



Relentless

My Immortal Knight – Book 4

By Delilah Devlin

Chapter One

With only slivers of moonlight to guide his way, Max Weir crept through the saw palmetto and pine thicket toward a house curtained by vegetative neglect. He'd forgone the use of the night-vision goggles that most of the human members of his team wore. On the prowl for a monster, he preferred his own senses, his own two eyes.

The Special Unit's stealthy assault was aided by a wind that howled through the trees, bending the tops so pine needles pelted the team. A constant low roar, like the sound of the ocean, filled his headset. God or Karma was with the SU tonight. The wind blew away from the house and its occupants, disseminating the scents of gun oil and the uninvited humans—they'd never know what hit them.

A cancer grew inside the small, cinderblock house at the center of the property. Max had been in this line of work long enough to know what took place in the nondescript house, but he'd never understand the attraction that brought humans willingly to the door of a vampire's den.

Anger knotted the muscles of his chest. Not until the disappearance of a college student was linked to one of the parties hosted here did the SU kick into gear. This killing field should have

been ringed with fire and its occupants consigned to hell when the den was first discovered and documented.

But that wasn't how they operated now. It wasn't simply enough to find a vamp and stake his heart to dirt. Now the vermin had to be proven guilty of crimes by the Masters' Council before the team got the green light to strike.

"So Dylan, how'd you talk Emmy into sittin' this one out?"

Max ignored the chatter in his headset. Not long ago, he would have joined the banter, which eased the guys' tension as they waited for the order to move on their target.

"We could sure use her tonight. Emmy's got a ruthless side to her," Phil Carstairs, one of the good guys—a human—continued.

"Toward a doughnut, maybe." Darcy Albermarle snickered from her position in the command van. Darcy, once upon a time a friend, consorted with the enemy now—fucked one of the bastards on a nightly basis.

"Em would take offense to that comment," Dylan O'Hara replied. "Her tastes have become a little more refined over the past months."

Max's shoulders bunched with revulsion at the sound of the Irish vampire's dry amusement. The vamp and his growing coven didn't belong in the SU—they belonged at the end of a stake. *His*, preferably.

"Yeah, she's moved on from doughnuts to the Danish!" Phil said. "Although, I gotta admit, your wife has no conscience. She'd try to talk the bastards to death."

Soft laughter followed. Emmy O'Hara's penchant for running off at the mouth when she grew excited was a well-known fact.

Max's lips twisted in disgust. They acted like the female vamp was part of "the family" now. Was he the only one of the original unit who understood how wrong it was to befriend the demons? And worse, let vamps lead a hunt for other vamps? As far as he was concerned, the only good vampire was a dead one.

"Get set," Darcy said, her voice suddenly sharp. "Traffic barriers are in place. Mobile phone jam is on. No one's driving in or calling for backup."

Max's hand tightened on his crossbow, which was already cocked with a steel-tipped arrow. The first of many, he hoped. He itched for a battle, something he could pour his adrenaline into.

"Captain says, move in," Darcy said. "Good hunting, guys."

"You heard it, men. Team One, circle around the back," Dylan said.

From the edge of the seedy lawn, the first team raced across the clearing to nestle close to the house before circling to the back entrance.

After a few tense moments, Max heard a crackle in his headset, then, “Team One’s in position,” Phil said.

“Team Two,” Dylan said, “wait for my command.”

As if the house sucked in all sound within its vicinity, an ominous silence settled around the clearing. There was no music, no shouts of laughter from within, even though a couple dozen people and vamps had to be inside going by the number of cars lining the driveway and street. This was supposed to be a party—an orgy of sex and blood sharing.

From the corner of his eye, Max watched Dylan streak across the lawn and flatten his back against the wall beside the door. Unencumbered by a flak jacket or heavy armaments, the vamp held only a stake in his hand.

Max tensed, waiting for the signal to rush the door.

Dylan straightened, his head lifting to scent. “Something’s wrong.” His whisper broke the silence. “Do you get that smell, Quent?”

“Coming.” The second vamp, Quentin Albermarle rushed across the lawn in a blur of black, his blond hair shining silver in the moonlight. Flanking the door, he too paused and lifted his head. “That’s not something you find every day,” he said, his British voice even, yet hard-edged.

“Team, have your pistols ready,” Dylan said. “Safeties off. We’ve a different sort of monster inside.” Without further explanation, he whipped around, lifted a booted foot, and kicked the door open.

Max cursed. “Team One, the front door’s been breached. Go, go, go!” With his crossbow raised, Max charged toward the house, his heart pumping so fast blood roared in his ears.

“Maybe, we should wait for Dylan’s signal,” Joe Garcia said, easily keeping stride with them.

Max wished he could ignore the vamp beside him. A twinge akin to pain reminded him Joe had been his friend. “Why? So he can help them escape out the back?” he asked, without trying to mask the acid in his tone.

Joe didn’t respond. Since his “death”, he’d remained aloof. Probably knew Max could hardly stand the sight of him. Still, old habits seemed to die hard—even when one was undead. Joe looked and acted as he always had. He still wore the SU’s black uniform and used his issued weapons. The only difference was he’d left off the flak jacket.

Were all vamps arrogant assholes? A jacket could have protected him from an arrow or a stake. His cockiness would get him killed.

Not that Max gave a damn.

He reached the door, propped the stock of his weapon on his shoulder, and then stepped through the door. Sighting down the beam of his crossbow, he found the living room empty, save for clothing lying in piles among small hills of brownish-black soot. Vamp remains.

“Shit!” Joe said. “Did they leave us anything to do?”

Max caught himself before he smiled. Joe had always been eager for action.

“There’s no way those hotshots took care of this alone. What do you think happened here?”

Max barely heard him. Odors assailed his nose. Singed flesh—the vamps, he guessed. And something else, wet and musty. He tensed. *It can’t be.*

A prickling unease raised the hairs on the back of his neck. He followed another smell—which grew more overpowering the closer he came to the source—followed the sound of muffled voices, Dylan’s and Quentin’s, he recognized as he drew closer. He stole down a hallway toward a brightly lit space that opened wide into a game room.

Once again shouldering his weapon, he stepped through the entrance. He found what his nose already told him was there. Human carnage in vivid splatters that dotted the ceilings and drowned the shag carpet. Opened carcasses with bowels unstrung like wads of yarn across the floor.

“Holy Mary, mother of God,” Joe whispered beside him. “No fucking way a vamp did this.”

Max’s body tightened in rejection of the horror he witnessed. For all his years on the force, he’d never seen carnage on this scale. Shit like this had never happened before the SU went soft on vamps. A monstrous evil had found Vero Beach’s leniency too inviting and was making itself at home. Once you negotiated with one evil...

Like hell he’d let it continue! His finger closed around the trigger of his bow. Dylan’s back was exposed as he knelt over one body. Damn, but he was tempted!

“Don’t do it, Max,” Joe said, his voice low, but firm. “My wife would never forgive me if I let you dust one of her new friends.”

Max trembled with outrage, but he slowly lifted his finger off the trigger and lowered his bow. Now wasn’t the time.

At Quentin’s nod, Dylan looked over his shoulder. His glance fell to Max’s crossbow and he lifted one eyebrow in challenge.

“Good choice,” Joe said and slapped his shoulder as he passed him to squat next to his new buddies.

Max stared at the three of them, thick as thieves. Max could remember a time when Joe swore he'd rather die than turn—even asked Max to set him in the sunshine to fry if it ever happened.

“So what the hell did this?” Joe asked.

Dylan cast Quentin a wary glance, before replying softly, “Werewolves.”

“Did I hear you right?”

Max jerked at the sound of Phil's voice as he stepped through the door. He'd been so engrossed in the scene before him he hadn't heard Phil's approach.

Phil's eyes widened. “Shit!” His face tightened as he took note of the bodies strewn around the floor. “The rest of the house is secure. Only dust bunnies left.”

“When did werewolves move into the neighborhood?” Joe asked, his hands fisted at his sides.

Phil, his gaze still glued to the floor, asked, “Am I the only one who didn't know werewolves existed?”

Max shook himself. He had a job to do. “I'll start the teams on a sweep of the area. See what we find.” As he turned to leave, he cast a scathing look at Dylan and Quentin.

Joe, he ignored.

Dylan sighed and stood up as Max left the room.

“He's not going to change—voluntarily, that is,” Quentin murmured.

“I know,” Dylan said. “I've already made the call to Navarro.”

Quentin nodded. “We can't let anyone stand in the way of our setting up a southern council.” He waved his hand at the room. “This only makes it all the more vital we handle him quickly.”

Dylan glanced at Joe to see his reaction.

The younger vamp was still torn by old loyalties—trying to ride the fence between his new “life” and his old friends. Joe took a deep breath, his face a grim mask. “Well, shit. How are we going to keep a lid on this mess?”

* * * * *

Max pushed through the door of the bar determined that tonight he'd either get shit-faced or fucked. Which, didn't matter. So long as he could blow off the steam that had been gathering a head since the botched mission hours before. The bar was a regular haunt—only a block from

his house. If need be, he could crawl home. The smoky air, the loud grinding music, and the smell of stale beer appealed when he had an axe to grind.

The SU had swept the area for signs of the wolves that killed the vampires before turning on the humans in a mutilating frenzy. Their bloody paw prints led beyond the house to a gravel road where they'd disappeared. The pack had made their getaway in cars. This hadn't been a roaming band's target of opportunity, but a takedown.

The grim faces of the vampires telegraphed their worry. He hoped they were shaking in their boots. Not that the thought of a rogue wolf pack wasn't just as unsettling to Max.

But seeing the cocksure Quentin lose his perpetual smirk was gratifying. Dylan had been grim-faced and pale. Perhaps the bastard saw his own fate in the house.

However, Joe's silence had been the most telling. He hadn't looked the least bit surprised.

Max made his way through the tables ringing a small dance floor. The place was nearly empty, save for the men hovering near the bar for the night's last drinks. The tension in his shoulders knotted tighter. All it would take would be one smart-ass comment. He hungered for an excuse to drive his fist through something.

The crowd parted, and a flash of a slim white ankle snagged his attention. Every trace of anger, bitter regret, and frustration coalesced into a single, burning need.

The men blocking his view shifted, and the ankle drew his glance upward to a bare knee. The woman's legs parted, and one slid atop the other. Her foot sawed up and down, and a slender, functionless sandal dangled from the tips of her painted toes. God, he wanted to help her lose the shoes altogether.

He advanced toward the men standing between him and his goal. Their faces registered annoyance for only a moment before they stepped aside. The hard hunger that rode his belly must have turned his face into an implacable mask.

As he drew near, her shape was revealed one tantalizing curve at a time. Sweetly turned hips were clothed in a stretchy black skirt that ended at the top of her thighs—not a hint of underwear marred the smooth fit. Conveniently tied behind her neck, a miniscule top bared the gleaming, supple skin of her back and midriff—again, no sign of a bra. Her nipples puckered invitingly against the black fabric that barely contained the apple-like curves of her small breasts.

Finally, his gaze rose to her face. She could have been a whole lot less than appetizing, and he'd still have wanted her on the merits of that ride-able frame. But her face only made him more determined to have her.

Large, doe-like eyes, framed by thick lashes, blinked as she caught his stare. Her upper lip was a fraction fuller than the lower and inspired delicious, succulent fantasies. Her face was round,

her jaw small, and a thumbprint dimple carved her chin into two delicious halves. His tongue itched to slide along that little notch.

As he reached the bar, he drew a deep breath, eager to catch the scent of her perfume. He wasn't disappointed. The woman smelled like sex. Hot, nasty, spicy sex.

His body hardened along with his intentions. With only a fleeting thought for how aggressive he might appear, he loomed over her, his gaze sweeping downward. When he glanced back up to her eyes, he schooled his expression into something shy of predatory. He didn't want to frighten her away before he'd even learned her name.

Instead of looking intimidated or frightened by his intensity, as so many women would have, she raised a single dark eyebrow. She didn't say a word, just returned his stare. Somehow, her bold action felt out of sync with the wariness lurking in her eyes.

Then he noticed the movement of her throat as she swallowed. Did he make her nervous?

Her expression betrayed no such fear. Part amusement and part calculation, it changed as her gaze dropped from his face to sweep down his chest and lower. Interest with only a hint of alarm flared her nostrils and tightened her jaw, causing her to open her mouth to take a deeper breath.

She had good reason to be wary. If she told him to back off, he'd be hard pressed to obey. Every male chromosome in his body screamed at his groin to take her.

His gaze never leaving hers, he took a deep, calming breath and forced himself to follow the ritual. "Can I buy you a drink?"

"I'm not thirsty." Her voice pleased him. Feminine, but not too dainty, with a hint of aged whiskey.

Undeterred, he nodded to the bartender hovering behind her. "Two draft beers."

Her brown eyes narrowed, but she remained silent.

He raised an eyebrow. "Maybe I'm just thirsty."

"Or impossibly arrogant," she muttered, just loud enough for him to hear.

He bit back a grin. "I haven't seen you here before," he said, and then cursed himself for using such a tired line.

"I'm new to the area," she said, sounding bored. Her foot sawed faster.

Great! They sounded like trained parrots. How could he think of conversation when all he wanted was to slide his hands around her naked back? "What's your name?"

“Pia.”

Pia. Cute name, a little sassy like she was. Or rather, like he thought she might be if he could just figure out how to get her talking.

At least she hadn't tried to bolt. He leaned past her to reach for one of the beers the bartender laid behind her on the bar. He held it out.

Her hands remained in her lap, her expression defiant.

Well, hell! His luck wasn't running any better. He lifted the glass and gulped the foam.

She watched him, her eyes following the movement of his throat. Her tongue licked her full lower lip.

Before he gave it a thought, he handed her the same beer again.

Rather than pouring it on his shoes, her hands slid around the glass. Her gaze remained on the beer.

Satisfaction throbbed in his belly. She'd probably like an introduction before he asked her to go home with him. “Name's Max.”

Her lips pressed together and then curved into a smile that stretched the full lower lip. The lady had a rather large mouth. It was perfect. “As in Maximus?”

The smile warmed him while giving him confidence he hadn't totally blown it. He shifted his feet and stepped closer, bringing her crossed legs between his. “Do you doubt it?” he asked, his voice low.

Her head tilted back, and a frown drew together her finely arched brows. “Do you think I'm impressed with your caveman tactics?”

His glance slid down to her breasts. Her headlights were erect little points that stabbed toward him. “Damn right,” he said, hoping he hadn't read her body language wrong.

With a toss of her hair, she uncrossed her legs, her knee caressing the inside of his thigh. “Sorry about that,” she murmured, although she didn't look sorry at all. She'd just checked him out.

His heart kicked into a slow, thrumming throb. The lady knew where this was leading. She'd accepted his beer.

The part of him that had tensed in pursuit relaxed. She could be his if he didn't overplay his cards. And he had a decision to make. Savor a slower rise to climax or take her hard and fast? “Dance with me.”

She shook her head, which swept the ends of her curly brown hair across the tops of her bare shoulders. “I don’t dance.”

He reached for the beer she held in her lap and set it on the bar. His fingers closed around her slender wrist, and he tugged her up from the stool.

“What do you think you’re doing?” She tottered on her heels for a moment, and her nipples brushed his chest. Her gaze, wide-eyed, set his heart thumping in a slower, heavier beat. He swept his arm around her waist and pulled her along to the dance floor. He needed her in his arms *now*.

They were the only couple on the small square of parquet-printed linoleum. Max didn’t give her a chance to protest, he simply pressed his body to hers—chest to hip, and slid his leg between her thighs. The heavy, grinding rhythm of the rock music suited his mood just fine. He shifted on his feet from side to side, not so much a dance as foreplay. His body introducing itself to hers.

She stiffened inside the circle of his arms. “Do you ever pay attention to what a woman tells you?” she asked, her words clipped.

Encouraged she hadn’t hauled off and slapped him yet, he leaned down to whisper in her ear, “Sweetheart, I was listening, but not to what your lips were saying.”

Her head jerked back, and her gaze bored into his. “Perhaps you should.”

The look halted him in his tracks. He’d pushed her too hard. “All right.” Sighing his regret, he stepped away. “I’m sorry. I misread the situation.”

But she didn’t walk away as he expected. Instead, her head tilted to the side, and she studied his face for a long moment, her teeth worrying her lower lip.

He wiped his expression free of hunger, hoping for another chance.

Finally, she looked around the bar and shrugged. “Well, seeing as I’m here...”

He didn’t wait for her to change her mind. He pulled her into his arms.

She nestled her face in the crook of his neck and groaned. “This is happening too fast.”

Relaxing to savor the sensations, he chuckled and pulled her closer. “I know what you mean,” he murmured. A dark, musky floral scent rose from her hair and skin, wrapped him in heat.

Her arms snuck up around his neck, and her small, firm breasts pressed against his chest.

Once again pretending to dance, he shifted her slightly to glide her nipples across his chest. They’d been erect before their bodies met—they were hardened little bullets now.

“Do you think you’ll overcome every one of my objections as easily?” she asked, her breath gusting gently in his ear.

“I promise you won’t have *one* when the time comes.” He lifted his leg and rubbed his thigh against her crotch.

Her head fell back, and her chocolate eyes glinted with amusement. “Sure of yourself, aren’t you?”

He was getting there. He leaned down to whisper in her ear. “I smell your arousal.”

Her breath gasped, but she didn’t pull away. A tremor shook her body. “Do you think you’re just going to get a quick—”

Placing a finger over her lips to shut her up, he said, “Whoa, sweetheart.” He nuzzled her cheek. “Nothing about this’ll be quick. This is just the appetizer.” He bent his neck and kissed her sleek shoulder.

Her head fell back exposing her creamy throat, inviting him to slide his lips along her throat—which he did.

“You sound like you’re going to eat me,” she said, half-laughing, half-moaning.

Max stiffened and spoke between tightened lips, “I will, if you ask me sweetly.”

Again, she gasped, following with a burst of soft, strained laughter.

Not the outright “yes” he hoped for, but promising just the same. He wished he had a glib tongue so he could put her at ease, but his body was too insistent, too ready to pounce for him to think straight.

Every sense tuned to her. Her body draped languidly across his chest. Her legs slid along either side of his thigh, and he wondered if she wanted another rough caress. He decided to test her by rubbing his thigh against her femininity.

She moaned—a sexy sound that made his dick throb.

His hands glided over her back, then smoothed to her sides. With his thumbs, he caressed the edges of her breasts. She didn’t stiffen in his arms. “Look at me,” he said.

Her head tilted back. Her eyes were wide open.

He swept his thumbs beneath the fabric of her top and went straight for the ripe little berries at the center of her breasts.

Her gaze darted beyond his shoulder to the bar.

“They can’t see a thing. It’s too dark.” He swooped down to capture her lips.

Sounding like a kitten, she whimpered, pressing hard against his thumbs. Her hands clutched his shoulders.

He raked her tongue with his, and then swept around her mouth to touch her teeth, the roof of her mouth, before he pulled away to drag air into his lungs. “Baby, I want a bed beneath your back for what I’m gonna do to you.” No way could he be subtle or patient with this one. *She has to want this as much as I do...*

Again, her throat moved. “And if I can’t wait?”

He stilled for a moment, and then muttered, “Christ!” His need crowded insistently against the placket of his jeans. With a quick glance around the bar for the nearest exit, he pulled her down a hallway and into the restroom.

Once inside, he locked the door. Then he turned and stalked her, backing her into the old-fashioned wooden stall. “You have to spell it out for me. Do you want me to stop?”

Her eyes rounded. “I don’t know. I don’t know *you*.”

His jaw clamped tight. “I won’t hurt you. Or at least I’ll try not to.”

Her tongue wet her lips. “Good enough,” she whispered.

Max palmed her breast with one hand; his other hand glided up her bare thigh and pushed up her short skirt. He went straight to the scrap of nylon covering her sex. He tipped the lid of the toilet closed with the toe of his boot and sat.

The woman, Pia, wasted no time climbing onto his lap, her thighs straddling him. Her breasts were level with his mouth, and she pushed the hem of her cropped top up, exposing them.

Max took the hint and groaned, rooting with his lips until he held a burgeoning nipple between them.

She grasped the back of his head, pushing her breast deeper into his mouth. Her sex ground against the hard ridge of his cock, riding him, wriggling her hips so eagerly he thought he might spill his seed in his pants like a teenager.

He dragged his mouth from her breast. “Wait.” He pushed her off his lap and stood, then placed his hands on the sides of her waist and lifted her high. “Hold onto the top of the stall, sweetheart.”

Quickly catching his drift, she spread her arms wide across the top of the wooden stall and gripped the edge. He hefted her higher and stepped backward. She “lay”, suspended from the

top of the stall, her legs parted and draped over his shoulders. His face was poised at the opening of her legs.

He glanced up at her flushed face. “I did say I’d eat you, if you asked sweetly.”

Chapter Two

Pia D’Amato wondered how things had gotten this out of control so quickly.

She’d planned to play hard to get ever since she’d glimpsed him striding toward her. His large, heavily muscled body had radiated hunger, and he’d moved with a rangy, masculine grace that raised her nipples in an instant to full alert. When his gaze had found hers, she’d felt the searing heat of his brand.

Never one to question the vagaries of fate, she accepted that tonight was meant to be.

