

## *Chapter 1*

“He’s a dumbass vampire,” Miranda Crescent snarked into her iPhone as she ran down the stairs of the annex to the New York City Museum to catch a cab downtown to the financial district where the mysterious and powerful vampire, Lord Valadon, was waiting for her in his corporate fortress, ValCorp. “He has hundreds of people working for him! Any one of them could have brought my handbag to me, but does he even think of that? No!” As a cool evening breeze whipped her chestnut hair across her face, Miranda was able to flag down a cab on Seventh Avenue. “I bust my ass to get his credentials done on his painting so he can have his board meeting and does he even think to thank me? No!”

“Miranda, *dahling*, he’s da leader of da VN—the entire freakin’ Vampire Nation, he can do whatever he wants,” Lizandra Wells purred with a hint of her Caribbean accent. “And did he make you forget your bag? Is he responsible that you left it behind—again?”

Miranda could hear the growl in her throat surfacing. “No,” she reluctantly admitted to her best friend, who was the voice of reason and grateful Liz didn’t remind her about the last time she left her purse behind.

“Perhaps he just wants to spend more time with you. You know—after hours stuff.”

Miranda imagined Lizandra playing with her long black braids in her cubicle at New York Hospital, smirking and raising her eyebrows up and down as she usually did when being playful.

“Oh get real, with the supermodels he hangs out with, I don’t think so.” Miranda laughed at her friend who was always trying to fix her up with someone. *Vampires now*, she muttered. As she got into the cab, she gave the driver the address. “I mean *really!* The museum is on an austerity budget. We don’t have the resources ValCorp has to afford couriers and he has millions, no—billions! He could have sent someone. This was damned rude if you ask me.”

Miranda took a deep calming breath and relaxed back in the cab admiring the sights of the city. She lowered the window to let the night air in, along with several of New York’s more intriguing scents: the Hudson River, various ethnic foods from the restaurants, as well as other nefarious odors of refuse and car exhaust. “Anyway, I’m going to be late tonight. Save me a seat in the lounge at Nightshade.”

“Will do,” Lizandra said, but added whimsically, “but if you want to spend a couple of hours chatting up da sexy vampire, feel free, I’m sure Cyra and I can find plenty ta do.”

“Not happening. I’m getting my purse and then I’m getting the hell out of there.” *Dumbass vampire*, Miranda muttered again. “I’ll let you know when I’m on my way.”

“No worries. And give da vampire king my greetings.”

“Funny!” Miranda knew as queen of the Black Star werewolf clan, Lizandra had been in meetings with the powerful vampire and deeply respected him. She ended her call and tried not to think about the ruling vampire of New York City. Valadon was fabulously wealthy, handsome and the paparazzi went nuts whenever he was out in public, but he was also a very old and powerful vampire. *A vampire, for Christ’s sake*, she thought, *and a dangerous one at that!*

True, he was attractive with his dark brown hair, penetrating green eyes, sculptured cheekbones and he dressed to kill, *though with his fangs*, she mused, he didn't have to.

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Miranda closed her eyes and thought back to when she had been in Valadon's conference room earlier that day examining the Matisse painting when she suddenly felt her skin going cold. She'd slowly scanned the room and had this uneasy feeling . . . that someone else was present, watching her, but when she turned—no one was there. She had shrugged off the disturbing feeling and after finishing her analysis of pigment hues and techniques, she had the inkling to get up closer to the painting. Impulsively, she had toed off her heels and climbed up on his leather couch.

Matisse was a master of shading and Miranda loved eyeballing the variations up close. Unexpectedly, she'd felt something cold climb up her spine and lost her footing. She'd been about to fall on her ass when two very powerful arms caught her. The combined scents of vampire and night ocean breezes permeated the air.

"Professor Crescent, if you require a ladder, I'm sure I can arrange to have one made available." Valadon's baritone voice had made the hairs on her arms stand up as he slowly lowered her to the floor. She'd tried not to inhale his intoxicating scent, but it was impossible not to be affected by his presence. His scent was too powerful—like the man himself. And his eyes—my God, of all his striking features, his emerald eyes were the most captivating.

*Damn, what a way to meet the enigmatic vampire leader*, she'd thought, as she righted her glasses and smoothed down her dress. Valadon was far more handsome in person than he was in any of the magazines. Pictures could never capture the essence of the man; no image would ever be able to define his presence or his power. Lord Valadon had seemed amused with his

tantalizing half smile, but Miranda thought she saw something deeper, darker in his penetrating gaze as if he could see through to her very soul.

