of the vast room revealed its lack of a mirror. Sighing with disappointment, I shoved my fingers through my wild curls. As silly as it sounded, I had hoped to see if I looked any different. Had the yellow-green of my eyes changed? Would there be new depth to my chestnut hair?

Aside from the marble like quality of my skin, it didn’t seem as if my body had changed at all, so likely the rest of me hadn’t either. Regardless, I still wished for a good long look at my reflection.

Pinching my cheeks and biting my lips to add natural color, I pulled open the door to find my king lounging against the opposite wall in the dimly lit hall. He straightened and looked me up and down with undisguised approval. “Nice,” he commented, then



approached to offer his arm.

I seemed unable to move.

Dressed uncharacteristically in head to toe black, he stunned me with his beauty. A tight turtleneck showcased the muscles of his upper body and arms, while expertly tailored dress pants flowed over his legs. His pale hair lay in artful disarray around his features, and the tips dusted the top of his shoulders. He looked good enough to eat, and the memory of all that had happened during the blood ritual tightened my skin and reawakened my desire. I ducked my head in an effort to hide my thoughts.

“Are you alright, Sylvia?”

I looked up with a nod. “Yes. I guess I just feel a little overwhelmed by it all, but I’ll be fine.” I ran my tongue over my teeth and discovered my new fangs. Barely longer than the rest, they would soon lengthen to allow me to enjoy my first real meal as a vampire. Anticipation and the promise of fresh blood made them stir within my gums.

“Your hesitation is understandable,” he said, placing my hand on the soft sleeve of his sweater. “But I have faith in you.”

I wondered at a vampire’s choice of the word faith. Could we possess such a thing? Hoping we could, I held his words close to my heart and allowed them to comfort me. “Your faith is all I need.”

The wide smile, which was becoming a great deal more common, pulled at his mouth. The lines linking his nose to his lips deepened, and his lashes drifted down. Compelled to touch him, I traced the fetching wrinkles to the edge of his mouth, and he turned to kiss my palm. “And you are all I will ever need.”

It was not a declaration of love, but my heart soared nonetheless.

Holding my hand, he led me toward the top of a grand staircase, but I dug in my heels before we started down the black marble steps. He stopped and arched a brow in silent question.

Before speaking, I studied his features in an attempt to gage

his mood. I had assumed becoming a vampire would grant me the ability to read his thoughts, but obviously I had assumed incorrectly. Flying blind, I cleared my throat and spoke my mind. "I wish to know your name."

All the times he had come to me, all the nights spent in his arms, never once did his name pass between us. Until now, the oversight had seemed trivial.

His features shifted to resemble the hard mask I was more accustomed to seeing. "No one in the coven possesses such knowledge."

"Nor shall they, if that is what you desire, but I think I deserve to know everything about you." Despite the dark look creeping into his eyes, I refused to back down. I had given this man my body, blood, heart, and soul. All I asked for in return was a name, something to whisper in his ear during moments of passion, and something to cry out if ever frightened or vulnerable. Surely I didn't ask for too much?

Turning to frame my face in his palms, he pressed his lips to mine, then whispered, "I do not have the power to deny you a single thing. I've given you my coven and my blood, and in doing so, I declared that all I have is now yours."

The brush of his lips turned to a kiss of fiery passion, and several moments passed before he spoke again. "The only thing I have left to give is my name."

Holding my breath, I stared into his eyes. If he denied me this one thing I feared all the choices I had made were in vain.

"Dante."

I blinked twice, unsure if the word had really been spoken out loud.

Kissing me again, he repeated the name over and over until I breathed it in with every press of his lips. Our mouths parted, and he threaded his fingers deep in my hair. Holding me with a fierceness that robbed me of breath, he stared into my eyes. "Say

it.”

“Dante,” I breathed.

His smile squeezed my heart, and I looked into the unmistakable face of eternal love.