His golden eyes had honed sharp as an eagle’s on a bunny rabbit. Assholes she could deal with, and she’d prepared her standard rebuff. However, the hint of wary desperation—and his expectation she’d resist—made her hesitate. She’d sensed he needed to win their battle of wills, but that he also needed her to give him hurdles to overcome. Why pleasing him became important mystified her.

Not that she intended to refuse him, *ultimately*.

Then she’d found herself uncharacteristically tongue-tied, overwhelmed by his relentless pursuit. At first, all she could do was blink dumbly and try her best not to drool. What woman could resist the mesmerizing intensity of his full-frontal assault?

His gaze had stripped her while she sat on her barstool. The look he’d given her once he’d finished said he’d staked his claim. If any other man had so blatantly given her the once-over, she’d have delivered a setdown he’d not soon forget.

But Max was a man like no other. He embodied a mix of strength, stubborn determination, and an underlying vulnerability she was sure he kept buried from the world. He attracted her—*madly*.

When his jeans-clad thigh had scraped the tender flesh between her legs, she’d laughed at herself, at her eagerness to rub on him like a cat in heat. And she’d thought to manipulate *him*!

All she wanted was him—inside her. *Now*.

His head turned and his hot mouth kissed each thigh, the scrape of his evening shadow glancing against the lips of her pussy. Covered by the sheerest silk thong she owned, she felt moisture dampen them in an instant. As uncomfortable as she found her perch, there was something

pretty damn exciting about having all this mega-male's attention concentrated on the core of her femininity.

His gaze smoldered, and his nose twitched as he inhaled deeply. But he didn't give her the kiss she wanted. He really was going to wait for her to ask him sweetly before he plundered her body.

The man was blatantly male; he called to her body on its most primitive and elemental level. Built large and rugged, his shoulders were so broad they easily spanned her spread thighs. His biceps were so thickly muscled they strained the arms of his dark T-shirt.

His face was too hard and masculine to be handsome. A square jaw, heavy brow, and a broad nose that was slightly askew on his face, were a match for his rough and ready attitude. He was too much man to manipulate. Too much man to refuse.

His hot breath gusted against the wetness gathering at her entrance, and her belly tightened around a coil of desire so strong she trembled.

But her pride demanded she couldn't beg for release. Bad enough he'd managed to ride roughshod over her willpower. She still wasn't certain how he'd managed to get her into this predicament—holding on to the top of a bathroom stall with her legs draped over his shoulders—waiting for him to fulfill the promise in his golden gaze.

And why her? She took a deep breath and glanced down her body. Why had he chosen her? Had she somehow given herself away? Or was she just an easy conquest to him?

While the thought rankled, she had to admit, the evidence was pretty damn convincing. She was after all splayed wide for his taking, her small breasts squeezed beneath the hem of her halter. Her nipples constricted so tight and so long they begged for attention.

Like she would have to beg, if she was ever going to feel the warmth of his mouth on her dripping sex.

And how long had it taken him to convince her? Fifteen minutes? Maybe!

He tongued the crease between her thigh and her pussy, wetting her skin. The air conditioning blew cool air on her open thighs. The contrast of the cool air on her crotch, and his warm hands, each cupping a bare buttock, drove her over the edge. To hell with who had control. And to hell with the last remnants of her dignity. She needed his mouth on her most intimate flesh.

"Please," she said, surprised by the husky timbre of her voice.

He kissed her thigh. "I like the way you say that, but I want the words, baby," he said, and lapped at the fabric covering her sex again.

Her womb tightened. He wanted the coarse, nasty words—the ones that made her flinch. Saying them would strip away any pretense she might want to keep for her pride's sake that this was anything but what it was—a physical mating, a carnal fuck.

Pursing his lips, he blew a stream of warm air over her open, weeping flesh.

Her breath caught on a sob she didn't know was coming. "Eat me, Max."

His lips lifted, baring his straight, white teeth. Not a smile—more an animalistic grimace of triumph. His hands slid from her ass and around the tops of her thighs. They met at her mons.

Oh God.

He bent his head and licked the seam of her pussy through her underwear. He rubbed his tongue over her, pressing into the silk, poking inside her opening to swirl his tongue in the shallow sheath he'd made.

She moaned and felt her womb clench. All too soon, it wasn't enough. Why hadn't she taken off the goddamn panties?

One clever hand tugged rhythmically at the strap that rode between her buttocks, drawing the elastic tightly against her anus. The other traced her slit through the crotch of her panties.

"More, please," she begged, looking away from the hard-faced man who was quickly ratcheting up the heat of his caresses.

"Tell me, you want me to fuck you with my fingers," he said, his voice rough as gravel.

Oh, yes. She pumped her hips, eager for him to hurry.

"No, baby." He nipped an outer lip through her panties. "Tell me."

She gritted her teeth. "Please, fuck me with your fingers," she said, her voice rising. "Please fuck me, Max."

With his nose, he nuzzled aside the crotch of her panties, and his tongue touched her directly for the first time, delving between her labia to flutter the tip against the notch at the top of her slit.

Pia nearly screamed, biting her lips to hold it inside.

His gaze slammed into hers as he curved his fingers to plunge inside her.

She wished he wouldn't watch her so intently. She didn't want to reveal how vulnerable she felt this near to release. Or how close she was to tears at the powerful rush of desire that swept through her.

“Come for me, baby,” he growled, while pressing his fingers deeper. Then his lips closed over her clitoris, and he sucked—*hard*.

Pia flung back her head and howled, her body shuddering as the coil unwound, pulse by pulse.

When finally her climax waned, she clung limply to the wood, gasping for breath, her body sagging.

He kissed the nest of hair that covered her mons before sliding her soaked panties back into place. “Come home with me.” Not a request. But not *exactly* a command. His expression betrayed his naked need.

Naked as hers still was.

Her throat closed. This powerful, but needy, man was her quarry, and she’d betray him tonight.

* * * * *

Max’s foot was heavy on the gas pedal as he sped toward his house. His body was so hard he hurt. His engorged cock felt strangled inside his jeans.

He couldn’t get the picture of her unraveling out of his head. Her body had been his for the taking. Open, trembling, then convulsing around his fingers. The sound of her loud wail had filled him with triumph and still rang in his ears. The taste of her arousal remained in his mouth, and he savored it. Her spicy flavor drove an urgency so strong and insistent inside him, he fought the need to pull his truck to the side of the road. But there wasn’t room in the cab to fuck her hard and long, the way he had to—or die.

She’d been silent ever since they’d left the bar and that worried him. He’d waited impatiently for her to retrieve her purse from beneath the front seat of her car, and then hurried her to his truck. If she changed her mind, he feared he wouldn’t have enough control to stop.

Perhaps he shouldn’t have waited. But as hard and horny as he was, he knew a quick fuck against the bathroom stall wouldn’t have been enough to slake his need.

Something about this woman told him getting her out of his system would not be quick. He wanted—*no, needed*—to hammer at her pussy for a good long while. He just hoped that when he had her underneath him, he didn’t scare the shit out of her.

Pulling into the driveway, he hit the garage door opener. The seconds it took for the door to rise and close them inside were interminable. He was out of the truck and pulling open her door before she’d finished fumbling to release her seatbelt.

He held out his hand.

Her face was pale, her mouth a tight line.

He didn't give her time to refuse. He clasped her hand and pulled her from the seat and into his arms. His kiss wasn't gentle or tempting—his mouth ate hers, and he swept his tongue, still flavored with her release, into her mouth.

Pia groaned, her hands clutching his shoulders, while her body pressed so hard against his, he thought she might try to crawl inside his skin.

His hands reached for her soft bottom and he squeezed, bringing her hips flush with his arousal. He slipped his hands beneath her skirt to grip her warm, naked flesh and ground his cock between her thighs while he massaged her ass.

The small whimpering sounds she made in the back of her throat drove him crazy—if he waited any longer to take her he might not keep control.

The flimsy fabric of her panties gave beneath his tug, and he growled with satisfaction when he heard them tear. He dropped them to the ground and then encouraged her to raise her legs, one at a time, to hug his waist. Max pumped his cock against her exposed flesh, drinking her sighs. As moisture seeped from her to soak the front of his trousers, he trembled with the need to be inside her.

He dragged away his mouth, his gaze boring into hers, and walked through the door into his kitchen and down the hallway to his bedroom, not bothering with lights.

When he reached the bed, he climbed onto it, never letting her go, until she was beneath him, his arms cradling her. "Tell me now, if you want me to stop," he said, straining to get the words past his lips. All he wanted was to tear their clothes from their bodies and get her naked skin next to his—his cock crammed inside her cunt as far as he could reach. "Spell it out for me, baby. I can't make a mistake. Don't want to hurt you."

"I don't want you to stop," she said, her voice tight.

He rose on his arms. Light from a streetlamp outside filtered through the blinds, painting her face and body with pale gray stripes. Her eyes were huge in her face, her mouth already swollen from his earlier kisses. His belly and thighs tensed. "Be sure," he said, fighting his body for control. "I'm so far gone, I can't be gentle."

Her lips opened around a gasp. "I don't want gentle. I want you inside me now."

Straightening, he pulled his T-shirt over his head. Then his hands went straight for his jeans and he opened them, closing his eyes with relief when his cock fell free from its denim tourniquet.

Her breath caught. When he opened his eyes, he found her glassy stare glued to his dick. Her teeth bit her lower lip, and she moaned.

He closed his fist around his cock. "Baby, I'm gonna fuck you like an animal," he said, his voice growling his promise.

Then he reached for her hips, shoving her skirt up to her waist to expose the nest of black hair that beckoned him like a siren. It glistened with her arousal. The spicy scent of her made his dick pulse.

With shaking hands, he stripped the skirt and her halter-top from her body.

Pia eagerly parted her legs and reached out with her arms. Her pale skin was luminous in the lamplight. Her nipples were dark, dimpled circles that made his mouth water. Every pale hill and shadowed valley of her body was on display—his for the taking. She appeared tiny beneath his large hands, everything about her as feminine, fragrant, and soft as a man could want. She made him ravenous as an animal to possess her.

Unable to wait a moment longer, Max fell between her thighs, his cock prodding her warm, wet slit. When he was sure of his aim, he tilted his hips and rammed inside her, crowding past the tight, soft tissues of her vagina. Without giving her time to adjust to his size, he claimed her with a single thrust.

Her muffled scream halted him.

His chest heaved and his body trembled, but he held himself still above her. “Christ, I’m sorry. Baby, I can’t stop now,” he said, desperation making his voice thick.

Pia’s breath panted. “Fuck me, Max. Fuck me hard,” she whispered.

With another growl, he came down on top of her, pushing and grinding into her wet cunt until she sheathed his length. He couldn’t stop to savor the feel of her body closing around him when his own clamored for him to move. His buttocks tensed, pulling away, and then he flexed forward, cramming his cock back inside. He pumped into her, the rhythm hard and jerky. The force of his strokes drove her body up the bed.

Her voice rose on a moan, and she reached above her head to brace her arms against the headboard. Her legs settled around his hips, and her face grew taut. “Fuck me, fuck me,” she chanted.

Max grunted as he pounded at her cunt, hammering hard, twisting to drive to one side then the other, needing to stroke the sweet spot inside her, needing to hear her say the words.

“Fuck me, fuck me!” Her body grew rigid. “Harder!” Then he felt the clasp and roll of her inner muscles, drawing him deeper, summoning her climax.

He gritted his teeth, the muscles in his back and ass expanding with the strain, clenching as he set his jaw and plunged. His head felt ready to explode, his cock and balls hardening like steel.

Still, he jackhammered his hips until her groans turned to guttural gasps for air.

Her legs and belly trembled, and her cries grew higher and incoherent. Her back arched off the bed, and then she screamed, long and loud.

Max's body burned like a match to dry kindling. He paused and pulled her legs from around his waist. Then he pushed them high, using his shoulders to force them upward so he could reach deeper inside.

She moaned, and her head thrashed on the mattress, her hands fisting around the bedding.

He had to get deeper—so deep he'd feel her heartbeat against his dick. He pressed her thighs into her chest and coaxed her to clasp her ankles around his neck.

"Too much," she gasped, squeezing her eyes shut. "It's too much!"

He turned his head, kissed her ankle, and drove his cock upward.

Her breath hissed inward.

"Baby, relax," he said, realizing how absurd that had to sound when his body was clenched, readying itself for the final assault. Braced on his arms, her ankles snug around his neck, he rocked against her cunt, trying to keep it slow and steady, not wanting to hurt her.

Pia's gaze clung to his face, her eyes dark, her mouth rounded with her gasps.

The tension built in his belly and his strokes quickened, aided by a hot wash of creamy arousal from inside Pia's body. He stroked and pounded, varying the length of his thrusts, reveling in the wet slaps of his belly and balls against her flesh. The bed shook and shimmied with the strength of his powerful fucking. Faster, harder, until the bed banged loudly against the wall.

"Now! I'm coming again, now!" she keened. "Yes!"

Max flung back his head, his eyes scrunched tight, and he howled as his body exploded, pumping scalding liquid from his cock in a stream of fire to bathe her womb.

Finally, his hips slowed their pounding motion to long gliding, inner caresses. He opened his eyes and stared down at the stranger beneath him and bent his head to kiss her. Thanking her with his body and mouth for the gift of sweet release.

* * * * *

More comfortable now that her body wasn't folded like a pretzel, Pia yawned. What a night.
What a man!

Her limbs remained as limp as overcooked linguine, and she ached deliciously. She lay on the bed still stunned by the strength of her climax. If anyone had asked her—before Max—whether she preferred a gentle lover or an animal, she'd have chosen gentle. Not that he'd given her

more than a few little bruises where his hands had gripped her ass—oh, and a pussy that felt pretty raw and hot.

Her hands smoothed over his back in lazy circles. His breathing had returned to normal, and the sweat on his chest and shoulders was dry, or drying on her. It was nice just lying beneath his weight, blanketed by two hundred plus pounds of prime, Grade-A human male.

“Are you okay?” he asked, his voice rumbling against her breast.

“Sure.” Her jaw nearly cracked with the next deep yawn.

“Do you need to rest?”

Pia’s hands circled faster. “No, why?” she asked, her heart already skipping in front of his answer.

“You’d tell me if you were too sore, right?”

Pia was thankful for the darkness. No way did she want this man to see how flustered his intimate questioning was making her. “Sure.”

“Good. I want you on your belly.”

Did he expect her to snap to his order just like that? “In case you didn’t notice, you’re anchoring me to this bed.”

He kissed her nipple and hauled himself up to kneel beside her.

Pia rolled immediately to her belly. Who was she fooling? She couldn’t muster an ounce of irritation. She had to know what wickedness he had in store for her next. Round one had been mind-blowing.

Besides, there was still time to complete her mission.

Max’s hands palmed her buttocks as he crawled over her to straddle her thighs.

Pia groaned and pressed her bottom upward.

He kissed her shoulder, nuzzled through her hair to nip her neck, all the while his hands massaged her ass, squeezing, separating her cheeks, reigniting the fire that had only banked its embers.

Then he stretched out on top of her, his weight pressing her into the mattress again while his cock nestled between her buttocks. The scrape of the denim still clothing his legs only added to the wild excitement clamoring throughout her body.

Pia sighed and wriggled, wishing she could open her legs to take his hard cock into her body. Which place he chose to tunnel inside didn't particularly matter. She wanted to be filled with his masculinity.

He lifted a knee and nudged it between her legs.

Relieved they were both hurtling forward at the same speed, Pia moved one leg to the side, then the other, as he climbed between. He stretched over her again. But this time the hard ridge of his cock pressed directly against the super-sensitive flesh between her legs, while his weight squashed her to the mattress, leaving her breathless. Her body responded with liquid encouragement, seeping out to lubricate his cock as the rolling motion of his hips stoked the flames higher.

"I wanted to take it slow this time," he said, an edge of desperate laughter in his voice.

"Slow—fast, I don't care," she said, gasping for air. "Just come inside me, please."

"I wouldn't be much of a gentleman, if I didn't get you ready first. Your cunt is red-hot. I'll hurt you."

Oh, he'd used the C-word! Her body clenched. On any other man's lips, she'd have taken offense, but he said it so easily, so naturally. The gravel in his rough voice made the word erotically charged.

"So get to work," she whispered, "on my...cunt...please," she whispered.

He growled next to her ear, and his teeth grazed her neck. Apparently, he liked her saying the word, too. Then he lifted off her body, and she heard the sound of rustling bedding.

"Lift your hips, baby."

She groaned and lifted her bottom.

"Higher." He shoved two pillows beneath her, raising her bottom. "Do you mind if I turn on a light?"

Pia's breath hitched. The man wasn't going to leave her any shred of privacy. With her face pressed to the mattress, he'd have a view of...everything. Places *she'd* never seen. "Do it."

He didn't choose the lamp on the bedside table. No, he went for the one on his bureau, even angled it to remove any chance of shadows marring his view.

Pia groaned and pressed her hot cheeks to the bed.

Max laughed as he returned, the mattress dipping to one side with his weight. His hands caressed her ass. “Don’t worry about it. You’re beautiful.” His fingers combed the down between her legs. “Open your legs wider, sweetheart.”

Once again, Pia obeyed. One part of her was eager for his exploration, the other cringed inside at the intimacy he forced on her. A coupling in the dark was one thing—even hanging from a stall with her legs spread wide had been different. She’d been able to see him. Now, she was vulnerable, under his control. Waiting for the next wicked thing he would do.

He cupped her sex with his palm. “You’re red here, and hot. Would you like me to cool you down?”

“I thought me being hot was the whole point,” she said, her words muffled in the bedding.

“Aroused—not irritated. There’s a difference. You’re red—raw-looking, actually,” he said, his voice not sounding the least bit regretful.

“Are you going to give a tour?” she asked, with a bite in her voice.

“Would you like that?” Again, the sexy hint of a growl that made her fingers curve tightly around the sheets. He squeezed her ass.

“I would never have guessed you were a man of so many words.”

“I was focused before.” His fingers traced a lazy trail between her buttocks. “I don’t talk much when I have a target.”

“You have two targets now.” She couldn’t believe she’d just said that! “Shouldn’t you be doubly quiet?”

“But I’m enjoying making you squirm.” He nipped her ass.

She yelped and lifted her rear higher. “A sadist, then?”

“Do you like pain?” He circled her anus.

“Augh!” She bunched the bedding around her face and tried to control the trembling excitement building in her belly. “Sometimes,” she whispered.

“I’ve left bruises on your ass. I’m sorry about that.” His mouth gently placed wet kisses on each one.

“I didn’t mind.”

“I may leave a few more before I’m done.”

“Oh, please...”

Chapter Three

“Seduce him or turn him.”

Pia shuddered at the memory of Navarro’s tight-lipped order. His scary, intense stare had made every hair on Pia’s body rise.

Some of the female vamps, and a few of the males, thought he was pretty hot with his dark, shoulder-length hair, olive complexion, and a slender face that looked like a picture she’d once seen in a textbook of an ancient Byzantine king.

The others were convinced he had to know a lot about pleasing a woman, as old as he was. That he had to know dark, ancient techniques when only a look could make their flesh burn for him. But she’d never actually heard of him taking a lover.

The only thing he inspired in Pia was a major case of the willies.

For one thing, the man never smiled. His mouth was beautiful, perfectly symmetrical, curved at the corners like he’d been a man who smiled a lot—while he’d lived. Sitting in his study in his large, leather armchair, the center of his mouth had formed a straight line. Betraying no hint of emotion, he’d talked about the human who served as the only impediment to the Masters’ plan to extend their reach into southern Florida.

And his dark eyes never seemed to blink. She’d stared transfixed the few times she’d been in his presence, waiting for him to lower his lids or do something that would make him seem the least bit—well, human...like.

“So, if he’s such a problem, why don’t Dylan or Quentin handle him?” she’d asked, after gathering her courage.

“They are our diplomats. They must remain blameless. Besides, their wives care about this human.”

“Do they know you’re sending someone?”

“Yes, that’s why I offered you the option of seducing him.” He waved a negligent hand.

“Otherwise, I’d have said, turn him or kill him.”

“Oh.” She looked down at her hands and realized she was clutching them together so tightly her knuckles were white. She unclasped them and wiped off the sweat from her palms onto her slacks.

Raising her gaze, she found him watching her curiously, like a bug beneath a microscope, his palms pressed together and fingers steepled under his chin.

She took a deep breath. “Do they know I’m the one you want to send?”

“They are not to be apprised of my plan,” he said, his words clipped. “They don’t even know things are already underway. It’s best this way.”

“Quentin might not be too happy to see me,” she said, working her way up to broaching the subject that really bothered her about this assignment.

“Quentin has softened since his marriage. I doubt he still holds a grudge.”

If she didn’t know better, she’d have sworn there was a smile in his voice. “Well, if you’re certain I’m right for this job...”

“You’ll be perfect,” he’d said, his gaze boring holes into her. “Try seduction...first.”

With her ass in the air and Max’s lips trailing kisses across her bottom, Pia wondered who was doing the seducing here.

When his tongue laved the hot skin of her swollen labia, she forgot about Navarro, forgot about her assignment. Her whole world narrowed to the glide of Max’s talented tongue.

He licked and fluttered, teasing her with shallow inward strokes that had her lifting her bottom to follow the motion. “I need more. This is torture,” she said, her voice sounding thin to her own ears.