Vampires had an otherworldly aspect; something that spoke to the differences between a human and a vampire. An ethereal intensity she couldn't fathom and Miranda was *very* good at reading people. To Miranda, an empath, the various races of the world had unique frequencies—a certain pitch that identified vampire and Were as *different* from human . . . and Miranda was especially sensitive to that pitch.

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Shaking off her reveries, Miranda watched as the skyscrapers of the financial district passed by. There was construction going on to repair the damage caused by the war nearly twenty years ago when some lunatic in a foreign country decided to send air strikes to America. Retribution had been swift and complete. Now, the city was almost completely rebuilt with the help of the Vampire Nation, even though there were still *dead zones* throughout various areas.

The cab pulled up to Valadon's building: ValCorp, the black steel and glass edifice that stood eloquently against the night sky. The vampire stronghold was a favorite for the double-decker tour busses that frequented the downtown area. Tourists from around the world loved to photograph the place.

After paying the driver, Miranda quickly sped up the stairs and went through the circular doors. Although ValCorp was mainly a vampire conglomerate, humans and Weres also worked there. Since it was a Friday night, most of the employees had already left and the building had an eerie feel to it. *Silent as the grave*, she thought and tried to stifle a shudder. The black and gold marble floor had columns supporting the high ceiling and were polished to such a sheen that it looked like shadows were following her.

A young man in uniform behind the console said, “Valadon is waiting for you in his office. He said for you to go right up.” The guard motioned for her to take the elevator that went directly to Valadon’s penthouse offices. Miranda nodded and wondered where Valadon’s *real* security force was located. She was sure every step she was taking was being carefully monitored somewhere in the building.

Miranda watched the doors of the elevator close and smirked. Whoever said vampires had an aversion to mirrors had never been inside ValCorp, she thought sardonically as she checked her reflection in the darkly tinted mirrors and held her stomach at the silent speed of the elevator.

When the doors opened to the penthouse suite, where Valadon employed only his most trusted vampires, Miranda looked again at her watch and grimaced. *Dumbass vampire, could have sent my bag down to me*, she muttered as she walked quietly down the hall.

Miranda gazed out the windows at the NYC skyline and was mesmerized by the view—a view she never tired of seeing. The lights glowed brightly in the office buildings against the darkness. Miranda shook her head in awe; no other city in the world could compare, she thought as she shivered. Vampires, coldblooded creatures, didn’t need heat the way humans did and kept the thermostat turned down low. Miranda paused to catch a whiff of perfume and smiled; it was the same fragrance Cyra had given her as a present.

As she approached the sunken conference area she saw the partially opened door to Valadon’s darkened office. Slowly, Miranda pushed the door open and spotted her bag on the couch. Searching the shadows, she heard a shuffling noise in the corner and inhaled Valadon’s seductive scent.

“I believe I’m the dumbass vampire you were referring to,” a sardonic voice reverberated.

Miranda gasped as she heard the deep, evocative voice of New York's premier vampire and then Valadon appeared out of the shadows. He stepped closer to the windows so she could make out his form, but not his face. "Lord Valadon," Miranda steadied her breathing as the shock of seeing him wore off. "I didn't see you. I thought everyone would have gone home by now."

"Almost, everyone," he smiled at her with humor in his deep sea green eyes. "Please do not call me lord. That is a term only very old and familiar vampires use. The media likes to play up that idiom whenever they write about me."

Miranda's heart sped up knowing she was in the presence of a predator. She watched him as he took in her clothes. This vampire didn't have to use his allure to hold anyone in a state of mesmerism, she thought; all he had to do was walk in a room. His presence alone could capture an audience. Most vampires muted down their power not to frighten humans, but Valadon's power was permeating the room and Miranda could feel her skin prickling. Her ire resurfaced at the unnecessary trip she'd been forced to make. "You could have sent a courier to deliver my bag,"

"I know. I could have," he smirked. But then I would have missed the opportunity to talk with you." He came around his desk so she could see him better. "You've been in my offices several times now; yet, neither one of us has taken the time to get to know the other."