His response was to blow a stream of cooling air over her, and then he pressed apart her lips to direct another cool stream at her opening.

Her thighs and buttocks trembled with her excitement. “Max! I thought this was going to be fast.”

“It will be,” he murmured. “Are you complaining?” His lips closed over her hooded clitoris, sucked and released.

She released a shaky breath. “Course not,” she grumbled. “You’d just go slower.”

“Smart girl. Are you ready for a new adventure?” The pointed tip of his tongue dipped into her anus.

She yelped in surprise. “What are you doing?”

“You don’t like that?” His tongue fluttered like the wing of a butterfly.

“That’s not the point.” She groaned. Was he trying to thoroughly embarrass her?

“That was *the point*—shall I prove it to you again?”

“Why don’t you go back to being tall, dark, and mute?”

“So you’re saying you’re ready?”

Was this a trick question? “Uh...yes...”

“Finally.” His hands left her rump, and he shifted on the mattress. Then she heard his feet hitting the floor.

“Where are you going?” she asked, rising up to glance over her shoulder.

His back was to her as he bent to remove his boots. “I’m taking off the rest of my clothes.”

She blushed and looked away. She’d forgotten he still wore boots and blue jeans. While she’d been naked as a newborn for the last hour, he’d been half-clothed. She buried her face again to the sound of his soft laughter.

Then the mattress dipped and she braced herself, her body already shivering in anticipation of his touch.

His hands settled on her buttocks, and he silently encouraged her to come to her knees, raising her bottom into the air.

Pia buried her hot face into the bedding, a little embarrassed he could see everything—including proof of her overwhelming arousal trickling down her thighs.

Then his tongue lapped the cream seeping from her pussy. His moan vibrated against her sensitive flesh, and her trembling grew stronger. His fingers spread her folds, sliding inside once, before something broad and heavy pressed into her entrance.

And that was only the beginning of the wonderful sensations that left her breathless with need.

Below, his blunt, calloused fingers circled her clitoris as his cock eased deeper into her vagina. Above, fingers teased the second little orifice, circling then dipping inside.

Pia’s body quaked on the edge of release. “Oh Max,” she moaned, as she rubbed her aching nipples on the nubby fabric of his comforter. “Deeper, please. Please, Max. Deeper!”

“Give me the words, baby,” he said, his voice raspy as his shallow thrusts built a fire inside her.

She had to tell him? Did he want whole paragraphs? “Damn you! This sex talk is new for me.”

“Shall I stop?” He rotated his hips, circling his cock inside her.

“What do you want me to say?” she asked, the words coming out in a rush.

“Tell me what would please you—what you want to feel.”

“That’s easy. I want your cock deeper inside me.”

“Is that all?”

“No,” her breath caught on a sob. “Your fingers. Fuck my ass with your fingers. Please. If you don’t mind.”

“Mind? Ask me anything.”

“I just did! Fuck me with your fingers!”

“Oh baby, keep talking to me.” His strokes grew longer, reaching deeper. His fingers tunneled in and out, keeping rhythm with his hips. “Christ, you feel so good. Hot, tight. Your cunt’s soaking wet.”

“It’s for you,” she moaned.

His thrusts were harder now.

“Please, just like that! Fuck me hard, Max.”

“Can you take more?” he asked, his voice harsh, strained. “I want my balls snuggled up to your clit.”

“Give me all of you, Max. Please, pound my pussy!”

His chuckle sounded strained. “Pound my pussy?”

“So, I told you I’m new to this. Just do it, buster!”

He growled and his teeth closed on her shoulder, not piercing her skin, but hard enough to bruise. His taut belly slapped her bottom with the force of his movements. Harder, sharper, faster.

Pia went wild, jerking her hips back to slam against his belly, taking him as deep as her vagina would allow. “Oh, that hurts so good. Damn, you’re big. I love your big cock.”

“Wiggle on it. Just a little.”

Pia lost control, egged on with his encouragement, slamming backward, her hips jerking.

“Oh baby, I can’t wait.” His hand settled between her shoulder blades, and he pressed her chest down to the mattress. “I’m gonna come.” Another finger joined the two pumping in her ass. Then he hammered faster.

“Can’t talk. Can’t breathe. Faster! Oooh!” Pia felt her orgasm rush over her like a firestorm, sucking the wind from her lungs, flashes of color bursting behind her tightly shut eyelids. “Yes, yes!” she chanted, until she could only moan as he delivered the final, powerful thrusts.

He folded over her back, both of them raised in the middle by the hummock of pillows. He kissed her shoulder and murmured, “Pound my pussy?”

She dug her elbow backward into his ribs. “See if I ever talk dirty again.”

His arms closed around her, and he hugged her tightly. “Baby, I don’t mean to tease you.”

“Don’t you?”

“Well, yeah, but not in a mean way. It was pretty funny.” He shifted over, dragging her off the pillows, but keeping the connection with her body. He settled on his side, her body spooned with his.

With his arm as her pillow, Pia felt her eyelids dip. She’d been truly fucked and fondled to the edge of her endurance. And vamps had a lot of that—endurance. She smiled softly at the thought that Max might be her match. And he was a human!

Just a quick nap, she thought, and then I’ll take care of business. Her mouth opened wide around a yawn. The last thing she remembered was the feel of his hands cupping her breasts, and she slept.

* * * * *

Max woke to find that Pia hadn’t moved an inch. She still lay inside the circle of his arms, her rump snuggled against his groin. His cock appreciated the soft pillowy mounds as it rubbed against her. He squeezed her breast, but she didn’t stir. While disappointed she didn’t wake, a primal satisfaction made him smile—he’d exhausted her.

His hands glided over the shallow indentation of her waist and lowered to the womanly swell of her hips. She was a tiny thing, really. He wondered how she’d taken him. Not that he’d given her much choice. He’d ravaged her body, inside and out.

Pia would have pleased him if she’d simply given him release—but she’d done so much more. The tension that had knotted his body was gone, melting beneath the rays of her warm, womanly smile, her lusty appetite, and the funny things she said. In the light of day, would she change toward him? He hoped not. He wanted her again.

Glancing over his shoulder, he gauged the hour by the gray, morning light sifting between the blinds. Dawn was breaking.

Deciding to close them and let her sleep a while longer, he rolled out of the bed and padded to the window.

An indrawn hiss sounded behind him. He swung around to see something like steam rising from a stripe of skin on Pia's shoulder where the sunlight touched her. She whimpered and reached a hand to cover her shoulder.

He flipped the blinds closed and stood stock-still. The stripe sizzled, red and blistered.

Fucking hell! A vamp was in his bed. Sweet Pia was a goddamn vamp bitch!

A chill wrapped around his heart and he slowly walked around the bed, staring.

Deceptively innocent, her face was as soft and beautiful as an angel's. A dark angel.

Her eyes were closed, her breath so slow and shallow he could barely tell she breathed. She'd cried out in her sleep.

When had she planned to take him? If he hadn't loved her to sleep, would she have nuzzled her sweet mouth against his neck and bitten when he'd been so close to orgasm he didn't care? Or would she have drained him dry while her mouth closed over his cock? Now she'd never get the chance.

Although his stomach churned at the thought, he knew what he had to do. Pia's fate had been decided the instant she'd died the first time. All he could do now was send her soul to hell along with the rest of the demons who'd made her and her kind.

Damn her for getting under his skin!

Bending, he dragged his duffel from beneath the bed and slid open the zipper. He dug inside until his hand closed around warm, smooth wood. He pulled the stake from the bag and straightened.

His chest rose and fell swiftly as he fought anger and disappointment. This was his calling, what he lived to do. That the most appealing woman he'd met in a long time was one of them ate a hole in his gut.

He reached out and gently rolled her on her back.

She didn't wake—not a flutter of an eyelash or a sleepy murmur.

He climbed onto the bed and straddled her body, moving stealthily so as not to jar her awake. He'd observed enough vamps at rest to know they slept like the dead. Pia was no exception.

And he'd make no exception for her. Careful not to note the sweet curves of her breasts, or the dimple he'd promised himself to explore, he closed his mind to her spicy scent and the feel of her butter-soft skin between his thighs. Better to get this over with quickly. He traced an X above her heart with the tip of the stake, drawing two thin lines of blood to mark the spot.

Then holding the stake with both hands, he raised it high above his head. He drew in a deep breath. A shudder racked his naked body. Every muscle in his arms, back and shoulders shook as he fought himself. This was the right thing to do. Every demon deserved her death.

But the bloody X looked obscene against her milk-white skin. His belly clenched at the thought of looking into her startled eyes the moment she disintegrated into dust.

Slowly, he lowered the stake and tossed it on the mattress beside her. He'd let her find it when she awoke. If she were smart, she'd make damn sure they never crossed paths again.

* * * * *

A sharp rap on his kitchen door was all the warning Max got before his brother Alec swept into the room. Like a free-ranging dog, he scouted the kitchen, opening the pantry door and tipping the lid to the bread bin, before finally choosing a beer from the fridge. He popped the top, and then straddled one of the chairs next to the table backwards.

"Make yourself at home," Max said, more distracted than irritated. The problem lying in his bed down the hallway still claimed his attention.

"You're in a sour mood today."

Alec's cheerful tone set Max's teeth on edge. As usual not one hair on his blond head was out of place. His khaki slacks were pressed with a knife-edge crease, and the cuffs of his cotton shirt were buttoned.

Max scratched his whiskered cheek and glanced down at his rumpled T-shirt and sweat pants. His brother always made him want to take a bath.

"Kill any vamps lately?"

Max started guiltily. "Not a one," he murmured and took a sip of his lukewarm coffee. "Why do you ask?"

Alec took a long draw of his brew and set the can on the table. "It explains your grumpiness."

"So, is this a social call?" Max's question sounded like a snarl to his own ears.

Alec's brows rose. "What? I can't just drop in and say hi to my big brother?"

"Do you need money?" Much as he loved his brother, he wanted him gone before he nosed around the rest of the house.

Alec's amusement crinkled the corners of his eyes. "I'm twenty-five, not fifteen."

Max stared pointedly at the beer. "But you still can't afford your own groceries?"

"It's just a beer. Man, you woke up on the wrong side of the bed." Alec's green eyes narrowed. "Quentin still giving you shit?"

Max shrugged. "We made a raid last night—it was a bust."

"Not the first time. You're edgy as a bear with a thorn in its paw." At Max's glare of warning to drop the subject, Alec grinned.

"Someone beat us to the party."

"Who?" Alec asked, his brows rising. "Rogue vamp hunters?"

Max shook his head. "Werewolves."

"Well, fancy that." He took another draw of his beer. "Shit's coming out of the woodwork around here. Have you had a chance to get inside The Compound?"

Max's hand tightened around his coffee cup. "No. Security's pretty tight. No civilians have been invited in."

"If the breeder's pregnant, it'd explain why it's sewed up tighter than a virgin's panties."

"Could be they're just a wary bunch of vamps," Max replied evenly.

"You were right the first time, brother. Why do you think we have a new dog pack in the neighborhood? Think it's a coincidence?" Alec's expression grew hard. "The woman, Lily, have you seen her since she arrived?"

"Nope."

"But you've seen the other women?"

Max nodded, knowing where this train of logic was running. "It does look damn suspicious. If she's carrying a vamp kit—"

"If she's breeding for a vamp, you have to take out her and the monsters she's carrying."

Max felt acid burn in his gut and he put down his coffee cup. "She's human."

"She's fucking a vamp."

Max felt his cheeks burn with guilt.

"You're the only one who can get close enough." Alec's gaze pinned him to his chair. "Joe's your buddy."

“My friend died,” Max said, between gritted teeth. “Besides, he’d be suspicious if I suddenly wanted to hang out again. He knows what I think of his kind.”

Alec lifted an eyebrow. “So have a change of heart.”

Max shifted his head from side to side to loosen the tension knotting his shoulders. “I’ll try to get close enough to see whether she’s actually pregnant.”

“Good enough.” He canted his head, leveling a questioning gaze. “What is it with you today? Are you going soft on the demons?”

Max forced his features to remain relaxed. “No.”

“Remember what they did to our mother,” Alec said softly.

“How the hell can I forget? They left me with you to raise on my own.” He gave his brother a small, tight smile.

“Yeah!” Alec raised his beer and swallowed the rest in one long gulp. “Hold onto that thought. By the way, can I borrow your motorcycle?”

So that was it. Max heaved a sigh. “I thought you were just here to see your big brother.”

“That too. Got a date tonight—can’t take her out in my Civic. She’ll think I’m a real geek.”

“If you take the chopper, you’d better lay off the beer.”

“Really?” Alec stood, eager to be away now that he’d gotten what he’d come for. “You’ll let me have her?”

“Sure.” At least it would get him away from Pia. “But if you leave a single scratch on her—”

“I know, I know.” Alec grinned and swiped the keys from a dish on the counter. “You know what your problem is...”

Max raised an eyebrow.

“You need to get laid, brother.”

Max threw a glare at Alec as he walked out the door laughing, then he glanced at his watch. Only an hour before sunset. Time to get dressed for work—and time to get lost before Pia awoke.

But first he couldn’t resist one last look.

He walked slowly to the bedroom and pushed open the door. Pia lay on her back just as he’d left her, naked and sleeping peacefully.

The dim light did nothing to hide the sweet curves of her body. Her hair was a dark cloud—he'd remember the sight of it fanned out on his pillow for a long time. He lifted a strand and rubbed it between his fingers—*fine as spider's silk*.

Her small body was just as deceptively beautiful. His gaze lowered to the silken thatch between her legs, and he shifted his feet apart. He could still remember the feel of her inner muscles clutching his body in rhythmic waves. Could hear her throaty cries as she'd come, luring him over the edge.

He reached and cupped a breast—the one marked with dried blood. His thumb caressed her nipple, and it budded instantly. He drew away from the temptation of that rosy crest, and cursed silently as his body reacted to the sight.

Damn her! Did she know what he was? Was she playing some sort of game to draw him out?

First, a murderous pack of werewolves. Then a sweet, fanged temptation.

Max didn't believe in coincidences.

Chapter Four

Stretching, Pia woke slowly, moaning as her sleep-fogged mind noted each delicious ache. With her eyes still closed, she slid her hand along the mattress, only to find the source of her languorous state gone. Sighing, she rolled and pressed her face into Max's pillow.

For a long moment, she let her mind wander back through the evening's love play. Max's stern mouth softened by long, carnal kisses. Strong hands kneading her breasts and buttocks. Blunt, clever fingers that brought her to the edge. And a cock that filled her to the brim.

But the words! Sexy, nasty words that made her flinch while at the same time incited her to orgasm. She wanted his whispers again.

Where the devil was he?

Her eyes opened, blinking at the fading gray light filtering behind the blinds. She listened, stretching her senses to determine whether he stirred anywhere in the house. Instead, she found she was completely alone. Only lingering traces of his tangy blood and spicy cologne remained, and no footsteps could be heard anywhere in the house.

Her disappointment was keen. She'd hoped to feel the slide of his strong hands and snuggle next to his chest, and perhaps, enjoy a slow ride into erotic wonderland. Then an appalling thought occurred.

She'd slept!

Pia jackknifed to a sitting position. She'd slept in Max Weir's bed! Had he guessed she was a vamp? Or did he just think she was a very heavy sleeper? Her gut told her he had to know. She couldn't imagine a man with his libido letting any woman in his bed sleep throughout the day. And if he'd tried to wake her for a little morning action...

Her heart galloped, and she raised a shaking hand and stared—nope, she wasn't disintegrating, and by the ache in her shoulder and other parts best not considered at the moment—she wasn't a ghost.

As deep as his prejudice was reported to run, she didn't know why he'd left her alive. But here she was in his bed—not even a splinter of wood poking from her chest. She glanced down and gasped. A burnished brown X was painted on her breast.

She scratched at the flecks of dried blood. It didn't take a brain surgeon to understand his warning. He may have let her live for now, but he'd been mighty tempted to end her life.

When she scooted to the edge of the bed, something smooth and hard rolled toward her hip. Her hand closed around it, and she raised it in front of her face. He'd been more than tempted! She screeched and tossed the stake across the room. Then she leapt off the bed, searching the floor for her clothing.

They were folded in a neat pile on top of his bureau, her shoes beside them. Like he wanted her to dress in a hurry and haul her ass out of his house.

Her shoulders drooped. What had she expected? One night of incredible sex and he'd leave her a love letter?

Best not to tempt fate twice. She dressed in a frenzy and hurried out the door. She'd gotten the message loud and clear—the next time he'd play for keeps.

* * * * *

Pia fretted with the fringe on the hem of her sleeve. She'd found a dangling thread and yanked it. "Shit!" Now, the gold fringe was only half as long as the one on her other sleeve. And she'd wanted to make a good impression.

The Compound, as its new owners had dubbed it, was a work in progress. From the details she'd gleaned since a security guard let her through the gates minutes earlier, the estate would be a cozy beige and gold haven with none of the opulence that usually marked a Master's residence. Overstuffed leather chairs and sofas faced inward, inviting one to linger for a chat. But Pia's nerves hadn't settled after her mad dash from Max's house, so she paced, trying to think of what she'd say about her latest failure.

Had she made a mistake coming directly to The Compound? What if she ran into Quentin? Did he still hold a grudge? She'd only been a lowly operative in the Masters' Northwest Council when she'd last seen him. Maybe he wouldn't remember her.

Perhaps she was just being paranoid, feeling off-kilter since her debacle with Max. If she ever saw him again and his expression held one ounce of the disgust she now felt for her deception, she'd crumble.

No, she'd best slink back to Seattle, her tail between her legs, and forget about the brawny human whose strength and dark sensuality had so captivated her. She couldn't bear to face him again.

Not that she hadn't dreamed in a corner of her bruised heart of seeing him one last time. At least to apologize. During the short taxi ride here, she'd entertained any number of scenarios, all of which ended horribly. Her staring down the shaft of an arrow buried deep in her chest... Her hand reaching out to him as she disintegrated into a grimy dust heap...

Okay, so she was getting melodramatic. She'd fucked up. Time to face the truth. She simply wasn't cut out for this cloak and dagger stuff. This latest episode in a long string of disasters should have told her that.

Worse, her first solo assignment outside Seattle and she'd botched the mission in less than 24 hours.

"Do you think she'll have a sleeve left if we leave her to stew much longer?"

Pia started at the feminine voice coming from the doorway of the den where she'd been cooling her heels for the past half hour.

A woman with golden hair that hung past her generous bosom grinned and sauntered into the room.

The man following her inside was Dylan O'Hara. And wherever Dylan was, Quentin was sure to follow. "Well, well," Dylan said, following the woman inside. "Won't Quentin be surprised?"

Rats! He'd recognized her. She needed to get out quick.

Emmy swung back to Dylan, her eyes narrowing. "You know her?"

Dylan flinched, appearing ill at ease beneath the woman's displeasure.

Pia had never seen the vamp anything but cool. Interesting.

"Well, I know her, but I don't *know* her, love," he said, his hand curving around the woman's fleshy hip.

"Good, then I don't have to tear out her hair." She turned back to Pia and gave her a blinding smile. "I'm Emmy O'Hara. Seems you two are already acquainted." She stared at Pia expectantly.

Pia straightened and offered her hand. The last thing she should expect was a polite introduction from Dylan. "I'm Pia D'Amato. From Seattle."

"How was the weather when you left?"

Pia shrugged. "Wet."

Emmy wrinkled her nose. "I don't miss that one bit. So, you're one of us? I can't tell just by looking. Dylan can, but he's older than Methuselah."

Dylan's eyes narrowed, but a hint of a smile curved the corners of his lips. "You're Navarro's solution to our little problem?"

"Some solution..." Pia muttered, then blushed when she realized she'd said it out loud. "He sent me."

"She's here to help with the werewolves?" Emmy asked, her eyes widening. "That was really quick."

"No love," he said. "Another little problem. One not worth mentioning."

Pia took the hint. The subject of Max's "conversion" was not for Emmy's ears.

"I can't wait until Quentin arrives," Dylan said.

Pia's face flamed brighter. "Actually, I just stopped in to tell you I'm heading back home tonight."

"So soon?" Emmy looked genuinely dismayed. "But you just got here! I know Lily would love to meet you. She hasn't had any female vamps other than myself to interview."

"Lily?"

"Yeah, Joe's wife. She's been with us for several months now. She's working on a book. *The Definitive Guide to Vampirism*."

Dylan cleared his throat. "She'll likely be too ill to see our friend, seeing as Pia's leaving so soon."

Emmy bit her lip. "Oh right. I forgot."

"Anyway," Pia said, hoping to take control of the situation, give her debrief, and hit the road before Quentin burst through the door. "I'm packed and on my way to the airport."

"Like I said before, leaving so soon?" Dylan asked. "Did you already take care of that little bit of business for us?"

Pia stared at her ragged fringe. “Um...actually, no.”

“But you’ve met him?”

Pia nodded, but still couldn’t meet his gaze.

“Met who?” A dark-haired man strode into the room. By his Latin features, Pia assumed he was the newest vamp, Joe Garcia.

“Max,” Dylan said.

“Is *she* the solution?” Joe’s dubious glance swept her from head to foot.

“We have a problem other than the werewolves that requires a solution?” Emmy asked.

“Navarro’s diabolical,” Joe said, a smile stretching his sexy mouth.

If Pia hadn’t already met Max, she might have melted into a puddle, this man was so handsome.

“I think I need a drink,” Dylan said. “You’re still in a hydrated state, Pia—so I assume your meeting wasn’t a total disaster.”

Joe glanced at his watch. “You work fast. It’s only an hour past dusk.”

Pia looked from one curious male face to the other. How could she admit she’d been a dismal failure? “Well, I-I met him last night.”

Joe’s eyebrows rose. “Oh, I see.” His gaze turned speculative. “I take it, he didn’t know you were a vampire.”

Pia wished they’d change the subject. “Not at first,” she said, her teeth grinding with annoyance.

“But he does now, and you’re still standing.” Joe glanced at Dylan. “I’m impressed.”

Dylan shrugged. “Seems our girl here has found a chink in the tough guy’s armor. Tell me why you’re so eager to leave? Looks like your work’s just begun.”

Pia blew out an agitated breath. “He made it quite clear he didn’t want to see me again.”

“You!”

Pia jumped at the familiar voice and her stomach sank.

Quentin Albermarle—the bane of her professional existence—filled the door, a look black as thunder on his face. “What the devil are you doing here?” The large, blond vampire advanced menacingly.

Pia refused to back up a step. “Hello, Quentin. Don’t worry about me. I-I was just leaving.”

“Do I detect a bit of animosity?” Emmy asked, her eyes too wide and guileless to be believed.

“She’s a menace!” Quentin said, pointing a damning finger in Pia’s direction. “A walking disaster!”

Annoyed he could still hold a grudge when she’d obviously done him no lasting harm, Pia straightened to her full height. “How was I supposed to know you weren’t killing that woman? She sounded hysterical.”

“I was tickling her—she was laughing *hysterically*!” he said, his face turning purple. “Besides, if you thought I was killing her, why didn’t you aim higher?”

Pia glanced at the others to see whether a rescue was imminent, but Dylan merely coughed, and Joe’s lips twitched.

She scowled at them both. “Who said I missed?” No way would she tell these arrogant assholes she’d been aiming for his heart. She couldn’t help it her palms had been moist, and the crossbow slipped.

“You *meant* to shoot me in the ass?” A tic pulsed next to his eye.

Pia decided discretion might be the better course. After all, she didn’t ever have to see this odious vamp again. She crossed her arms over her chest and glared. “I apologized. It was a natural mistake.”

“Natural?” He leaned down, so close his nose nearly touched hers. Then his face grew still. “Bugger me. Tell me Navarro didn’t send this chit here.”

“Fraid so,” Joe said, his tone mild.

“What the hell was he thinking?”

“She spent the night with Max.”

Quentin drew back and stared. “Fuck me. And she’s still standing?”

“Boggles the mind, doesn’t it?” Dylan said dryly.

Quentin looked her up and down, and then walked around her. When he’d finished his circuit, he frowned. “I need a drink.”

“Drinks all around, it is!” Emmy said gaily.

“Make a note, Dylan,” Quentin said, his voice still hard. “She’s never to hold a weapon within a hundred yards of me.”

“Looks like you’re staying,” Emmy whispered in her ear as she handed her a tumbler of amber liquid.

Pia didn’t even sniff to see what she’d been given. She tossed it back and then coughed. The whiskey warmed her all the way to her belly. “Who says I’m staying? He knows what I am. If he sees me again, I’m potting soil.”

Emmy pressed her down into a chair. Then her gaze turned mean as she surveyed the men. “So is someone going to tell me what this is all about? What problem is Pia supposed to solve with Max?”

“Now, love,” Dylan said, reaching for her.

Emmy held a hand out to block the move. “Don’t you dare ‘Now, love’ me and pat me on the head. I’m not a puppy.”

“No, love,” Dylan purred. “You’re my pussy kitty.”

“You are not going to distract me.” Emmy’s nostrils flared. “What are you guys up to?”

“Ballocks!” Quentin said. “That wife of yours never keeps a secret. Darcy will have my ass.”

Dylan sighed and reached for Emmy’s hand. “Haven’t you noticed Max’s intense dislike for us?”

“Max just needs time to get to know us,” Emmy said. “Darcy says he’s a great guy when he’s not being an asshole. Look at Joe,” she said with a nod toward the Cuban. “He hated our guts.”

Joe raised an eyebrow. “Who says I still don’t?”

“Lily says so,” Emmy said with a nod. “Did you tell her a lie?”

Joe muttered under his breath and slumped into a chair.

Emmy turned to Pia. “What exactly were you supposed to do with Max?”

“Not what she did, obviously,” Quentin muttered.

Pia squirmed in her chair. She knew Emmy wouldn’t be pleased to hear the details of her mission, or that Navarro’s first inclination was to kill Max outright.

“I take it you slept with him?” Joe asked, his expression closed.

“Yeah, that was kind of the problem.”

“Why?” Emmy asked. “What were you supposed to do?”

Pia glanced around the room.

Dylan sighed and shrugged.

Pia took a deep breath. She may as well get this over with. “Um...I was supposed to seduce him or turn him.”

“Turn him?” Joe’s brows drew together in a frightening scowl. “Over my dead body.”

“Too late,” Quentin murmured.

Dylan frowned at both the male vamps. “Well, you almost got the first part right, Pia. So what happened?”

“I fell asleep.”

Joe snorted.

“And when did you wake up?” Dylan asked.

“A couple of hours ago.”

Dylan stood still for a long moment, and then a grin teased the corners of his mouth. He turned to Joe. “He’s going to be surly as a grizzly bear.”

Joe’s expression didn’t betray his thoughts. “Yup.”

“I want you to stick close,” Dylan said. “See if he says anything about our girl here.”

Pia bristled at the “our girl”. “And what am I supposed to do in the meantime?”

“Stay here,” Quentin said. “Out of trouble.”

Pia had the urge to click her heels and salute, but Quentin’s fierce expression didn’t reassure her she was out of the woods yet.

“Let’s head to the station,” Dylan said.

“Try not to make it too obvious we’re sussing him out,” Quentin said, looking at Joe. “Do you suppose he’ll put two and two together and figure out we’re responsible for her being here?”

Joe rose from his chair. “Max is so ready to think the worst, he’ll probably jump straight to believing it was a setup.”

“Then we have to make sure he never makes a firm connection,” Dylan said. “Keep him doubting.”

“Pia,” Joe said, turning back to address her. “I want your promise you won’t attempt to turn him.”

Pia lifted her chin. “I can’t do that.”

His face turned menacing. “Then I’ll have to tell him why you’re here.”

“Let’s see if she can win him over first,” Dylan said. “She may not have to resort to draining him.”

“You’re not to move a muscle until we return,” Quentin said. “Got that?”

Pia didn’t try to hide a scowl. Her hot stare should have blistered their backsides as they swept out of the room.

“Whew!” Emmy said, fanning herself. “Was the testosterone stinking up the place or what?”

Pia felt her lips twitching at the outrageous remark. “They are a bit overwhelming.”

“Did you really shoot Quentin in the ass?” she asked, her face alight with laughter. “God, what I wouldn’t have given to see the look on his face.”

“It was a Kodak moment, all right.”

The two women burst into laughter. Pia felt the tension drain away. For the moment anyway, she was safe—and it looked like she might be given a second chance to redeem herself. She’d worry about how to keep her body solid around Max later.

“Did I miss a joke?” a feminine voice said from behind Pia.

Pia whirled.

“Not a joke. But you’ll be sorry you missed it,” Emmy said. “Meet Pia. Pia, this is Quentin’s wife, Darcy.”

Pia nodded to the woman, then her gaze trailed downward. Darcy was reed-thin except for her very round belly. Quentin’s wife was pregnant. Pia gasped. “Are you a breeder?”

“Not the kind you think,” Emmy said quickly. “The baby’s not Quent’s—but that’s a long story.”

Pia looked from one woman to the next. They couldn’t be more different. One blonde and voluptuous, with a face that sparkled bright as Christmas lights. The other brunette, slender, and serene. But there was no mistaking the bond between them as they traded meaningful glances. Pia felt a twinge of envy for their friendship.

“Pia is here to take care of Max, Darcy.”

Pia nearly groaned aloud.

“What’s to take care of?” Darcy said, stiffening.

“That’s a very good question.” Emmy turned back to Pia, her eyes narrowing. “You’re gonna have to spill, girlfriend.”

“Shit.”

* * * * *

“So what was-sh Max like?” Emmy asked, her reddened eyes alight with curiosity.

Pia wished her glass wasn’t empty, she could use another shot before she answered that one. She glanced over her shoulder to where the bottle sat on the kitchen counter—too far to walk. She sighed. “Intense.”

“I bet.” Emmy burped and then giggled. “He looks like the kind who would walk through walls to get at a woman.”

Pia’s cheeks filled with heat. “He is relentless.” She pursed her lips to keep from giggling, guessing it was probably time to stop drinking. She never giggled.

Darcy’s mouth turned up at the corners. “Well, well. I always knew he had it in him.”

Emmy leaned over the kitchen table and spread a generous daub of liverwurst on a cracker and popped it into her mouth. “Mmmm. Love organ meat. So’s Max...hung?” she asked, her hand covering her mouth.

Darcy tilted her head back and groaned. “She’s obsessed.”

“I’m not the only one,” Emmy snapped. “Lily carries a measuring tape.”

Pia intercepted Darcy’s swift headshake and a glare in Emmy’s direction, and alarm bells rang. That was the second time she’d heard that name. Wasn’t it? She shook her head—*big mistake*, the room swirled. “Lily? There’s another woman in The Compound?”

“Oops,” Emmy said, eyes rounded with guilt.

“Joe’s wife,” Darcy said. “She’s ill.”

“Oh.” The secretive glance the two women shared only heightened Pia’s curiosity. She tried to sit straighter in her chair. “Is she a vamp or human?”

“Human, like me,” Darcy said, quickly. “So is Max...hung?”

Her attempt to change the subject was too obvious to be casual, but Pia let it drop—Max's penis was a much more interesting subject. "He's impressive...especially for a human."

"I knew it!" Emmy said, slapping her palm against the table so loudly Darcy jumped.

Pia, on the other hand, guessed her nerves were too well insulated. Not so much as a flinch. She lifted her glass to her mouth, then cursed when she remembered it was empty.

"The guys are always saying they're just un-ush-unusually large for vampires." Emmy smiled. "The braggarts. So tell me, have you ever had a vamp who couldn't wield his cock like a weapon?"

Darcy spluttered with shocked laughter. "Em!"

Pia grinned. Whatever the two were trying to hide, it wasn't any of her affair. Nope! She was strictly short-term. "Vamp cocks are the biggest. Although..." she leaned over the table to whisper, "I've heard werewolves are just as impressive."

"Werewolves!" Darcy shuddered. "Monsters, every one. You should have seen what they did to those people."

Having heard the story of the botched raid earlier, Pia could sympathize. "Not that I have any personal experience, but I have heard things."

Darcy's gaze sharpened. "Is it true they're hard to kill?"

"You have to destroy their hearts or their brains," Pia said.

"Why do they hate us so much?" Emmy asked, looking like she was about to cry.

"Well, like I said, I can only tell you what I've been told—strictly third-hand info. But werewolves are like vampires—they can be made or born." Pia shrugged. "But the ones that are made, usually from a bite, are very unstable and vicious."

She paused as Darcy poured another finger of whiskey into her glass. Her throat was really dry. She took a drink and looked up to find both women staring expectantly. "Well, those who are born don't like the made ones very much—they tend to bring attention to the whole population. That's partly why there are so few."

"Purges, hunts?" Darcy said.

Pia nodded.

"But that doesn't 'splain why werewolves hate vampires," Emmy said.

Pia frowned, trying to remember the rumors told by other vamps on the fringes of those who would know—the ancient ones. “Their population is very small. They don’t usually risk turning humans to werewolves because those creatures tend to be unstable. They need breeders.”

Emmy’s flushed face blanched pale. Darcy shot her a strained look.

Pia noted the byplay, but her brain was a little too muzzy to understand. “And not many breeders exist,” she continued. “So werewolves take it personally when a vamp mates with one.” Pia shrugged. “Wouldn’t you take it personally if a vamp robbed you of a chance at continuing your species?”

“Bugger,” Emmy muttered, shoving her glass away.

“Funny how our two senior citizens never mentioned that story,” Darcy murmured.

“It’s not common knowledge among vamps—there are very few opportunities for the two species to tread on each other’s toes. Breeders are that rare.”

Darcy’s eyebrows lifted. “Well, I’m glad we had this little talk.”

“Me too,” Emmy said glumly.

“You don’t think your werewolves are sniffing around a breeder, do you?”

“Course not. What would be the chances?” Emmy said briskly. “Is there any more of that liverwurst?”

Pia looked from one woman to the other. Both their expressions were pinched with worry. Something was definitely up. “So when are you due, Darcy?”

The dark-haired woman’s face relaxed fractionally. “At the end of the month,” she said, smoothing her hand over the mound of her belly.

“I think that’s the only thing I miss about being human,” Pia said, sighing.

“Have you been one for very long?” Darcy asked.

Pia grinned. “Well, I’m not as ancient as your old man, Emmy, but I’ve been around the block a time or two. I was turned back in the twenties.”

“You were a flapper girl?” Emmy said, her face lighting with enthusiasm again.

“A gangster’s moll, actually. Can’t you picture it?”

Emmy tilted her head to the side, smiling. “Carmine red lipstick, one of those chiffon and silk chemises—yeah, I can picture it.”

“So what happened?” Darcy asked.

Pia blew out a breath. “The usual. Wrong place, wrong time. I went to a dance hall where the bootleg whiskey was pouring a little too freely.” She raised her glass. “I’ve always loved the taste of whiskey. But I swear, that night I only had two drinks and there I was dancing on a table. I’m sure someone put something in my drink.”

Emmy wrinkled her nose. “So, some studly vamp fell for you in a hard way and had to ‘trink your blahd’?”

“No. I distracted the partygoers, and G-men raided the party. My table got flipped and next thing I knew, I was waking up with a cracked skull and a vamp who looked like Mortimer Snerd sucking me dry.”

“Who’s Mortimer Snerd?”

Pia laughed. “You’re such a baby.”

“Well, I liked the sucking you dry part,” Darcy said, waggling her eyebrows.

“Darcy! You have such a dirty mind,” Emmy cried.

“I can’t help it,” Darcy said, blushing. “All I think about these days is sex. Quentin won’t do the mambo with me until I pop.”

“You make it sound like you aren’t doing anything!” Emmy rolled her eyes. “What’s all that commotion I hear from your wing of the house?”

Darcy swatted Emmy’s arm, while Pia chuckled.

“So, was anyone going to tell me there was a new vamp in town?” a new voice chimed from the doorway.

Pia peered around her shoulder, swaying in her chair. “You Lily?”

The newcomer strode inside, dressed in an oversized T-shirt and stretchy pants. Her brown hair glinted red in the light from the chandelier.

Pia’s glance caught on the small mound of her stomach pressing against the cotton shirt. “Good God! Is it in the water?”

Chapter Five

Max sat at the far end of the conference room table with his arms folded over his chest, waiting for the rest of the team to assemble. He felt like hell and knew he looked it, too. He hadn't bothered with a shave, and his uniform had that "lived in" smell.

When he'd left the house he hadn't brought a clean uniform with him. He'd just wanted to put as many miles between him and that woman as he could. So he'd changed into the uniform he'd discovered at the bottom of his locker and hit the firing range. Two demolished targets later, he still hadn't worked the rage out of his system.

He'd let her go. His mission in life was to keep people safe—and he'd let a bloodsucker walk. His gut told him she wasn't a stone-cold killer.

For one thing, she'd missed several opportunities to take him out when he was his most vulnerable—sleeping a deep, dreamless sleep beside her, or lost in the wonder of the most powerful orgasms he'd ever experienced.

He snorted, disgusted with himself. He should have known then she wasn't human.

Further, she had puppy-dog eyes—wide, brown, liquid—the kind that tore at your heart. *Not* that she'd touched him. How could anyone who had her soul shining in her eyes hide homicidal tendencies?

The conference room door swung open, and he pushed the memories aside. He had work to do. Werewolves to track and kill. Vampires to expunge from the planet.

Joe walked in, dressed in SU black, a coffee cup in his hand. "Hey buddy."

Max bristled, grunting his displeasure at Joe's familiar greeting.

Despite the less-than-polite acknowledgement he'd received, the vamp sat beside him. His gaze swept over Max. "Looks like you had a rough day."

Max's arms tensed, bulging his biceps as he tried to contain the growl rumbling in his chest.

Joe's lips curved, and he tilted his chair, balancing it on two legs. "Captain Springer had the daytime team pull every report of animal attacks in recent weeks," he said casually. "Other than a few missing dogs attributed to gators, nothing came up. Think we have an isolated incident?"

Max grunted, wishing the others would hurry it up. Making small talk with the undead thing wearing his friend's face made his stomach churn.

"We're going to make the rounds of the 'blood banks' tonight. See whether anyone's heard anything. We'll also check out any new vampires in town."

Max stiffened.

Joe lifted an eyebrow and gave a slight smile—the mischievous sort Max had often seen before Joe turned. “You’ll be with me.”

“Wearing your flak jacket tonight, *Garcia*?” Max said, keeping his voice even.

“Will I be needing it—*Max*?”

“You never know, *old buddy*.”

The door opened again, and the rest of the team filed in. Max forced himself to relax. He felt so wound up, he was a hair-trigger away from exploding. The Captain knew better than to partner him with Joe—he’d made his feelings clear on that issue.

However, the sly look in Joe’s face when he’d mentioned scouting for new vamps in town had raised red flags. He knew about Pia. Max had known the bitch was too good to be true—even before he’d discovered she was a bloodsucker. Just his damn luck the most appealing woman he’d met in years...

Maybe shadowing Joe for the night wasn’t such a bad idea. He might get a chance to figure out what she was doing here and how The Council might be involved. Remembering his brother’s suggestion to pal around with Joe, Max decided to play it cool and keep his ears and eyes open.

He glanced across the table and found Quentin’s gaze trained on him. Something was definitely up. The bastard’s face always sported a smirk. Now, his expression was a blank slate.

* * * * *

Max’s head pounded in time with the heavy beat of the rock n’ roll blaring inside the last stop of the night. Nine Inch Nails music couldn’t have been more appropriate for his rotten mood.

“Look, I’m going to speak with the bartender,” Joe shouted into his ear. “Why don’t you have a look around the backrooms, see whether everyone’s playing nice.”

Max nodded, glad for the chance to shake Joe off his back for the first time since they’d left the station. Maybe he’d even find some vamp action he could sink his stake into.

The scene in the “blood banks” had undergone a dramatic change since The Council came into being. Before, vamps had always sought their victims in dark alleyways or the restrooms of the “blood banks”—seedy bars where the pickings were easy. Lured by the erotic and sometimes hypnotic nature of the vampires, humans followed them into darkness.

If they were vampires with souls or at least a healthy streak of self-preservation, they played by the rules and drank only enough to sate their appetites while leaving their human hosts slightly

dizzy from blood loss. The gift the humans earned in return for serving as meals-on-legs was a powerful sexual release.

Since vamps were hard to spot unless they forgot to retract their teeth or wore their monster faces, Max had often crept into dank, dark hidey-holes to catch a vamp in action and dust him.

Now vamps had public places, poorly lit backrooms in bars, where humans and vamps could mix and be watched. This was considered an improvement. So long as the sexual conduct remained fairly PG, no one interfered with consensual blood sharing. Prostitutes and thrill-seekers were the only human fare—that was another rule: No innocents could be taken here.

When Max pushed through the door of the “feeding room”, he hoped for one little scream so he could let loose.

The heavy thump of the drums was just as loud here as in the main hall, because the room was packed. The sound of the bass beat was muffled, but insistent, like a relentless, throbbing heart. A colorful light ball spun overhead, painting the patrons in strobing, rainbow colors while they undulated to the music and their sexual fervor.

Max edged around the room, checking the humans to make sure they were conscious and pink-cheeked. Unfortunately, everyone appeared to be playing nice.

Then he caught a glance of a familiar mane of glossy brown hair among the dancers. He shoved between gyrating bodies until he stood behind Pia and her human meal. The young man was groping her backside, grinding his hips into hers while her face snuggled into the crook of his neck.

Max’s shoulders bunched tight as steel, and he saw red. His hand sought the stake deep inside his pocket, but he realized he didn’t want to kill her.

No, he wanted to plant it deep inside the chest of the man who looked ready to shoot his load in his pants.

Max watched the pair, letting his anger grow with each passing second until the man’s face tightened with his release. Pia held him while the young man spasmed, gasping as his orgasm rushed through him. Then she slowly pulled away, licking his neck to close the punctures.

At the sight of Pia raising her face to kiss the guy’s cheek, Max had all he could take. He stepped forward and clamped his hand on her shoulder, squeezing hard.

Pia glanced back, but didn’t look particularly surprised to see him. Blood stained her lips, and her vamp teeth peeked beneath her upper lip. She turned to her host and murmured something that made him smile. He let her go and headed for the bar. Then she shrugged her shoulder.

Max dropped his hand, but reached for her wrist and tugged her hard, pulling her into his arms. “Didn’t you get my message, *sweetheart*?”