Valadon inhaled her scent of orange blossoms, intrigued he didn't frighten her as he did other humans. He enjoyed watching Miranda. Earlier, he'd been transfixed by her sense of serenity most women couldn't hope to possess—her kind or his. When she had stood back in rapture and studied his painting, she'd made his fangs ache. He had watched her before, been appreciative of her intelligence and had requested the museum send only her to authenticate his works of art; he would have no other. As he was on the board of directors, they complied without question.

The city was under a veil of shadows behind him and Miranda could only see his face by the light of his computer screen. He motioned to turn on the lights via a remote, but she stopped him. “No, don’t. I prefer the dim light. After staring at a computer screen all day the bright light hurts my eyes.”

“You almost sound like a vampire saying that.” The amusement was back in Valadon’s voice. He pointed the remote at a low light over a Greek statue giving the room a little more illumination.

“I’ve been like this since I was a child,” Miranda said as she came further into the room. “My night vision doesn’t compare with yours, of course, but it’s still very good. I can see you fine now, thanks.” She moved closer to his desk and bravely spoke to him. “Why did you really have me come all the way down here when you could have simply sent my bag to the museum?”

Charmed by her courage, Valadon shifted his stance. “You’ve worked for me for some time. I simply wanted the opportunity to meet you.” He paused for a moment. “I like knowing the people who work for me.” Valadon appreciated her black shimmering top with the black jeans that seemed to caress her body. She wore more make-up that accentuated her sharp, whiskey-colored eyes and nicely defined lips. Her long chestnut hair made a man want to run his fingers through it and pull it back wrapped in his fist as he drank her in. But it was her perceptive eyes that kept his attention and a hunger long dormant began to awaken. He sensed a growl of approval building in his throat.

Miranda knew he was studying her just as she was him. The smart thing would be to grab her purse, make some sort of explanation, and then beat feet out of there. But Miranda stood transfixed. Valadon had a mysterious evanescence that made people want to know him, discover

what lay beyond his penetrating gaze and explore forbidden realms. Therein lay his true appeal, she thought, that elusive charm that challenged the curiosity in others: To know the unknowable. For Miranda the attraction wasn't just his physical appeal, but the intelligence of those keen eyes. What knowledge he must have accumulated over his centuries of existence, she mused—almost enough for her to offer a little neck. Almost, she smiled.

It was the movement in the shadows behind him that suddenly broke into her thoughts. Helicopters weren't unusual in this section of New York as the helipad was merely blocks away. Tourists paid a decent amount to admire the city's lights. But unlike the tourist helicopters, this one was silent. That was her first clue something was off; her second was the figure in black hanging out of the side of the chopper with the sniper rifle. Miranda screamed, "*get down,*" as she flew over the desk and pushed him to the floor as a blaze of gunfire shattered the window behind them. The thunderous sounds of rapid gunshots were deafening in his office.

Miranda could feel the glass spraying all over the office as Valadon held her tight, burying her face in his chest as they lay on the floor. She could feel something sharp piercing her hip, but dared not move until the gunfire subsided.

What occurred next happened so fast she hardly had time to process it. The door swung open and men poured in. She heard one angry voice above the others giving orders. The next thing she knew she was being lifted and thrown across to the other side of the room. Suddenly, someone was on top of her pinning her down, and the burning sensation in her hip intensified.

"Get off of her; she had nothing to do with this," Valadon bellowed as he stood over her and the vampire pinning her to the floor.

"There were bullets fired, you're bleeding and she's holding a weapon. You want to explain to me how she's *not* involved?" Remare, the deadliest of Lord Valadon's Torian Guard, snarled.

## *Chapter 2*

If Valadon was the poster boy for the VN: Their eloquent spokesperson and diplomat, professional and debonair in front of the cameras, Remare, his second in command, was the opposite.

Unlike the other Torians, Remare flaunted his vampire nature—especially when in the public eye. He kept his long raven-black hair and his goatee neatly trimmed and lived a notorious lifestyle, frequenting many New York clubs that catered to vampires. If Valadon was the VN's epitome of political correctness, Remare was the VN's bad boy and appeared amused by that moniker. He was the only vampire at Valadon House who openly defied Valadon's mandate of social integration—the only one who could get away with it.

Remare's face was made up of harsh angles and had dark brown eyes almost as black as his pupils. Where Valadon could easily win over people with his calm and confident demeanor, Remare had people on guard and distrustful of his intentions. His distaste of humans was legendary. There were all types of rumors concerning him—not the least was his penchant for many bed partners.

Lizandra had once told her that she thought it was all PR hype to foster support for Valadon. His way of saying either accept me as the leader of the VN—or deal with my successor.

No one wanted Remare to rule New York City, especially after Valadon had written into laws vampires were not allowed to use their mental powers on unsuspecting humans, thereby winning over those fearful humans who believed vampires were evil bloodsucking creatures. The Vampire Nation's public relations department had fostered a positive image of vampires as a separate race of beings who had lived along humans for centuries and simply had larger incisors, an allergy to sunlight and lived longer than humans. *A lot longer.*

Better to keep Valadon, the political diplomat and Remare as his enforcer and leader of the Torians. There was no telling what Remare would do with the political power Valadon wielded. Better *the devil you know*, many had agreed.

Valadon's Torian Guard, aptly named after Caesar's Praetorians, consisted of his elite force of trained soldiers. They vowed to protect Valadon with their lives; there were no deadlier creatures on the planet as far as Miranda knew and the deadliest Torian was currently on her back, gripping her wrist and the dart she'd pulled from her hip.

"Get off me! In case you haven't noticed, I'm the one who's bleeding." Miranda tried to buck him off, but Remare held her down with powerful arms. She looked up at the faces of the men who surrounded Valadon, then reflected that fear does strange things to people: Most people would have retreated from the dangerous vampire, but when pushed to her limits, Miranda's darker side evolved and instead of fear, anger surfaced. Turning to see the hostility in Remare's face, she saw the red rims around his irises glowing. Miranda gripped his forearms, digging in with her nails to push him off, but he only pinned her tighter to the floor.

Miranda breathed in Remare's woodsy, earthy scent and could swear she saw steam coming from his ears; his enmity was palpable. She was sure he would have killed her if Valadon hadn't

pulled him off her and then helped her stand up as Remare reluctantly released her, never once taking his dark eyes off her. In the depths of those sinister orbs, Miranda could see her death.

Then, Remare sniffed the dart and his expression became contemplative. Keeping his eyes on Miranda, he seemed to calm his rage, then brushed himself off. “It seems our old friends have decided to make an appearance. Their calling card,” Remare said, as he handed the dart to Valadon, who sniffed it then handed it to one of his guards.

Miranda glared at both of them as she straightened up. Then she muttered to Valadon, “if you had sent my purse to me, I wouldn’t have gotten shot.” She tried to walk off the pain, but her leg folded in on itself. Valadon caught her before she hit the floor.

“But then I would be the one lying injured on the floor, Professor Crescent,” Valadon smiled as he lifted her into his arms. “Let’s get her to the infirmary. Remare, have your men report in, then join me in the medical suite.” He looked at the damaged window and the mess that had resulted and growled, “have something done about the window.”

Remare slowly backed away and nodded suspiciously as he watched Valadon leave with his guards and the woman who had returned his defiant stare. His nostrils flared, *intriguing scent*, he thought, then turned and surveyed the damage. Whoever dared this attack on Valadon would soon learn the full wrath of his retribution.

He could hardly wait, he smirked.

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ValCorp’s infirmary was already prepped as their leader brought in Miranda. Like everything else in the building, their equipment was state of the art. The long, rectangular room consisted of four hospital beds set up like an emergency room with curtains separating each area.

Amory, a physician's assistant whose dark complexion was in sharp contrast to his hospital whites, carefully took Miranda from Valadon and placed her on the second bed, but Valadon wanted a medical doctor to look at Miranda. "Who's in the lab tonight?"

"Gabriel," Amory said as he turned to the nurse and rattled off the needed supplies to treat Miranda's wound. "He rarely leaves the lab."

"Get him in here," Valadon ordered.

Valadon knew Gabriel and he hadn't been on the best of terms, but believed his progeny was loyal. The doctor had been a close friend of his a century ago, but after Valadon turned him, their relationship became tenuous. Gabriel had never wanted to become a vampire and had been relentless in trying to find a way to turn himself back to being human. Valadon had told him there was no going back; but Gabriel had stubbornly refused to listen.

When Amory returned, he brought a tall, handsome man of slender built with light brown hair and golden brown eyes.

"What's wrong with her?" Gabriel said as he came closer to the bed.