She pressed her hands against his chest and glared. “A girl has to eat. I worked up quite an appetite last night.”

Slipping the stake from his pocket, he glided it along the bare skin of her midriff. “Don’t think I won’t carry through. I let you off light the last time.”

She shivered, and her nipples flowered, scraping his chest. “I’m a girl who appreciates a good, hard poke.” Holding his gaze, she licked the last traces of blood from her lips with a sensual sweep of her tongue. Her incisors remained protracted.

Max’s body tightened, hard as the stake inside his fist. “You just happened to be here, right? My last stop of the night.”

Her eyelids shuttered her expressive gaze. “And if I said, I’ve been following you?”

“No way. You got here before I did.”

Pia lifted her lips fractionally, baring the length of her fangs. “I work fast.”

“You wanted me to see you feed on him?”

“I want you to know what I am. I don’t want secrets.”

“Why would it matter to me?”

Rising on her toes, she whispered next to his ear, “Because I don’t want to worry that when I sleep in your arms, you’ll destroy me.”

With the stake still in one hand, Max gripped her upper arms to push her back. Looking down into her face, he said, “That’s assuming we’ll ever share a bed again.”

“Won’t you? Don’t you want me?” Her hand crept down the front of his pants and cupped him. “Tell me this isn’t all for me.”

His erection burned at her touch. Much as he would have preferred to deny her, he did want her. But it was just a physical thing, he told himself—she was one hot little lay.

He grabbed her hand, intending to shove it away. But through his slacks, he could feel the heat from it, and her fingers curved around him, squeezing. Instead of doing what he should have, he held her hand against him, encouraging her to rub up and down his length. “I hate this,” he bit out. “I hate you.”

She tongued his nipple through his T-shirt. “But you love the sex, don’t you? So do I.” Her mouth pouted, and her gaze smoldered. She glided her hand beneath to cup his balls. “I want you to fuck my brains out, Max.”

Max drew a deep breath, fighting his need for this woman, reminding himself—*she’s the enemy, a demon in a pretty package.*

A demon who was driving him out of his mind with her sexy little nibbles. Her fangs scraped his skin through his shirt, while her hands played with his dick and ass.

He shuddered, knowing he was quickly losing this battle of wills. He snagged her wrists and forced her arms behind her, bending her back.

Excitement brought a rose flush to her skin. “Are you going to do it here, Max? Are you going to sink that stake deep inside me?”

Witch! Oh, he wanted to sink something into her—the same something they were really thinking about. He wanted to drill a hole through his uniform to get at her. He slid his fingers around her arm and pulled her to a dark, shadowed corner, pressing her back against the wall.

Her expression wasn’t gloating—it was tight, flushed. She wanted this as badly as he did. He dug beneath the hem of her cropped top until his fingers spread out, cupping the mound of her breast—the one he’d painted with her blood.

Her nipple hardened, and Pia leaned into his hand, encouraging him to strengthen his grip.

He squeezed the little globe and plucked the velvety nipple with his fingers.

Pia opened her legs and slipped her hands inside the back pockets of his pants to pull his hips between hers.

Max couldn’t help but rub his erection against her. With one hand, he sought the juncture of her thighs. This time no scrap of silk covered her sex—she was naked.

“See?” she whispered. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

Her sex was hot—so wet, moisture trickled down his fingers as he delved between her lips. “For all I know, you’ve been fucking your way through dinner tonight.”

She flinched, but quickly relaxed her expression and offered him a sly smile. “Jealous? I promise the only cum you’ll find inside me will be yours.”

He fingered her nether lips, sliding back and forth in her juices. “You want this? You want to do this here?”

Her hips danced on his fingers. “Yes,” she moaned. “Now.”

He groaned and then remembered what was in his other hand. Although, his body was so hard he could break bricks, he went cold at his core. He trailed the tip of stake up the inside of her thigh.

Her eyes widened with alarm.

“Don’t you trust me?”

She swallowed hard, her gaze locked with his. “If you tell me you won’t kill me now, then yes.”

He pressed the blunt end about an inch into her pussy. “Don’t worry about splinters. I sanded it myself. It will slide in smooth as satin.”

Her eyes widened, but her body shivered and gushed its approval. Her mouth trembled and Max noted a battle seemed to be fought behind her brown eyes—she didn’t want to want this, and she was frightened.

Good. He lifted one eyebrow—a challenge. “Tell me what you want.”

“Kiss me,” she said, her eyes glistening with tears, “and then fuck me with that stake. Satisfy your need to drive it into me, Max.”

Max leaned down and kissed her, sliding his mouth over hers, drinking her moans. His tongue licked her lips and slipped between, touching the tips of her fangs then sliding deeper to stroke her tongue.

Opening her legs wider, Pia lifted a leg to hook over his thigh. “Do it,” she whispered.

With both hands between her legs now, he spread her lips wide and pushed the stake gently inside her, his thumb flicking her clitoris. Her moans deepened against his mouth, and he made his kiss rougher, harder, until he drew her tongue into his mouth and sucked.

He’d thought he had control—a dispassionate distance from which he could love her body and steal her pride. But his hands shook with his own raging desire.

Her body writhed against him as he pushed the wooden stake deeper and began stroking her vagina with short, pulsing glides. Pia’s hands shook as she sought the belt at his waist and unbuckled it, found the snap at the top of his pants and lowered his zipper. Then her strong, hot hands were wrapped around his cock.

Max forgot where he was, forgot there were people all around them. The woman groaning against his lips and fisting his cock was his whole world. He growled and stroked his penis between her hands.

“Bastard! Tell me you’re not fucking her with a goddamn stake!”

Max jerked at the deadly sound of Joe's voice. He lifted his mouth from Pia's and stared down at her. Slowly, he slid the stake from her. His body shook with unspent desire and rage at his partner's interruption. But in the back of his mind there was also a healthy dose of shame for himself.

He slipped the stake into his pocket, while Pia lowered her leg and straightened her skirt. He shoved his engorged cock back into his pants, and then he turned to face the vampire behind him.

Joe's face was a mottled red. "Pia, get behind me."

"So you know each other," Max said quietly, feeling his stomach clench that his suspicions about Pia might be true.

"Just met today, *partner*."

"I'm not in any danger, Joe," Pia said.

"You don't know Max, sweetheart. Get behind me."

Feeling like a bear protecting his mate, Max stepped between Joe and Pia, clenching his fists. "I gave her my word I wouldn't harm her here."

"No, you didn't," Pia said.

Max leveled a narrow glance at her.

Pia shrugged. "I asked, but you never promised."

Joe's shoulders bunched like he was ready to take a swing. "We're still on the fucking job."

Max shrugged. "So we were blending in."

"You went too far."

Knowing Joe was right didn't ease the ache in Max's groin. He turned to Pia. Unfortunately, looking into her face didn't help matters any either. Her lips were still dewy and reddened from his kisses, and her nipples poked at the fabric of her miniscule top. He forced his shoulders to relax. "I have to get back to the station."

"Can I ride along?" she asked, leaning into him, her eyes wide and pleading. Her nipples scraped his side, and it was all he could do keep from sliding his palm over them again.

"No!" He almost shouted the word. "It's probably best this way. This thing between us won't work."

"Because I'm a vampire?" she asked, her eyes glistening.

“That’s just the beginning of our problems.”

Her expression fell, but she nodded. “I understand.” Turning to Joe, she said, “I’ll just get a taxi.”

“We can drop you off on our way.” Joe gave Max a searing glance and then spun on his heels.

Pia followed him out of the bar with Max trailing them at a distance. Distance he needed to get himself back under control. Moonlight from a full moon in a cloudless sky drew his gaze, but he shrugged aside its allure. He’d had enough moonlit madness for one night.

At their sedan, Joe tossed Max the keys. “You drive. I want your hands occupied.”

Max twisted his mouth into a hard smile. “What’s your problem? Gone all righteous, have you?”

Joe opened the back door for Pia while Max climbed inside.

“Whoo!” she gasped as she settled on the seat. “The vinyl’s a little cold.”

Remembering she wore no underwear beneath her short skirt, Max closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. Then he jammed the key into the ignition and cranked the engine into life. Before Joe could close his door, Max stomped on the gas and the car leaped forward.

“The sooner we get there the better,” Joe mumbled, slamming the door closed.

Pia clutched the back of their bench seat and leaned forward. “Do we have to go straight back?”

“Yes!” Max and Joe shouted.

“Just asking.”

Max’s fingers gripped the steering wheel hard. “Where am I taking you?”

“To The Compound. My rental’s there. I’m already packed.”

Max grew still. “You’re leaving Vero Beach?”

“The climate’s a little too sticky for me,” she said, her breath licking at his neck.

“Good.” Joe’s response was more of a grunt.

Max told himself this way was best. Let her go. Save him the bother of dusting her later. Because he knew if she stayed, he wouldn’t be able to keep his hands off her. Eventually, she’d show her true colors, and he’d never allow a vamp to take a drop of his blood.

The radio squawked, and Phil Carstair's voice broke over the channel reserved for SU business. "I need back up. Wolves have been spotted at the Piki Tiki. Anyone in the vicinity?"

Max's body grew rigid while adrenaline shot into his veins. Not fucking again!

Joe grabbed the handset. "Max and I are on our way. How many do you ha—"

"We got to drop off Pia first," Max interrupted.

"Hell no!" she said. "I'm weapons-trained. You might need me."

"Weapons-trained?" Max asked. The flame fanned beneath the fire of his suspicions regarding her reasons for being here. Sweet Pia was weapons-trained—and she just happened to be in that bar last night...

"Pull the car over," Joe said. "We'll let her out at that gas station." He pointed ahead at a well-lit parking lot, and raised the handset to his mouth again. "Wait for backup. I repeat, wait for backup."

"Roger that," Phil said. "What's your ETA?"

"You're not leaving me behind," Pia said. "You need all the help you can get."

"You're damn well going to do as you're told," Max said, his voice hard and loud. No way was she going to get into the middle of this operation. The only danger she'd face would be him, after the pack was taken care of.

"Max is right," Joe said. "You're staying out of danger."

Max slowed down to pull into the parking lot.

"I'll just tell the man pumping gas to follow you," Pia said. "I can be *very* persuasive."

Max cursed under his breath. He knew damn well just how persuasive she could be. Her sweet body was another weapon in her arsenal. All she had to do was lift her skirt an inch...

He shot a glance at Joe, but his partner's mouth was tight-lipped.

"You better hurry," Pia said. "Your friend sounded a little worried."

The little witch! Joe and Max shared a glance. They didn't have time to ditch Pia.

Joe cursed and raised the mike again. "We'll be there in five."

"We've already cleared out any civilians along the boardwalk," Phil said. "See ya, buddies."

Max peeled out of the parking lot and gunned the engine again. “Just how much experience do you have with a gun?”

“Plenty. And I almost always hit my target.”

“*Almost* always?” He glanced in the rearview mirror.

Her eyes sparkled with excitement. “I *usually* hit where I aim.”

“Sweet Jesus!” Joe groaned. “Quentin’s gonna have my ass if I give her a weapon.”

“Should we let her go in without one?”

“I don’t suppose you just want to watch?” Joe asked. “From a safe distance?”

A scowl darkened her expression. “You’re not leaving me behind. I’m not helpless. I’ve been in Special Ops for twelve years now.”

“And just how many of your fellow officers have you shot?” Joe asked.

Max blinked and looked at her in his rearview mirror.

Pia’s mouth twisted in disgust. “Just one...well, two...if you count the time I tripped on a fallen tree limb. But that wasn’t my fault.”

“What are you?” Max asked. “The Barney Fife of vamp cops?”

“I excel at ‘undercover’ work,” she said snidely. “You should know.”

“Sweetheart, I’ve half a mind to lock you in the trunk while we answer the call.”

“Do you really think that will hold me?” she said, her voice dripping sweet sarcasm.

“Fuck!” Max turned into the parking lot that flanked the boardwalk along the beach. He killed the engine, hit the trunk latch, and bounded out of the car.

With light shining from the streetlights above and the pale lamp from the trunk lid, Max and Joe strapped on their web belts and slid percussive grenades into metal loops. Almost in unison they drew their Glocks and depressed the buttons on the sides of their weapons to eject the clips with the standard issue bullets. From an ammo box, they drew clips with the special new issue—silver-filled bullets.

“What about me?” Pia asked as she peered into the trunk from behind Max’s shoulder.

He stepped on the bumper of the car and reached beneath the hem of his trousers. He pulled out a gun and laid it in her palm.

“Don’t I get ammo, too?”

“It’s already loaded with what you need.”

He watched as she drew back the barrel and pressed the button to drive it forward again. Satisfied she knew which end of the gun she held, he reached for the flak jackets. He offered one to her.

“Uh-huh,” she said, shaking her head. “I might need to move fast.”

Max continued to hold it out. “You’ll wear it, or I’ll hog-tie you and strap you to the steering wheel.”

Pia’s eyes narrowed, and her lower lip jutted out.

Max lifted one brow.

“Oh, all right.” She swiped the flak jacket from his hands and shrugged into it.

Max assisted, closing the Velcro tabs.

She scowled ferociously. “If one of those puppy dogs bites my ass because I couldn’t get away fast enough, you’ll be hearing about it.”

Max leaned down and put his forehead against hers. “Baby, no one’s biting your ass but me.”

Chapter Six

“Promises, promises.”

Max found himself grinning as he heard Pia mutter beneath her breath. He made quick work of his own jacket. When he finished closing the fastenings, he glanced up to see Joe staring, a one-sided smile quirking his mouth.

Max wiped the smile from his lips. “Not one fucking word from you, *partner*.” The last piece of equipment he donned was the headset. He slid it over his head, lowered the thin microphone wand to his lips and flipped the switch. “Phil, we’re in the parking lot. Where are you now?”

“In back of the bar. We’re going in through the kitchen.”

“We’ll take the front door. I’ll give the signal when we’re ready.” Max spared a glance over his shoulder to make sure Joe and Pia were wired in. Then he climbed the steps to the boardwalk and loped toward the bar.

“I’m taking the rear,” Joe said. “I’m not getting in front of Pia while she’s waving that gun around.”

“Scared, Joe?” Pia asked, her breath even despite the pace.

“Spitless, sweetheart. Quentin told me the whole story.”

“Huh! Betcha he didn’t tell you everything. Quentin’s a pussy.”

“I heard that!” Quentin’s voice broke over the channel. “Tell me that walking disaster doesn’t have a gun.”

“Quentin!” Pia said, her voice filled with aggravation. “That was four years ago. I’m quite the markswoman now.”

“So long as it’s someone else’s ass you mark, my dear.”

Max was glad when the Piki Tiki’s bamboo awning came into view. The vamp banter was making him ill. That hint of history between Pia and Quentin pricked his jealousy. He halted at the corner of the building and held up his hand. “This is the way it’s going down. Joe and I’ll go through the front door. Pia, you’ll cover us from the window.”

“I’m awfully glad I’ll have the pots and pans to duck behind,” Quentin said. “I’m coming through the kitchen with Phil.”

“When I count three, Pia will start laying down cover fire.” Max swung around to stare hard at Pia. “You are up for this, right? You weren’t exaggerating your skills.”

“She’s the real deal, Max,” Joe said. “She has the training. But she did shoot Quentin in the ass.”

Max snorted. “Well, that’s no sin in my eyes.”

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” Quentin said, his voice wry.

Pia rolled her eyes. “Showtime,” she said softly, holding Max’s gaze. Then she shook her head.

In three shakes, all traces of the soft, sexy kitten he’d held in his arms half an hour ago were gone. In her place stood a vamp with long curved incisors. As he watched, her forehead changed shape. The bones beneath her skin shifted outward, growing until she was unrecognizable—except for the chocolate shade of her eyes.

Her lips curved into a maniacal smile. “Some men only worry about what their girlfriends look like without their makeup.” Her voice was deeper, with an odd, gruff inflection.

Max winced. “Why are you the only one donning a mask?”

“I’m only partway transformed. I need the extra muscle.” She held up her arm. “Wanna feel?”

Max shook his head. “So long as you keep your monster reined in, I don’t care. Come on, Joe.” He strode to the side of the building, and peered through the window. The scene inside was chilling.

Three wolves in various stages of transformation had half a dozen vamps and a human bartender trapped in a corner. A dark-furred wolf, still walking on two legs, swiped his claws at a male vamp, shredding his clothing and drawing four bloody lines across his chest. The vamp screamed through a row of jagged teeth and charged, wrapping his arms around the wolf to lift him off his feet.

The pair crashed to the floor and rolled. But the wolf quickly gained the advantage and opened his jaws wide to close around the vamp’s throat. With a shake of his powerful shoulders, the wolf separated the vamp’s head from his body and the vamp exploded into a dark cloud of dust. His clothing floated to the floor.

“Bastards,” Pia whispered beside him.

“They’re just doing what’s natural,” Max said, giving her a steady stare. “Offing vamps.”

Pia turned her head and lifted her upper lip, baring her fangs.

“Not your best look, baby.”

“Good thing I’m not trying to impress you then, hmm?”

Max turned his attention back to the interior of the Piki Tiki bar. This place had quite a history—a long association with the vamp scene well before they came out of the closet.

He hoped the owner had good insurance. The bar was trashed. Tables were overturned, chairs lay in splinters, attesting to the battle that had raged inside. Broken glass sparkled like diamonds on the tiled floor.

A wolf with golden fur circled in front of the group huddled in the corner, snapping and snarling. Suddenly, he faced off with the vamps, lowering his head until it nearly touched the ground. A rumbling growl built in his chest. Each time one of the vamps looked ready to answer his challenge, he neatly corralled him back like a dog herding sheep.

The vamps returned the rumbling, snarl for snarl. However, they soon didn’t attempt to step outside their corner. It was a standoff, with the golden wolf in the superior position. His pack mates had only to wait for him to cull the vamps from the herd, one by one.

“I hadn’t realized they were so goddamn big,” Joe’s whispers came through the headset. He still hovered behind Pia at the end of the building.

“How would anyone mistake them for dogs?” Pia said in her odd, gruff voice. “They’re all monsters, but that gold one’s the worst. He knows what he’s doing.”

Max agreed this wolf was a bigger danger than the others. His actions were calculated, intelligent. However much he might empathize with these wolves' lust for vamp blood, they weren't discriminating about what they chomped on. They'd kill humans just as quick. "We better move now," he whispered, and gave Pia a final look. "Make your shots count, baby. The head or the chest."

Pia nodded and crouched beside the corner of the window, her weapon held steady in both hands.

He ducked beneath the window so the occupants within the bar wouldn't see him as he sped toward the entrance. At the door, he counted, "On three. One, two, three." As gunfire erupted from the front and back of the bar, he shoved open the glass door, tossed a grenade, and rolled into the room. When he came to his feet, he aimed and fired at the golden wolf just as the grenade exploded, shattering more glass and distracting the wolves momentarily.

His first shot struck the wolf in the shoulder. The wolf staggered back and then shook himself. Rather than doing the expected and charging toward Max, he leapt into the air, bypassing Max. In a second bound, he broke through the large plate glass window, landing on the boardwalk outside.

Max had only a moment to spare a thought for Pia, before a dark-furred wolf crashed into him.

He rolled with the beast, struggling to bring up his gun.

The wolf clamped his teeth over the shoulder of Max's flak jacket in a bone-crunching grip and shook his powerful head.

Max flailed, helpless for a moment, and then clutched the fur at the wolf's neck. All his strength focused on raising his gun. He pressed the barrel beneath the wolf's jaw and pulled the trigger.

In a spray of blood and gray matter, the wolf crumpled on top of Max. He shoved it away and struggled to his feet.

Joe and Quentin battled the third wolf. By the looks of things, Max almost felt sorry for the beast. In the close confines of the bar, the vamps had forgone their weapons for hand-to-hand combat. They wore their vamp masks and traded blows and bites with the wolf. The muddy brown wolf was quickly losing the fight. Blood streamed from his mouth and nose, his chest heaved.

Max swung back to the window and realized Pia's weapon was silent. With a roar of anger, he ran to the door and jerked it open. The boardwalk was empty.

His heart thudded. The wolf had taken Pia—might already have destroyed her. But which way had he gone?

“Pia! Can you hear me?” he shouted into his mike. He stood still, trying to separate the shouts and sounds of fighting inside the bar. Then he heard it—feminine gasps. She was hurt and scared, but she was alive. “Baby, hold on. I’m coming.”

The streetlamp barely illuminated the beach beyond the wooden planks. The shadows hid the wolf’s tracks. He jumped over the railing onto the sand below.

They could be anywhere. He had to find her. But first, he needed to be able to follow the scent of the wounded male.

Max’s hands stripped open the Velcro fastenings, and he dropped the jacket to the ground. He ripped at the rest of his clothing and equipment until he stood naked beneath the lamplight.

Please don’t let me be too late.

Pulling strength from the glare of the full moon, Max let the transformation come over him in a rush powered by his anger. His teeth slid from the roof of his mouth. His face stretched, the bones cracking as they reached outward. Then he dropped to the sand as his body lengthened and fur sprouted from his skin. Within seconds he caught the musty scent of the male wolf—and the acrid smell of a woman’s fear.