"I was shot with a dart," Miranda said as she glared up at him and noticed his hair had blond highlights. Must be a trick of the light, she thought, vampires didn't get sun highlights. "You can ask me. I was actually there." Miranda's sarcasm rose as she stroked her left hip. "It went numb right after."

Gabriel met her eyes and gave her a crooked smile. "My apologies."

"Professor Crescent was in my office when the assassins attacked. They missed me, but hit Miranda. I presume you didn't hear the alarms?" Valadon crossed his arms over his chest and watched as Gabriel smirked and pulled on a pair of latex gloves. He'd long become accustomed

to Gabriel's impertinence in private, but he refused to allow him to show it in front of others. Silently, the tension rose significantly in the room as the two vampires stared at each other.

Finally, Gabriel's shoulders relaxed and he nodded in acquiescence. "I sometimes wear my ear phones when I'm working." He grinned, "Josh Grobin was singing loudly tonight." Then his face sobered in genuine concern for his lord. "Were you wounded?"

"No, but here's the dart that injured Miranda." Valadon motioned for his guard to give the dart to Gabriel who sniffed it and then handed it to Amory.

"Run a diagnostic on it. We'll soon find out what new toys your friends have been playing with." He turned to Miranda. "Now, let me see your wound."

Miranda looked pointedly at Valadon, who nodded and stepped away. She focused on the handsome, but moody doctor. There was something different about him, she thought. A vampire for sure, but his frequency was off. Humans tended to have a moderate frequency; Weres had a higher, faster pitch. But vampires had a different frequency altogether that made her skin tingle. The older the vampire, the more intense the prickling sensation rolled off her skin.

Lizandra couldn't explain how Miranda had this talent, other than to say she was a *sensitive*—someone capable of reading people, *all* peoples. Miranda thought it was one more thing that made her a freak.

Miranda removed her boots, unzipped her pants and kept her eyes on the doctor, curious about the tension between the two vampires and why his current flowed unlike the others.

"You're different from the others," Miranda said as she reclined on her side. There was no way she was taking off her thong. It left more than enough room for the examination, she thought.

Though if she knew she was going to be on display tonight . . . she might not have worn the little red silk panties.

Disconcerted by the silent conversation he'd just had with Valadon, Gabriel applied antiseptic to a gauze pad and murmured, "figured that out, did you?"

Miranda narrowed her eyes as she raised her body up on one elbow. "Are you having a bad night, or do you just not get out of your lab enough to know how to have a pleasant conversation?"

"I've had better," Gabriel said as he rubbed his neck and looked at Miranda who was staring him in the eye—a foolish thing for a human to do with a vampire, though she was in no danger from him. Valadon's *guest* was attractive, a bit angry with him, deservedly so, he thought amusedly, and saw intelligence in her perceptive eyes. Right now they were trained on him with a cutting edge. Getting shot could do that to a person, he thought as he smiled. "And I get out plenty." He softened his tone. "Be quiet now while I examine your wound."

Miranda hadn't been hushed since she was young, so she did what she always did when she was a child: She ignored him. "You're not a practicing medical doctor are you?" She took an educated guess: "Researcher?"

"I have my medical degrees, professor . . . and I've been a doctor for longer than you've been alive. What exactly is it you're a professor of anyway?" Gabriel figured if he kept her talking, she wouldn't feel any discomfort when he examined her. When he looked at her nearly naked backside, he tried not to notice her sexy figure, but her curves weren't completely lost on him.

"Art history. I authenticate Valadon's paintings for the insurance company."

“Ah, that explains it,” he muttered as he prepared an inoculation. “This topical is going to numb you, but it will only affect the area around the lesion. You’re probably going to need a few stitches.”

“That explains what and how many?” Miranda asked as she twisted on the bed and tried to get a better look at the needle. To this day, she thought, she had to be the only woman in NYC who didn’t have her ears pierced. Lizandra had laughingly threatened her many times with piercing them and even went so far as to bring back beautiful dangling earrings from the Caribbean islands as an incentive. Never worked, though.

“How many what?”

“Stitches. I sort of like knowing these things.” *He really needed to get out more*, Miranda mused.

Gabriel liked her attitude. “Four or five and . . . as for your other question,” he said as he pierced her skin with the needle, “you don’t seem like Valadon’s type.”

“Ouch!” So *not* gentle there, she thought as she turned to face him. “Exactly what is Valadon’s type?”