Max, the wolf, leapt from the boardwalk onto the beach and followed the trail of the other male’s scent. Lost was Pia’s name. Only a vision of a dark-haired woman with soft skin and round, wide eyes shimmered in his mind to match the scent. His strides stretched as he neared them, the woman and the golden wolf, and a deep-throated roar broke from him.

The golden wolf spun to face him. He held the woman by her torso, his large jaws clamped over the black covering encasing her upper body. The wolf was a powerful, potent adversary—and this close his scent was...familiar.

Weakened, the woman beat the golden wolf about the head with her fists, trying to dislodge his powerful jaws.

The dark wolf lifted his head and howled. His mate was in danger. Another had attacked what belonged to him alone. Fur lifted on his shoulders and back as he stalked toward the rogue wolf.

Pia gasped in agony. She figured the enormous wolf that held her had crushed every rib along her right side. Why he hadn’t killed her outright? He could have so easily. Sure he’d go for Max inside the bar, she’d stared transfixed with horror when the wolf broke through the glass and landed beside her.

When he’d swung toward her, she hadn’t time to raise her weapon before he was upon her. In the attack, she’d lost her weapon, and could only offer a feeble defense once he’d crushed her

side with his enormous jaws, preventing her from taking a full breath. Then he'd lifted her and ran into the darkness while she flailed like a rag doll.

She'd thought he took a bullet in the shoulder, but the wound didn't seem to slow him. Obviously, someone had missed the two vital organs that could have brought him down. But why hadn't the silver bullet affected him? She wondered if perhaps it had passed through him, and therefore the poisonous affect of the silver hadn't had a chance to do its work on his body.

Now a second wolf, slightly larger than the monster that held her, stalked toward them. His coat glistened like polished coal in the moonlight and rippled with the flex of his powerful muscles. Believing the next few seconds would be her last, Pia's thoughts skipped to Max. She prayed hard that he was safe, and harder still that he'd find happiness.

The black wolf growled and snapped its teeth, and suddenly, she was released. She hit the ground and rolled to the side. Searing pain took what little air she could suck into her lungs. Slowly, she came to her knees.

The black wolf sidled toward her, answering the golden one's growls with a rumbling roar that emanated from deep inside his chest. The sound sent shivers up her spine. He stood between her and the golden wolf now.

Despite her pain, Pia tried to edge backward, but the black wolf turned and nudged her with a cold nose—an oddly tender action that confused her. Had he just told her to sit tight?

Dimly, Pia grew aware of shouts from the direction of the boardwalk. If she could have drawn a deep breath she would have screamed, but the effort of breathing was quickly diminishing her strength.

Then the black wolf raised his head and howled.

"Over here," Quentin shouted.

The golden one snarled and darted forward, snapping at the black's front hocks.

The black answered with a lunge and sank his teeth into the neck of his foe.

The two, well-matched in size and strength, rolled in the sand, their snarling growls growing deeper, their gnashing teeth inflicting more vicious wounds by the second.

Pia tried to retain her mask and vamp bulk, but she felt her strength seep from her body until her human form slipped to the sand, panting to ease the pain burning her lungs.

The pounding of booted feet hitting the sand drew nearer, and the golden wolf wriggled free of the black's hold before dashing away into the darkness.

Then the black wolf turned back to her, his fur glistening now from saliva and blood. He padded toward her, his head down, his chest heaving, until his face was inches from hers.

“Pia, hold very still. We’re going to take him out.” Quentin’s harsh monster-voice echoed as if rising from a deep well.

She stared at the wolf, drawn by the unblinking gaze of his gold eyes. He was magnificent! Larger than any wolf she’d ever seen in a zoo. His head was broad, his neck thick, and his chest wide and deeply muscled. His black coat looked soft and lustrous. Slowly, she lifted her hand beneath his snout, half expecting he’d bite it off.

Instead, he gently nudged her palm with his nose and lowered himself to the sand.

“Don’t hurt him,” she whispered, raking her fingers through the matted fur around his face. He smelled like a dog—fresh, slightly musty, except for the tangy scent of the blood on his neck and shoulders. “He’s a friend. He saved my life.” She wasn’t sure how she knew that, but the certainty grew stronger as she stroked his fur.

“We have to destroy him, Pia,” Quentin said. “He’s part of the pack that’s been murdering humans and vamps.”

“Not right,” she gasped to get the words past her lips. “He...wasn’t inside. Came later.”

“Anyone seen Max?” Joe asked.

Pia peered up to see Joe and another officer, Phil she guessed, join Quentin. Their weapons were raised and pointed straight at the dark creature beside her. She struggled to her knees and crawled in front of the wolf.

“Dammit, Pia. Get out of the way.” Quentin stepped forward, but the wolf’s growl halted him.

Grasping his fur, Pia leaned into the wolf. “Go!” she whispered. “I’m safe.” She wasn’t sure he understood.

He whined and nuzzled his snout against her neck.

She turned slowly to the men. Their faces were hard, determined. They’d shoot him without a second thought—unless she pulled out a bigger weapon. “Shoot him, Quentin...and I’ll tell Darcy...exactly where that bullet hit you...and who dug it out of your ass.”

“Pia!” Quentin’s voice rose in warning.

“I’m not kidding.”

Quentin’s mask melted. “For fuck sake. He’s a goddamn werewolf—not a lapdog. He’s dangerous.”

“I can start with where the surgery was performed...”

Quentin blew out a breath. “Lower your weapons,” he said, his voice sounding as disappointed as a child denied his dessert.

Pia shifted back to the wolf. “Go!”

But he lay there, and his tongue lapped at her fingers.

Tears filled her eyes. Her chest burned like fire and this stupid lupine was quickly losing his chance to lift his leg on another fire hydrant. “Go!” she shouted, shoving him as hard as she could manage.

Finally, the wolf rose to his feet. With a glare at the men standing beyond her, he turned and loped into the darkness.

Quentin stepped forward and knelt beside her in the sand. “Are you all right?” he asked, reaching to tuck her hair behind her ear.

Fighting to keep from crying like a baby now the danger was past, she asked, “Did you get the other two wolves?”

“Yeah,” Joe said, as he joined them. He reached for the fastenings on her jacket and stripped them open. “What the hell happened with the light-colored one?”

“Blackie chased him off.”

Joe’s eyebrows lifted and he gently shoved the jacket off her shoulders. “Blackie? You want a pet that bad, why don’t you move in with Max?”

“Max isn’t housebroken.” Pia winced as she pulled her arms from the jacket. “Where is he, anyway?”

“That’s a good question,” Joe murmured. “Quentin, you want to go back and see where he went—he might have followed another trail. If that yellow dog circles back...”

“Do I have to save his ass?” Quentin asked.

“You do unless you want me to tell your secrets, Quentin,” Pia said, working her face into a scowl.

Cursing, Quentin swiped her flak jacket from the ground and headed back the way they’d come.

“You must be feeling better if you want to boss him around,” Joe said.

“I am.” Thank God for a vamp’s rapid healing. She could actually draw a deep breath. “Just help me to my feet.”

“You are one stubborn woman.” Joe bent to place his shoulder beneath her arm and helped her rise to her feet.

Pia swayed and then pushed away from Joe. “We have to look for Max.”

They walked back to the boardwalk. Joe assisted her as she climbed the steps. A crowd of black-clad SU officers hovered outside the Piki Tiki. The first of the body bags passed out the door.

Pia scanned the crowd, anxious to find Max to know he’d escaped injury. But she was disappointed when she didn’t see him.

“He can take care of himself,” Joe said, quietly.

“Is it so obvious I’m worried about him?”

“You’re biting your lip.”

“Who are you worried about?” Max asked, from directly behind her.

Pia screeched and whirled. She launched herself against his chest, throwing her arms around his neck to hug him hard. “Where the hell have you been?”

“Hunting.” He hugged her back.

Pain shot through her side and she gasped.

Max dropped his arms and tried to step back.

Pia wouldn’t let go of his neck and snuggled close to his chest again.

“Are you all right?” His arms closed gently around her this time.

“Mmmm. Fine now.” She closed her eyes and rubbed her hands up and down his back. His bare back. Tilting her head, she gazed up at him. “What happened to your jacket and shirt?”

“I wrestled with a wolf—they stink.”

Something in his eyes told her there was more to the explanation. But she’d kept secrets. In fact, she still had one, so she figured he was entitled to a few of his own. She snuggled close to his chest and inhaled. He did smell like a dog—just like Blackie had.

“Next time, let someone know where the hell you’ve gone,” Quentin said.

Pia lifted her head to watch his approach. When she did, she noticed for the first time the angry red scratches on Max’s torso and the deeper cuts on the side of his neck. “Why the hell did you remove your flak jacket?”

Max's smile was strained. "So I could move faster."

"You need to have those seen to."

"Later. We have some clean-up here, before I can leave."

"For fucksake, get out of here," Quentin said, waving him away. "Stow your gear in the SU van. Joe will make sure it gets turned in. Go to hospital."

Max stiffened.

Pia reached for his hand. "He's right—even if it's Quentin saying it—you need to go to the hospital." She tugged to pull him along.

Max walked stiff-legged behind her. When they reached the car, he pulled the keys from his pocket.

"You're not driving," Pia said, holding out her hand, palm-up.

Max planted his hands on his hips—and intimidating look from such a large man. "If your driving is as dismal as your shooting, I want to be behind the wheel."

She jutted her chin. She wasn't backing down from this one. "You're not driving. You could pass out on the way to the hospital."

"I'm not hurt that badly—and what about you? You need to have those ribs seen to."

"I'm a vampire. I heal fast." The way the blood zoomed through her veins now, she was well on her way to recovery. Arguing with Max ought to be prescribed for pain-relief.

"I'm only scratched."

"Those don't look like scratches to me," she said, pointing at his neck. "Give me the keys."

He sighed and looked toward the star-bright sky, stubborn tension bunching the muscles of his arms. "You're not going to leave me alone, are you?"

Pia grew still. "Is that what you want?" she said softly.

Max lowered his gaze. He stared at her for a long moment.

So long, Pia worried he would tell her something she didn't want to hear.

Instead, he laid the keys in her palm. "Take me home."

She closed her hand around the keys and dragged in a relieved breath. "To the hospital, you mean."

"I have supplies at home. You can take care of me there."

Taking him home meant he wanted to have sex. Her heart leapt at the prospect. "Is your tetanus up to date?"

"Last year. And werewolves don't carry rabies." He raised her chin with a finger, and his thumb caressed her lower lip. "Take me home, Pia."

Although framed as a demand, his voice held invitation. A warm, softly feminine feeling, a feeling she hadn't known for a very long time, settled inside her chest.

But the wounds on his neck were blood-encrusted. He might not think he needed a hospital, but she couldn't bear it if something bad were to happen. She pushed his head up to get a closer look at his neck. "Were you bitten?"

Max's expression shuttered. "I'm fine. Take me home, Pia."

She jerked open the car door. "Fine. Get in the car."

Max let himself into the car and leaned back against the seat.

She started the car, and then looked over at him. "You'd tell me if one of those bastards bit you, wouldn't you? I wouldn't want you going all furry on me."

Max leaned his head against the headrest and closed his eyes, shutting out Pia's face. Her worry warmed his heart.

If she only knew...

Chapter Seven

Pia pushed Max into a chair in the kitchen, and busied herself with the contents of his first aid kit. If she thought he might let her, she'd just lick the wounds until they closed. But she was pretty sure Max would be funny about vampire "gifts".

"You don't have to do this," Max said quietly. "I'll get a shower."

"Just stop, will you?" She grabbed cotton gauze and peroxide and hurried back. "Is this a macho thing? You have some ugly scratches."

His hand closed over hers. "I didn't bring you here to nurse me."

"You didn't bring me here—I did the driving." She uncapped the bottle. "These scratches could get infected."

Standing between his open legs, she poured some of the peroxide on the gauze and wiped at the bloody wounds on his chest. "I should really be pissed. You made me wear that heavy vest, but you couldn't keep yours on for five minutes."

"It got in the way," he murmured.

The blood dissolved, and she used a fresh piece of gauze to blot the rest of the dark brown smears from his chest and neck. When she was finished, she drew back her hand. The wounds were nearly healed. Only faint pink tracings remained on his skin.

Her mouth gaped and she looked up. *How was it possible?* Her gaze locked with his.

Max's mouth curved into a feral grin. "I told you I didn't need it."

She swallowed, suddenly uneasy. His stare was too intent—too predatory. "You heal fast."

"Fast as you," he whispered. He trailed his fingers from her shoulders to her wrists.

Shivering with equal parts of fear and desire, she stepped back. His hands closed on her hips. She jerked away—but he held her fast. The strength of his grip was surprising—*inhuman*.

She pushed back a niggling suspicion, one that would make her desire for this man a betrayal to her own kind. "Y-you must have some metabolism," she said, dropping the gauze to the floor.

"It's hereditary. All my line shares the same...metabolism." His eyes glinted as he pulled her closer. His legs were a vise, holding her immobile.

Pia's heart thundered. Her brain screamed caution, but her body melted against his.

His hands swept up her back to tangle in the hair at her nape. He jerked her head back and brought his lips to her neck.

If what her mind suspected were true, she shouldn't trust him not to harm her when she was so vulnerable to his bite—but *she did*.

"We share the same appetites." He bit her neck, hard enough to bruise, but not break her skin.

Pia's breath caught, and her body trembled. She was either in very deep shit here or Max had a *Psycho* fetish. Whichever didn't matter at the moment, her mind focused on the sensual bombardment his body and mouth were delivering. She struggled to offer one last coherent response, "Do you all the share physical characteristics? Your strength? Your incredible...organs?"

"Yes!" His tongue trailed up her neck, and he licked the lobe of her ear.

Her hands clenched the tops of his shoulders. "Then your women are blessed."

“They’re too few.”

He was telling her something here, but all she could register was the heat of his mouth, gliding back down her neck. “You only need one at a time.”

“Huh!” His breath gusted with single laugh. “You’re in denial, baby.”

“Who’s doing the denying?” She was so aroused her skin tingled everywhere they touched, and she wished he’d just stop talking. “I’m getting hornier by the second—*Max*.” She pressed her body to his, mashing her breasts against his chest and grinding her sex into his enormous erection.

He let go of her hair and gripped the neck of her shirt. “I need you naked,” he said, with a harsh edge to his voice that tightened the coil of sensual tension that curled inside her belly. He ripped her shirt apart.

The bra quickly followed, and Pia reveled in the violence of his act and his hot, hungry stare. Her nipples beaded, hard as pebbles. She gasped when his hands covered her and squeezed.

She shoved down her skirt past her hips, but it bunched where his thighs clasped hers together. “I want to be naked for you, Max.”

He spread his thighs, but his mouth never left her skin, sliding over her shoulders.

Pia pushed her skirt lower until it drifted down to puddle around her feet. Then she sought his zipper and opened his pants. His erection fell into her hand, and she wrapped her fingers around him and squeezed.

“Yes,” he moaned, and his chest rose and fell faster against hers, further exciting her nipples.

Pia climbed onto his strong, splayed thighs.

His hands sought her buttocks, steadying her as she straddled him.

Then she centered the blunt tip of his cock at the opening of her vagina and sank down. He felt thick as a tree trunk, stretching her inner walls. When at last her pussy met the wiry hair at the base of his cock, she groaned, letting her legs spread and dangle on either side of his widespread thighs.

She wriggled her hips, circling until every last inch of his length lodged deep inside her pussy. “We have a problem now,” she said, nuzzling his neck.

“I can’t think of one.” His hands gripped her ass and pushed her hips forward and back, creating a burning friction.

"But I can't move." She scraped the turgid points of her breasts across his chest. "I need to move."

He raised his head. "But you can," he said, his voice slightly hoarse with strain. His next kiss was straight on, noses touching. His open mouth pressed to hers, then withdrew with a suctioning smack. "Rock on me."

Pia rolled her hips, but the movements weren't the deep, gliding ones she needed. Without something upon which to brace her knees, she couldn't rise. "I need more."

"Is this what you want?" His hands pushed her hips back and forth harder, grinding her pubis into his curly nest.

Nice, but not the sort of sweet violence she needed now. "Not quite."

"I aim to please. How about this?" He raised her by her bottom, then shoved her down again.

She shuddered and moaned, "Closer." Undulating her hips, she scraped her clit into his crisp hairs. A shock of electricity shot straight to her core, and she strained closer. "Do it again."

"No. Too late," he said, his voice raspy. "This isn't about you now."

Pia opened her eyes. "Not fair," she gasped. "I'm not even close."

The hungry, dangerous glint in Max's eyes gave her heart a jolt. Hot arousal gushed from deep inside her while her vagina tightened its grip around his cock.

Max groaned. "I need more." He pushed and shoved her hips, grinding deeper, faster. "I've gotta fuck you hard."

Pia sobbed and flung her arms around his neck. "Please, Max. I need that too."

He rose from the chair in one easy, powerful motion.

Pia wrapped her legs around his lean waist to keep him lodged inside her, but he didn't go far. Her back met the cold wood of the door.

He pressed his forehead against hers. "Your ribs—can you take it rough?"

Pia placed her palms on his cheeks, and whispered, "Rattle the door off its hinges, baby." She tilted her head and kissed him, slipping her tongue into his mouth to mate with his.

Max tasted like sin. Lusty, dirty sin.

He dipped his knees and heaved upward. His cock stroked deep inside her cunt. There wasn't time to savor the sensations because he thrust again, hard. The kiss ended when she had to gasp for breath.

He thrust again and again, until Pia calibrated the climb to the summit by the sweat that gathered on his forehead and back, and the excess arousal smearing her thighs. He battered her body against the door, his own breaths becoming labored, harsh, grunting as he drove up inside her.

The door didn't rattle—it thudded loudly. Almost as loudly her moans. This was what she'd needed. A hot, powerful claiming.

Then he changed the length of his thrusts. Angling side to side, pistoning his hips, until the heat deep inside her cunt burned like flickering licks of flame that spread outward, tightening her legs and belly.

“Max! I'm coming, Max!”

“Christ, don't wait. Give it to me.”

“Fuck me! *Max!*” Her shouts echoed around the kitchen, punctuated by the pounding on the door. Pia had the fleeting thought that anyone listening might think an earthquake rumbled through the house. But that was her last lucid thought as Max drove her body to climax.

She gasped, arching her back against the door, her pussy convulsing around his cock, squeezing, milking him for the essence of his life force.

How long it lasted, she'd never be sure, for afterward she clung to him like a wilted vine, sobbing.

Max pressed her body to the door and speared his fingers through her hair, lifting her face from the crook of his neck. “Stop crying, Pia. I'm sorry. So sorry.”

But she couldn't stop. She clutched him tightly, her legs squeezing around his waist to hold him to her, afraid to break the connection lest she lose the feeling—the glowing one that burst like sun above the rim of the earth at morning. A sight she'd been denied for three quarters of a century.

“I swore I wouldn't hurt you.” Max said, stroking her hair. “Didn't mean to. Fuck!”

Finally, she heard what he was saying and opened her eyes. “Baby, you didn't hurt me.” She kissed his chin, his jaw.

“I was too rough.” His eyes were filled with regret.

She kissed the side of his mouth. “No. You were perfect. Too perfect. I didn't know I could feel so much.”

“But—”

She pressed her lips to his—a close-mouthed blessing. “You weren’t too rough with me. I promise. Would you be standing in a puddle if I hadn’t liked it?”

He blinked and a smug smile tilted the corners of his lips. “I am? Damn, why do I still have my shoes on?”

“I needed your violence every bit as much as you,” Pia said, holding his gaze, willing him to understand she’d accept his sensual deflections—*for now*. “Remember, I’m a vamp. I’m not some frail human girl. I can take everything you give me.”

His eyelids dropped halfway. She recognized that look. He was considering what she’d just said and wondering what new limits he could push.

Pia felt a smile curve her lips. “Seeing the possibilities, now? Hmmm, lover?”

* * * * *

Max stood back from the window. The blanket he’d hung ought to keep the sun at bay. He grunted. He didn’t miss the irony of the care he took with this vampire woman.

He turned to the bed and Pia. She slept curled on her side. Knowing what she was, he still felt uneasy at her stillness. But she definitely needed the rest—she’d fallen asleep before dawn in mid-sentence.

Equally jaded, he smirked, feeling self-satisfied—his balls were drained dry. The woman could fuck. She could take anything he gave her.

He set his alarm, crawled back beneath the covers, and pulled her into his arms, draping her just the way he wanted—her head nestled in the crook of his shoulder, her thigh nudging his spent cock. When they awoke, he wanted her to be right where he needed her to be for a little dusk delight.

Now that she slept and wouldn’t attempt to distract him with her sexy demands, his mind was free of the clouding lust that had driven his body the past hours. Free to contemplate the woman lying beside him and the mystery of her sudden appearance in his life.

Her arrival in his life hadn’t been a coincidence. That much he was sure of. The male vamps knew her well. He guessed she was an enforcer, of some sort, for the northern council—the one that had spawned the new community of vampire masters here. And her latest assignment had been him. But to what purpose?

His hatred for all vampires wasn’t a secret. But he’d done his job, suppressing his natural animosity for their species. If not accepting of them—he’d tolerated them.

And he didn’t think he posed any great threat to their organization. He was just one lone werewolf.

So what had changed?

The only thing that came to mind was the woman no one spoke of in “mixed” company—Joe’s wife, Lily.

Max had seen her only once on the day Joe returned to Vero after his “sabbatical”. Max had known instantly what she was. A breeder in heat. Her scent had been provocative, drugging—an aphrodisiac so potent he’d hardened to oak in seconds.

Others of his kind hadn’t missed her arrival either. The male wolves had caught a hint of her tantalizing scent in the air that first day, and they’d been restless ever since to discover her whereabouts.

He wished he hadn’t been in the conference room when Joe arrived, looking haunted, bitter. The woman with the cinnamon-colored hair had entered behind him, her pinched, white face betraying how overwhelmed and frightened she felt.

Max’s body had stirred at her irresistible allure—but she belonged to Joe. So he fought it, tamped it down viciously. Eventually, her heat had passed and the hormonal dementia it had created dwindled.

He wished now he’d never mentioned her to Alec. Ever since, his brother had reminded him of his duty to his family. Of the possibility that Lily could breed a vampire—the likes of which would be more powerful and horrifying than the creatures born from a vampire’s bite.

The kind that had killed their mother.

Max and the other pack members had been raised on tales of the Old Wars. They’d sat fascinated as any child listening to stories of heroic deeds and mythical monsters, little realizing the truth behind the tales.

The stories bred fear of beasts that walked the night, undead bogeymen and women who’d eat a cub if they caught one alone.

That fear became an abiding hatred, reinforced by the training wolves received as they approached their majority. Training that helped them blend among humans, so they might protect themselves and their families from detection. Training that helped them master the monster within and prepared them for The Final Battle for dominion over the Earth.

Max had trained and learned along with the others, but his time living a “blended” life, had taught him how insular his upbringing had been—and how narrow the vision of the clan’s future.

Now, he recognized the hatred he was taught for what it really was—prejudice. The woman beside him had changed his heart—opened his mind to the possibility that wolf and vampire

could coexist. Her dark passion ignited a sensual storm that paled in comparison to the purely animalistic urges Joe's wife had stirred. He was afraid he might be in love with her.

But what was he to do about his brother? And was it really possible a breeder was going to bear an abomination—a vampire child? As far as he knew, no one in his immediate clan had ever seen one. His mother's death had been attributed to one—but Max wondered how much truth lay in the tale. Had it been embellished to support their fears, to invigorate their fight? There was no living wolf left to corroborate the tale.

The only thing Max could think to do was discover whether Lily truly carried Joe's child. If she didn't, he could put Alec off her scent, and Max wouldn't be forced to make an impossible choice—between killing Joe's wife and offspring or disloyalty to his clan.

But how could he learn the truth when she never set foot outside the Masters' fortress? It was a given *he'd* never be invited inside.

He could think of only one way to get inside The Compound. To accomplish it, he'd have to betray the woman sleeping in his arms. His arms tightened around her as if he should protect her from his intent.

He could tell himself he was laying to rest issues that stood between himself and his vampire teammates—or attempt to justify his actions by claiming Pia and the others hadn't been honest with him about her presence in Vero either. Neither felt honorable, and neither was the truth.

The truth was, he had to know whether a creature like the one who killed his mother grew inside the belly of his best friend's wife. If one did, he'd have to destroy the woman to prevent its birth.

Killing vamps had never been hard—until he'd had to spend time with them. Now they had names and faces he'd remember—soft brown hair and silky skin he'd never tire of touching.

He hoped like hell he found nothing in The Compound. And would never have to make the choice.

Worse, if he was discovered inside the Masters' dwelling, he'd lose Pia and likely his life.

* * * * *

Something wet and slightly rough lapped his balls. Before he even opened his eyes, he pulsed his hips against Pia's mouth.

Seemed Pia was still working on proving a vampire lover's advantages.

Max could definitely attest to the indescribable pleasure her long cat-like tongue was giving him as she rasped his balls and shaft. He groaned and threaded his fingers through her hair, tugging to encourage her to move higher.

A low, throaty laugh vibrated against his flesh. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you, but I woke up horny.”

“Sorry, my ass,” he said, growling with feigned irritation. He peered at her through slitted eyelids.

She sat perpendicular to his body, bent forward so her hair caressed his thighs and groin. Her eyes were closed; her lips glided along his penis until she reached the crown. Then she swallowed him, suctioning strong, her cheeks hollowing as she wrung pleasure from his core. One hand continued to massage his balls, tugging gently, while the other grasped the base of his cock and worked up and down his long shaft. By her expression, she was sucking the most delicious lollipop imaginable.

God, she was beautiful.

Max reached for a breast and plucked a velvety bead. Her hips wriggled and he took the hint, moving his hand to her buttocks. He lifted his hand and smacked her.

She gasped and sucked harder.

Her reaction encouraged him to experiment. He squeezed one cheek, rubbed it in circular strokes until it heated, then slapped her again.

Pia shuddered and her belly lowered, raising her buttocks against his hand. Her teeth grazed the tender flesh of the head of his cock—her tongue fluttered inside the tiny eye.

“Let me suck your cunt, sweetheart,” he said, his voice harsh with need.

Without breaking the rhythm of her bobbing head, she crawled over him, centering her pussy above his mouth. She drew back from his cock. “If I have to tell you what to do, I won’t be sucking you off,” she said, her voice tense.

“Then tell me with your body.” His hands reached around her to grasp her buttocks, and he lifted his mouth to her fragrant, moist cunt. One lap of his tongue and he knew she was very close to coming—she dripped creamy excitement. Not one to pass up a gift, Max licked the excess moisture from her thighs, her plump, down-covered lips and finally traced the edges of her delicate folds. The salty taste of her had him growling deep inside his throat.

He decided it was time to show her one of the advantages to be gained from having a lupine lover.

His tongue lapped her flesh, like a dog drinking from a bowl, his tongue caressing the length of her slit in quick strokes.

“Oh my God. Max! That’s incredible!”

He grinned and lifted his hips to press his cock against her mouth—a not-so-subtle reminder that she had work to do as well.

She opened her lips and bobbed her head down his cock until he touched the back of her hot throat.

Satisfied she was back on track, he nuzzled between the inner folds of her sex and slid his tongue inside her, licking the inner walls of her vagina as far as his wolf's tongue could reach.

Pia's thighs trembled, but she continued to move on him, her hands and mouth gliding in unison, if perhaps a little jerky now.

Max rolled his day-old beard against her hooded clit and continued to stroke her with his tongue. Then he squeezed the mounds of her buttocks and glided his fingers toward the crevice between them.

Pia's shudder racked her body, and she mewled—the sound making a shivery vibration on his cock that hardened his balls to stones.

Close. She was so close he could feel the slow, building spasms inside her channel and taste her fresh enthusiasm.

He circled a thumb over her anus and observed a marked increase in her quivering. Her breaths came in shallow pants. Feeling powerful, he pressed the blunt, thick ball of his thumb inside, noting the tightness of the orifice. He nearly spilled his seed then and there at the thought of pushing his cock past that tight little ring of muscle.

The warm glove of her mouth lifted. "Oh Max!" Pia gasped. "I'm right there. Please, I'm gonna come."

"Don't stop sucking me, Pia," he said, making his voice low and dangerous. "If you do, I won't give you what you really want." He licked her cunt as a reminder.

She dipped her cunt lower over his mouth. "What if I give you something...unexpected," she said, her voice husky. "Something hotter than you've ever imagined?"

He knew she was talking about the gift of a vampire's bite. Somehow, the thought of Pia drinking his lifeblood wasn't distasteful. If he allowed it, she'd know what he was. Perhaps now was the time to tell her—when she was so wrapped up in her own arousal, she wouldn't be able to stop until she'd fed well. Perhaps when she had the essence of his life warming her belly, she'd be ready to listen...to understand. "Show me, baby."

Her hands stroked his belly and thighs. "I'll be the best you ever had, Max. Promise."

Max turned his head and kissed her inner thigh. "Baby, you already are. Just don't bite my cock."

Chapter Eight

“I promise you’ll only feel a prick,” Pia said. “You’ll love it.”

He bit the tender skin of her thigh. “Maybe, but just the thought of...”

Pia laughed, a strangled sound that ended on a groan. “All right. I won’t bite your cock.”

Max rolled his chin on her pussy. “And what do you want, baby?”

She groaned again. “You’re not going to make me say it, are you?”

“Uh-huh.” He rubbed her anus with his thumb. “Tell me.”

“Oh, do that again.” Her hips pulsed back, then forward, until she rocked. Shallow pulses, Max wasn’t sure she was even aware she made. “I want...you to fuck my ass with your fingers while you lick me with your incredible tongue,” she said, her words coming out in a rush.

“All right. I think I can handle that. You ready?”

“Are you?”

Damn, she sounded sexy. Max didn’t answer. Instead he put two fingers in his mouth and wet them. Then he stroked his *incredible* tongue deep inside her body while pushing one finger past the tight ring of her asshole. He rotated his hand, easing her tight muscles before pressing another finger inside.

“Sweet, sweet Jesus!” she moaned. “Oh, that hurts so good.” Her body told him how much she approved when her cunt tightened rhythmically around his tongue. Pia went to work, gliding her tongue up and down his cock, lubricating it so her hands glided easily along his shaft. Then she licked his balls.

At first, Max felt only the rasp of her wet tongue, and then he noticed a slight, burning that turned to a tingling sensation. He recognized the cause—she’d released the enzymes in her mouth, the ones that numbed the flesh of her hosts. *Christ*, she was going to bite his balls!

Max’s thighs tightened, his cock felt ready to explode—if she bit him there, he wouldn’t last a second. He had to distract her.

With his tongue stroking her vagina and the fingers of one hand pumping inside her ass, he brought his free hand to the top of her pussy and pushed back the skin covering her clitoris. He found the hard, slick knot and touched it with the pad of his finger.

Pia widened her stance, bringing her cunt lower still. Her belly quivered now against his. Then he felt her mouth close around his balls, and he tensed.

There, where his sac snuggled against his groin, he felt the prick of her teeth. She hadn't lied—the pain was slight and he relaxed a fraction. Then she drew blood, and he heard her gasp.

He didn't give her time to think about what her tongue tasted—about the undeniable fact his wolf's blood revealed. He rubbed her clit, working his fingers back and forth, faster, as he finger-fucked her ass and laved her juicy channel.

Pia shuddered and drew again, sucking hard, pulling blood from his extremities in a rush of cold-hot sensation that brought him to the brink, but held him there. His cock was so hard the skin that clothed his shaft felt tight enough to burst. His balls, nestled in the cavern of her mouth, grew hot and impossibly harder, but she controlled his release, keeping him at the brink until he thought his heart would explode in his chest it beat so fast.

Then she moaned and her hips rocked, and he was flying, his cock erupting in a geyser of cum that never seemed to end.

Pia's cunt convulsed and she cried out, the spasms stroking his tongue. Until they both slowed their rhythmic shudders.

She licked the punctures closed and let go of his cock, laying her head on his thigh as she dragged air into her lungs.

Max eased his fingers from her ass and gave her one last soothing lap of his tongue and then swept his arms around her hips, holding her tightly for a long moment. Giving her time. Time he knew she used to gather herself, to consider what she'd just learned.

Then she tensed and struggled against his hold.

He let his arms fall to his side and lay on the bed while he watched her climb off him and turn.

Her expression was wary, then her eyes widened. "It was you on the beach!"

Max nodded, waiting to see what she'd do next.

"I didn't want to believe..." Her lips twisted in self-disgust. "I smelled wolf all over you. I just wanted to think you'd rolled on the ground with one of those monsters—but I *knew* better when I cleaned your wounds."

"I wondered how long it would be before you pieced it together," he said softly.

Pia's cheeks grew red as her anger built. "I didn't want to believe what my brain was telling me all along. But you knew what you were doing—deflecting me with sex. You must have thought I was incredibly stupid. Probably laughed at me the entire time."

Max kept his face solemn and he shook his head. "Never."

But she acted like she hadn't heard him, lashing out at him. "I should have known. You're stronger than any human I've ever encountered. And your tongue! No human has a tongue like that."

He gave her a crooked smile. "There are advantages to having a werewolf lover."

Pia's eyes narrowed. "I would never have fucked you that first time if I'd known."

"Well, now you can't deny it." He kept his voice deliberately mild. He needed her to let loose all over him, so he prodded. "What are you going to do about it, sweetheart?"

Pia launched herself at him, her hands curved into claws, her mouth open, teeth protracted to slash at his flesh.

He caught her and rolled, pinning her to the bed.

She bucked, nearly unseating him, but he straddled her body at the tops of her thighs to keep her legs in check, and held her arms above her head. "Listen to me."

"No! You're a goddamn werewolf. I knew it! You were too good to be human."

"You knew it all along. Don't pretend otherwise." He pressed her hands into the mattress. "In the back of your mind you had to know. Did it excite you? Having an animal between your legs?"

"Bastard!" She bucked harder, panting with exertion.

Max felt his belly tighten in renewed arousal. "Did you like what my tongue did to you? Would you like a wolf's cock fucking you?"

"Get...off...me!" she said between gritted teeth. "We don't mix. It's impossible. We're mortal enemies, and it's my duty to kill you."

Max held her, not an easy task since she was strong and writhed like a snake. He ignored his arousal stirring between his legs. "Mine too, love. But I saved your ass. Doesn't that tell you something?"

Her eyes blazed with anger and betrayal. "It only tells me you're more devious than the hounds who slaughtered those vampires." She lifted her head and banged her forehead hard against his chin.

Max tasted blood from his split lip. "Pia, stop fighting me. I'm not going to hurt you."

"And I should believe you?" she yelled. "You lied to me."

Max heard the hurt and confusion in her voice. "I never lied."

“Then you should have told me.”

“I just did. I let you bite me for fucksake!”

She halted her struggles. “You should have told me,” she repeated, this time her voice broke on a whimper.

“Like you told me you’re a vampire?” he asked softly.

“That’s not the same!”

“But it is, baby. What was I supposed to say? ‘Hey, Pia. I’m a werewolf.’ Could I trust you not to tell the others? I work surrounded by your kind. How long do you think they would have let me live?”

“They aren’t monsters!”

“And I am?”

Her eyes filled with tears. “Damn you!”

“Sweetheart.” He sighed and let go of her hands.

She didn’t fly at him. She covered her face and sobbed.

Max climbed off her and gathered her into his arms.

“Wh-what are we going to do?” she asked, burrowing her head into the crook of his shoulder.

He stroked her hair and her back. He didn’t know what to say.

* * * * *

From a distance, Max heard the muffled rattle of his garage door opening and the roar of a motor. Alec was back. He glanced at the clock. It was nearly dusk.

With Pia sleeping like the de—well, like a vampire, Max decided not to join his brother in the kitchen. Alec could eat his way through the groceries for all he cared. He had more important things to consider—like the woman lying in his arms and his future, now that he’d been outed.

He wouldn’t ask Pia to keep his secret. Too many weighed on his conscience as it was. Besides, an idea had planted a seed. One that could potentially grow to bridge their worlds.

The garage door closed and Max heard a car engine rev. Alec was in a hurry. Max settled his head in his pillow, ready to return to sleep, and then a niggling thought brought him wide awake.

The golden wolf. Not so unusual a shade. But he remembered something—something masked by his transformation the evening before. A scent. One *familiar*.

Max rolled out of the bed and quickly donned a pair of sweatpants. Then he headed to the garage. He flicked on the light switch. As usual, Alec hadn't bothered to give the bike a wash before returning it. As meticulous as he was about his appearance and his own belongings, he wasn't careful with Max's things.

Max knelt beside the bike and sniffed. Above the scent of gasoline, rubber, and oil he smelled traces of wolf. And on the seat, beneath a leather strap, he found a tuft of hair—from a golden wolf's coat—and a smear of blood.

A cold knot of anger settled in his belly. Damn Alec!

* * * * *

Max quietly entered Alec's apartment and followed rustling sounds down the hallway to his bedroom. He eased open the door to see Alec slinging clothing into a duffel. "Little brother, what have you done?"

Alec froze, but kept his back to him. "What you should have been doing. Killing vamps."

"If your cause is so righteous, why are you sneaking away?"

"Because you'd never approve. You always follow some rulebook the rest of us haven't read and don't understand."

"You killed humans. What do you think our pack will think about that?"

Alec's broad shoulders tensed. "They'll understand. Those humans were garbage. They fed vampires, willingly. Besides, I didn't kill them. I just couldn't stop—"

"You couldn't control those mindless beasts you made. Could you, brother?"

"No." Alec turned, his gaze was fevered. "I didn't intend for it to happen. We talked about it beforehand, but they seemed crazed by bloodlust."

"It was you at that bar last night, too. You knew how unstable your cubs were, but you brought them there anyway."

"Yeah, and we would have killed every last vamp in that bar." Alec picked up a shirt, wadded it into a messy bundle and stuffed it into his bag. "What of it? You stopped me from killing your girlfriend. Your *vamp* girlfriend." He tossed the duffel aside and turned, his fists clenched at his sides. "She had your scent all over her. Can you imagine how sickening it was to discover you'd fucked one of those creatures? You! My own brother?"

Max felt his body go cold. “Go home, Alec. Don’t come back. If you do, I’ll have to kill you.” He turned on his heel and walked away.

“You’d kill your own?” Alec screamed after him. “For what? That bitch? That fucking vampire whore?”

Max left the apartment, climbed on his bike, and sped to the station. He needed to see Pia. Needed to hold her and remind himself why he was turning his back on his own kind.

* * * * *

Pia slid the keys to the sedan across the conference table.

Joe raised an eyebrow. “What’s this? Max still not feeling well? He didn’t drive you?”

She shook her head. “No, he left me a note to say he’d meet me here.”

The conference room grew still. Pia glanced around the table and noted for the first time that only vamps were in the room—Dylan, Quentin, and Joe.

“He was on his bike then?”

Pia wondered at Joe’s pointed question. His gaze was too alert for it to be a casual inquiry. “I’m not sure. I haven’t seen a bike. Why? What’s going on?”

“The team ran a check on all the vehicles parked along the boardwalk last night,” Dylan said, his voice even—a little too controlled. “Max’s motorbike was among them.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Neither do we,” Dylan said. “That’s why we asked.”

“But he didn’t drive there on a bike. He arrived with Joe and me.”

“What do we really know about Max?” Quentin asked.

Pia turned to Joe. “He was your friend before you turned.”

“We drank beer,” Joe said, his eyes narrowing, “and watched each other’s asses on the job, but I wouldn’t say we were ever bosom buddies. I didn’t even know he had a brother in town.”

That caught her short. “A brother?”

“We ran some checks on my old buddy. Max has some deep, dark secrets.”

“We’re thinking he has some big hairy ones actually,” Quentin said.

Pia blushed guiltily.

“You know, don’t you?” Quentin asked softly.

She raised her head reluctantly, afraid they’d read Max’s secret in her eyes.

Quentin’s narrowed gaze pinned her to the spot. “He’s a fucking werewolf, isn’t he?”

Fear for Max instantly dried her mouth. Her heart pounded in her chest.

Joe rose from his seat and grabbed her upper arms. “Pia! This is important. Is Max a werewolf?”

Tears pooled in her eyes and trickled down her face. “He’s not dangerous to us.”

His face grew red, his mouth twisted with anger. “Goddamn! Fuck!”

“Where is he?” Quentin asked, rising from his seat.

“H-he’s supposed to be here,” she whispered.

“All of us are supposed to be here,” he said, his voice deadly calm.

“Lily! He’s going after Lily!” Joe released her. “We’ve got to get back to The Compound.”

“He’s not like that,” Pia cried out. “He wouldn’t hurt her. Why would you think he’d hurt her?”

“If he finds out she’s carrying vamp kits, he’ll fucking kill her!” Joe shouted.

“She is?” Pia grew cold. “I wondered, but the women were so tight-lipped.”

“She’s having my babies—and if anything happens to her, I’ll kill anyone responsible.”

“Let’s go,” Dylan said. “Call the women on your cell, Quentin. Let them know we’re on the way.”

A phone. Shocked and feeling like events were whirling out of her control, Pia could only think that she needed to get to a phone. The second part of her mission was accomplished. Navarro needed to know his hunch was right, a breeder was pregnant by a vampire.

Instead, she let the men herd her outside the station and into the sedan. As the tires spit gravel, she wondered where the hell Max was and hoped he’d gone to ground. If the vampires found him, he was a dead man.

* * * * *

Finally, the sedan came to a screeching halt. Max waited long heart-stopping minutes before he opened the trunk latch and climbed out onto the driveway inside The Compound.

His impulsive action to hide inside the sedan had paid off. Although their voices were muffled, he'd discovered they were on to him. His life in Vero was forfeit. After he learned the truth for himself about Joe's wife, he would disappear. He couldn't return to the clan. He couldn't remain in his "blended" world either.

He couldn't have Pia.

Her tearful comments to the rest of the SU vamps had tugged at his heart. He was warmed by her defense.

"He wouldn't hurt us," she'd said. "He saved my life last night."

"I don't know what Max's game is," Dylan had said. "But there's a reason he's still hanging around. I just hope it's not the one I'm thinking. If it is, we have to hope like hell he hasn't had time to tell others of his kind."

What had they been talking about? They were speeding toward The Compound. He knew because Quentin called the women to tell them to make sure the place was locked up tight. The only reason Max could think for their desperation was that he'd been right about the woman, Lily.

But he had to know for sure.

Max kept to the bushes next to the house, looking for an unguarded entrance. Finally, he spied one, fifteen feet above him—a balcony. He stripped in the darkness and shifted into werewolf form, telling himself to follow the scent of the breeder. Hoping he'd remember his purpose once he'd changed.

The wolf backed up several feet from the wall and ran at it, leaping into the air to catch the railing above with his paws. Then he was over it, standing on the balcony. He heard voices within, raised in shouts. A woman—his woman—crying. His hackles rose on his shoulders and back. He lowered the door latch with his nose and crept inside the darkened room.

The room held faint traces of popcorn and beer, he rushed past sofas redolent with human and vampire scent to the door, which stood open. The light from a hallway shone like a beacon. He peered around the door into the hallway, raising his nose to catch scents in the air.

He smelled a woman with a muddled aroma—human-vampire-*breeder*. He knew he should follow it, but the other scent, his mate's, was the one that pulled him down the hallway to an open area.

A railing stood between him and the large, hollow-sounding room below. The voices came from there. The overriding odor of several vampires set his heart beating faster—he peered between the rails and found his woman surrounded by large male vampires. They emanated anger and

spoke harshly to his woman. Two human women, pregnant by their scent, and a vamp female hovered around the edges of the circle.

Then the male with hair the color of sunlight, lifted his face, his nose twitching. His gaze rose. He'd caught the wolf's scent.

Letting a warning growl build in his throat, the wolf leapt over the railing to land at the feet of the woman.

Pia screamed as a large black beast leapt into their midst. He whirled in front of her to face the group closing in around them, snarling, his long fangs bared in a feral grimace.

Weapons were drawn and aimed directly at his broad chest.

Oh God, Max! She threw herself over him, clasping her arms around his neck. "Don't shoot him!"

"Stand away from him," Joe yelled.

She held on to the bristling male wolf whose deep-throated growl raised goose bumps on her flesh. "You can't shoot him. I won't let you hurt him."

"He's here for Lily," Joe said, his face darkening, his face transforming into a vampire's mask.

Joe's leer was every bit as frightening to Pia as the rumble emanating from the wolf's chest. Still she clung to Max.

"Damn you! He'll kill her. Step aside, or I'll shoot you both."

"Joe, please," Lily said, clutching his sleeve. "He's surrounded anyway. Think!"

Joe hesitated. "Stand behind me, Lily. He'll have to come through me."

"Fine," she said, slipping behind him. "Be a hero. Just hold your fire."

Pia leaned close to Max's twitching ears. "Please baby. Come back to me. I need you to change now."

The wolf shuddered beneath her. The rumbling didn't lessen.

"Max! I love you. If you don't change, they'll kill you. They'll kill both of us. You'll leave them no choice." She hugged him hard. "Please, baby. Come back to me."

The wolf grew silent, his body tensing at every restless movement made by the men, but Pia sensed he listened. Some part of his animal brain heard her.

“I love you, Max. I trust you.”

From one moment to the next, the wolf shuddered and fell to his haunches. He whimpered as he curled on his side, then the hair covering his body seemed to melt away, his body grew broader, his legs straightened. Pia let go of his neck and watched as his face morphed into the one she loved.

“Max,” she sighed and threw herself against his bare chest.

He rolled to his back taking her with him. “Pia.” His fingers swept away the tears she hadn’t known were on her cheeks. “I heard you crying,” he said, his voice sounding rough and husky. “Did I also hear you say you love me?”

Pia gave him a smile, knowing her lips trembled, but not caring he saw how much he meant to her. “Yeah. I’m crazy in love with you.”

His hand cupped the back of her head and forced her down. His lips captured hers with a “Max” kiss—hard, forceful, passionate.

Pia opened her mouth and groaned, taking his incredible tongue into her mouth. Her hands smoothed over his bare chest and upward to cup his face.

“This opens a whole new avenue for my research,” Lily said. “And I’m never going to take a vamp’s word for a wolf’s attributes again.”

“Lily! Just keep that damn tape measure in your pocket,” Joe grumbled.

“Joe, you’re such a spoilsport,” Emmy murmured.

Chapter Nine

“This isn’t over,” Quentin said, his narrowed eyes telegraphing his deadly intent.

Max gently set Pia aside and sat up, leaning back on his hands so they could see they were occupied holding him up. “You’re right. I’m only the beginning of your problems.”

Joe stepped forward, his fists curled, but halted when his woman grabbed his sleeve. “And you’re going to tell us what they are?”

“I don’t blame you for thinking the worst,” Max said. “Yesterday, if I’d happened upon Lily, I might have killed her.”

Joe shook off Lily’s hand and took another step.

“He said might,” Pia interjected, scrambling to kneel at his side.

“What’s so different about today?” Dylan asked, his quiet tone not fooling Max a bit. His body was tensed, ready to spring into action.

Max held himself perfectly still. No use exciting the men into opening fire. “I’ve had time to think about things—about what all this means.”

“What? You found God?” Joe snorted. “Gimme a break.”

Max stared at his old friend. “Something like that. I found love. And it didn’t matter if it would be returned. I knew despite what I’d been taught all my life, I couldn’t let Pia be harmed last night.”

Pia’s gasp drew his gaze. Her face was pale, and her eyes glistened with tears. “Max, you don’t have to say it.”

He gave her a crooked smile. “I do. I’m naked—”

“Mmm-hmm.”

All eyes turned to Emmy O’Hara.

Her blue eyes widened, and she lifted her hands in mock-surrender. “I’m just agreeing. I can’t help looking. The man’s made of muscle. Hell, he’s got muscles on his muscle.”

Dylan’s glare would have quieted a hard man, but Emmy just grinned.

Max ignored her, staring instead at Pia whose cheeks reddened. “What I mean is I’ve got nothing to hide behind, sweetheart. I’m in love with you. You’re my match in every way. You’re a vampire and I’m a werewolf, but we’re more alike than any two people I know.”

“Did you join the force just to kill vampires?” Quentin asked.

Max didn’t try to hide a smirk—the man got on every last one of his nerves. “Mostly.”

“Well at least he’s honest,” Quentin murmured. “Stupid, considering who has a bead on him, but honest.”

“Still doesn’t explain what he’s doing here,” Joe said.

“We all know why I came.” Max nodded beyond Joe’s shoulder at Lily. “Your wife, Joe, is a magnet for werewolves.”

“And vampires,” Pia whispered.

Everyone turned to stare at Pia now.

"I have a secret of my own to share. When you called asking for help with Max," she said, avoiding his gaze, "you played right into Navarro's hands. He'd heard things—about a breeder who might be carrying a vampire's children."

"And what were your orders, Pia?" Dylan asked.

Max heard the steel edge in Dylan's voice.

Pia must have too because she shivered. "Just to report what I learned on the ground here."

"Navarro's one devious bastard," Quentin said.

Joe cursed. "That caps it. We're leaving, Lily. We have to hide."

"Lily needs the strength of our numbers," Dylan said. "She's safer staying here, even if her existence isn't a secret."

"Besides, who's going to watch over her during the day, Joe?" Darcy asked. "I may be pregnant now, but I'll pop in a few weeks. Remember, I'm the day shift."

"I don't fry in the sunshine either," Max said.

Laser-hot glares met his suggestion.

"Isn't that like leaving the fox to watch over the hens?" Joe asked, sneering. "You'd like that wouldn't you?"

"Hens!" Emmy spluttered.

Joe rolled his eyes. "Sorry, ladies."

"As I told you before Joe, I've changed my thinking about this war between our species."

"Because you love Pia?" Joe's eyebrows rose. "We're supposed to believe that? Just days ago, you aimed an arrow at Dylan's back."

"You son of a bitch!" Emmy shouted and lunged toward him.

Without dropping his aim, Dylan snaked an arm around her waist and pulled her back.

Emmy's fists rose. "What are you waiting for? Kill him!"

"I'm sorry for that," Max said. "I blamed you, all of your kind really, for the horror I saw in that house."

"But your kind committed those crimes," Quentin said.

Max shook his head. “Not my kind. That’s the point. I’m not like that. You’re not like that. I didn’t see that then.”

“You do now?” Pia asked, sliding her hand over his shoulder.

His heart felt squeezed in a tight fist at the look of love and trust in her misty eyes. “I thought there was a *good* reason werewolves and vampires were enemies. But I fell in love with you, knowing what you were, and I can’t think of one goddamn reason why it’s wrong.”

“Whoa, *everyone* can see how much you love Pia,” Emmy said, her anger of a moment ago replaced with a hint of wonder in her voice.

Max smirked, unashamed his cock reacted so fiercely to Pia’s presence beside him.

“Get him a blanket,” Dylan said, his voice filled with disgust.

“I think he needs a room,” Quentin murmured.

“He can’t stay here,” Joe said flatly.

“No, he can’t.” Dylan finally lowered his weapon and sighed. “You are a problem. Our wives won’t let us kill you, but we can’t trust you.”

Still leaning back on his hands, Max drew a sigh of relief when the others put away their weapons. “I understand it’ll take time.”

Dylan released Emmy and sat on the edge of a nearby sofa. His expression was troubled. “Why are you willing to help us? And leave Pia out of the equation.”

Max thought that last command was unreasonable. Pia was the end of his resistance to all things vampire. “I was raised on stories of the Old Wars between our species. I stayed on with the SU when you came aboard, because I waited for you to show your true colors. I expected you to grow in strength and take over. But it didn’t happen.

“I envied how strong you were—how organized. My kin are surviving at the brink of extinction. We talk about building our numbers to face you, but it never happens. We live in isolated communities—we haven’t learned to blend well with humans.”

Max felt his face tighten. “We don’t police ourselves. I think that’s our greatest failure. I’d like to learn from you.”

“Why?” Dylan asked. “So you can take the knowledge back and teach them how to defeat us?”

“No, so I can teach them how to get along with you so that we don’t have to live on the fringes.”

Dylan stared at him. “I think we have a lot to talk about, Max, but we can’t build trust in a night.”

Max nodded. He had his life still. One step at a time.

“We have a special room here—it’s contained.”

Max stiffened. “A holding cell?”

“It has a few more comforts than that.” Dylan gave Pia a wink. “You’ll stay the night. We’ll talk more tomorrow.”

“What about work?”

“We still have patrol, but we’ll be keeping you covered tonight.”

“I don’t suppose you can tell us about the werewolves?” Joe asked. For the first time this evening, his tone was a shade less than hostile.

Max drew a deep breath. “My brother was responsible. He left for New Orleans today. He’s gone home.”

“Did he leave any nasty reminders behind?” Quentin asked, flexing his shoulders and looking as though he halfway hoped he had.

“I don’t know,” Max said. “But I believe his remaining wolves were killed last night.”

“Damn.” Joe’s face reflected disappointment. “It could be a really boring night.”

Dylan rose and kissed Emmy on the lips then he turned to the men. “Let’s head out.”

Max rose slowly to his feet, happy to be included, even if the vamps would be watching him as closely as the criminals. He gave Pia a quick kiss and indicated to Joe to precede him. “After you.”

Joe’s eyes narrowed. “No, after you.”

Max lifted an eyebrow and led the way out of the room. “Didn’t know you had a thing for my ass, Garcia,” he said, over his shoulder.

“Just don’t drop the soap when you hit the showers.”

* * * * *

The women had gathered once again around the kitchen table for a little late night gossip. Waiting for the men to come back and see whether they’d killed Max had taken the toll on their patience. At least two of the women were well into their cups.

“Max-sh has an amazing body,” Emmy said, tilting the last of the whiskey to spill into Pia’s glass. “I couldn’t help noticing that.”

“I think everyone noticed you noticing,” Darcy said dryly.

“Yeah, he does,” Pia replied dreamily. “And an incredible tongue.”

Darcy blinked. “A doggie tongue?”

Pia wagged her eyebrows. “Oh, yeah.”

“So, what else does a werewolf have that’s different from the average vamp?” Darcy asked, leaning as far forward as her round belly would allow.

“I don’t know. He’s never...you know...” Pia blushed. “...um...transformed while we...”

“Never?” Emmy giggled. “Looks like you have lots-sh more surprises coming.”

“Max is surprising even when he’s in purely human form.”

“It seems like it might be a little weird, making love when he’s in his wolf’s clothes,” Lily said. “All that hair, and all. But I wonder if his cock is like a dog’s.” Her eyes brightened with intellectual curiosity.

“Lily!” Darcy gave her a playful slap, then turned to Pia. “Do you think?”

Pia shrugged. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

Darcy held up her hands, formed a circle with two fingers and poked another finger through the middle, and then cinched the “O” tight. “Well, when dogs mate, they kind of ‘lock’ together,” she said, emphasizing her point by trying to pull her finger free. “But his penis swells inside the bitch.”

“Swells? Like what, a balloon?” The thought was vaguely alarming, but the Jack Daniels kept her from worrying too much about it. Pia downed the last sip of her drink.

“I don’t know, I’ve never really been *that* into canine sex,” Darcy said, wrinkling her nose. “Thought you might know something.”

“I still can’t get past the ‘bitch’ part,” Emmy shook her head sadly.

“You’ll tell us, won’t you?” Darcy asked. “What it’s like, I mean.”

“Darcy!” This time Emmy swatted at Darcy’s arm, but missed and almost unseated herself.

“I have to live vicariously these days,” Darcy said, scowling. “I’d love to learn what sort of ‘nip and tuck’ games werewolves play.”

“Nip and tuck? I take it we’re not talking plastic surgery.”

“If I have to explain it—”

Emmy bounced on her seat. “Oh, I get it!”

Pia grinned at the two, her heart warming at the friendship they’d extended her. She truly felt like “one of the girls” tonight. “Sure, we women have to share information, otherwise we’d be totally left in the dark.”

Lily cleared her throat. “Speaking of locks, do you think Dylan was serious about keeping you guys confined?”

“I’m sure he was,” Pia said. “But I’m thinking that won’t be so bad.”

Emmy raised her glass. “I imagine not—all that muscle on his muscle has to be...filling!”

Dylan turned from the monitor trained on the kitchen.

“I can’t believe you spy on them,” Max said, a smile still stretching his lips at the women’s ridiculous conversation.

“It’s the only way to stay one step in front of them,” Quentin said, with a desperate note in his voice.

“Aye, they’re a devious lot.” Nodding toward Quentin, Dylan said, “You wouldn’t believe the plots we’ve had to squash. Quentin here can attest to that.”

Quentin’s narrowed eyes promised retribution. “Dylan, stuff it.”

“That’s precisely what Darcy did, wasn’t it?” Dylan’s dry wit had every male in the room, save Quentin, grinning. “But fortunately, we stopped the proliferation of that particular weapon in their arsenal of tricks.”

Thinking the men exaggerated the threat, Max turned back to the monitor.

Darcy was leaning over the table. “So what’s so special about his tongue?”

“Fuck, we need to get in there quick and break this up. She has that look in her eye.” Quentin turned the monitor off with the remote. “They’ll be sharing techniques next.”

“And that’s bad?” Max asked.

“It is when Darcy gets around to describing her finger method.” Dylan looked worried.

“Finger method?” Curiosity had him trailing the men to the kitchen. In their rush, they spilled inside the room.

The women turned at the noise.

Emmy shot to her feet. “What the hell? What happened to your faces?”

“Were you fighting?” Darcy’s hands were on her hips. “I thought you’d put that discussion aside until tomorrow. You were supposed to be working.”

“We were. We suffered these injuries in the line of duty.” Quentin looked to Max.

Max nodded, even though it was a blatant lie.

“What was-sh it?” Emmy asked. “Vampires? Werewolves?”

“No, honey.” Dylan stepped close to his wife and steadied her with an arm around her waist. “Just a bit of a barroom brawl. We finished it.”

Emmy’s snort conveyed her disgust. “Just like men! You’re not happy unless you’re bangin’ on something.”

Everyone turned to Emmy and stared.

Her face blushed an unattractive shade of embarrassed. “I’ll just shut up.”

“That’ll never happen,” Max said.

Joe’s eyebrows rose. “Did you just make a joke?”

Max trained his expression into a fierce scowl. “I was dead serious.”

The men laughed.

The women faced off, hands on their hips.

Joe raised his hand to his mouth to cover a cough. “I think those of us who still have a sex life ought to hit the sack.”

“Ladies, remember the details,” Darcy said.

Quentin slung his arm around her shoulder. “Sweetheart, you don’t think you’re going to be left out, do you hon?”

“Quentin, I’m as big as a house now.”

“And your point is?”

Darcy’s eyes grew misty. “Oh, Quentin.”

Dylan pulled Emmy back to his side. “Love, do you want to play a little ‘hide the sausage’?”

“Ooh, my favorite.” She let him lead her from the room without ever looking back. “You know how much I love organ meat.”

Joe nodded toward the door. “Lily? You coming?”

“I just thought of a few questions I’d like to ask Max. I hate to waste an opportunity to interview—”

“Lily! You’re coming to bed with me, just as soon as I lock these two in.”

“Unfortunate choice of words, don’t you think?” Darcy said, her lips stretching into a wide smile.

Lily nodded emphatically. “He said ‘locked’.”

“Yes, he did.”

Pia swung toward Max, a frown marring the lovely curve of her brows. “Were you guys eavesdropping?”

“Love, would we do anything so unethical?” Max felt sweat pop on his forehead. He hadn’t *exactly* told a lie.

Joe’s eyes widened. “We need to get you put away for the night.” He nodded toward the door. “After you.”

Max rubbed the edge of his tender jaw, a reminder of the trouble he could cause if he spilled the beans about the true nature of their evening. “No, after you.”

* * * * *

“What were you ladies talking about downstairs?” Max asked, as he threaded his fingers through Pia’s dark mane. “We heard you laughing when we walked in.”

Pia pulled away from sucking his cock and tilted her head. “Um...we were just talking about the latest surgical techniques.”

Max tugged her hair, bringing her lips back into contact with his aching sex. “You’re a terrible liar. But you’re entitled to your secrets.”

Peering up from the floor where she knelt in front of him, Pia’s expression grew solemn. “I don’t want any more secrets between us.”

Max could think of one he’d never tell. His brothers in the spy trade would carve out his innards if he ever let it slip. “Have I told you how beautiful you are?”

Her lips pouted. "You're changing the subject. If I could remember what I just said, I might figure out why."

He pressed his cock to those pursed lips, and she opened her mouth to swallow him.

She moaned deep in her throat as she rocked forward and back, suctioning him to within a heartbeat of orgasm.

"Like my cock, do you?" He peeked down through slitted eyes. "Baby, there's so much more I have to show you."

Pia grew still and reared back. "Um...Max?"

"Yes, love?" He hid his grin. He knew what was coming. Pia's curiosity had been aroused by the women's conversation.

"Is there anything different about the way you have sex when you're...transformed?"

He helped her to her feet, and then swung her up into his arms. Two steps and he deposited her in the center of the mattress. "It's a matter of degrees," he said, sliding over her. He sucked a turgid nipple into his mouth and groaned.

"Degrees of what?" she asked, excitement making her breathless.

"Transformation, love. But as a vampire, I'm sure you wouldn't be interested." He plucked the dampened nipple and switched to the neglected breast, tonguing the tip. "And I'm plenty satisfied with the sex we have. Don't worry about it."

"I would hate for you to feel the need to stifle any part of you."

The earnestness of her comment had him hiding another grin. "I'm not sacrificing love. Is that what you think?" After schooling his expression into one of concern, he crawled up her body. "Let me prove it to you."

She pressed her hands against his chest, holding him off. Her eyes glinted with a touch of irritation. "You know damn well what I'm talking about, don't you?"

A smile won out. "You're going to have to spell it out. I can't make any mistakes."

"You said the same thing that first night."

"I still mean it. I don't want to frighten you or disgust you. And I never want to hurt you."

Her gaze fell away. "Max, would you teach me about some of those...degrees?"

He leaned down and nuzzled her neck. "Tell me, what you want," he whispered next to her ear.

“How can I, when I don’t know what you offer?”

He raised his head, his nose an inch from hers as he stared into her wide eyes. “Well, I could transform into a wolf and lick you from your eyebrows to your toes. After your arousal reached fever-pitch, I’d nudge you with my snout until you rolled over, onto your knees, and then I’d mount you—doggie-style—from behind.”

Pia gulped and her heart hammered against her chest so hard, his changed rhythm to match.

“There’d be hair all over my body, and I’d rub all over you before catching your shoulder between my teeth. I’d need to hold you still to drive my cock deep inside—deeper than you’ve ever experienced. But we’d need a lot of time, because something special happens when I mate as a full wolf.”

Pia’s breath caught and her chest expanded.

Max leaned back and cupped her breast tenderly. “Or I could transform partway, just enough to give me added strength—”

“More muscle?” she asked, her voice scratchy.

“More muscles on my muscle—and fine, downy hairs to rub all over your body.”

Pia’s belly quivered against his.

He slid between her legs and nudged his sex against her portal. “But I’d still have fingers to tease these luscious nipples and a mouth to kiss yours. So what’s it to be?” He squeezed her breast. “You have to be specific.”

“I want you to fuck me, Max. Fuck me like an animal.”

Pressing a kiss on the tip of her nose, he said, “Baby, it’s the only way I know.”