“Vampire, of course.” He looked directly at her, noting the tension in her body. “A bit sensitive there, are you? Now that didn’t hurt at all.” He shook his head at her and softened his tone. “Just relax, I’ll be done in a few minutes.”

Miranda mumbled, “it’s not your freakin hip that got hurt.”

Gabriel grinned despite himself; the woman obviously had forgotten that vampires had acute hearing and he could hear her comments about him, Valadon, vampires in general and a certain handbag. He then began to work on her hip, noticing the shiny red panties for the first time and felt his face heat. Her leg had a nice line to it and her hip was nicely rounded.

Gabriel shook his head when he realized his hands were on her ass. The doctor in him focused on the injury, making sure no fragments from the dart were still inside, and noticed the dark fluid coagulated deep inside the injured area. “There seems to be some viscous fluid. I’m going to suction it out. Don’t go anywhere.” He smiled and then went to the medical cart and retrieved a length of tubing that looked like an aspirator.

“Oh, yes, so in the mood to do laps around Central Park right now. *Not!*” she smirked up at him. This was so not pleasant, she thought as she clutched the pillow beneath her. “What do you use the tubing for?”

“Oh, all sorts of *nasty* things.” Gabriel teased as he concentrated on his task. “Now be still for just a moment longer.”

Miranda wasn’t sure what to make of Gabriel. Here she was lying half naked and all the doctor could think of was doing a procedure on her—a potentially painful procedure. And why was she even thinking about the handsome doctor?

“You shouldn’t be able to feel anything. The shot I gave you should have numbed you, but if you’re in pain, let me know,” Gabriel said, concerned she might be feeling some discomfort.

“Nah, I’m tougher than I look—or so I’ve been told.”

Wondering what she meant by that, Gabriel briefly glanced at her, then suctioned out the dark fluid. Satisfied he had removed it all, he thoroughly cleansed, then closed the wound with a few stitches and applied a dressing. “You need to keep that dry for a few days. I can take the stitches out then or your personal physician can.” The thought surprised him that he wanted to see her again. *For professional reasons*, he told himself. *Right!*

“I don’t have a doctor.” When Gabriel looked surprised, she said, “I don’t usually get sick, but I have a friend who’s a PA. She’ll take them out.” Miranda reached for her pants the same

time Gabriel was handing them to her and their hands touched briefly. Miranda immediately felt the low electrical current go through her as did Gabriel. “Rubber soled shoes?” she chided as she pulled her pants on and tried to slip off the bed, but wobbled instead.

Gabriel steadied her, liking the way she felt in his arms. He belatedly realized being caught in the crossfire of an attempt on Valadon’s life couldn’t have been easy. *Another attempt on Valadon*, he thought as he removed and disposed of his gloves. He wondered how many this made. But Valadon and Remare would deal with it; they always did. “I’m sorry you were hurt. We usually don’t get that sort of thing happening here.” He smiled. “ValCorp is pretty safe.”

Miranda was surprised by his words. Perhaps the good doctor was more human than she thought. “Thanks for patching me up.” As an afterthought, she turned back to him. “Any chance I can get a copy of the toxicology report?”

“Sure.” Gabriel shrugged. “But why would you want it?”

“I want to know what was in me.” She rubbed her hip and tilted her head. “Wouldn’t you want to know, doc?”

Gabriel nodded. Yes, he would. For nearly a century, he had tried to figure out what was inside him that made him vampire and how it could be reversed. But his latest batch of results was far less promising than he’d expected. “I’ll see that you get a copy of the results.” He smiled, reluctant to say goodbye and wondered if he would ever see her again.

“Thanks.” Miranda returned his smile and hesitated for a moment before she turned to leave and then gingerly walked down to where Valadon was waiting.

### *Chapter 3*

“She needs to be interrogated.” Remare steamed as calculation glared in his angry eyes.

Valadon shook his head. “It’s not necessary. She’s innocent in this.”

“Is she now? And you know this how?” Remare raised one pointed eyebrow as he stood with one foot crossed over the other and his arms folded across his chest as he leaned against the door frame.

To others Remare’s form might seem casual, but Valadon knew his second was coiled as tightly as a snake. “Christ, Remare, she took a bullet for me. Isn’t that enough?” Temper surged in Valadon’s voice—rage for the enemies who would dare to target him in his own territory . . . and frustration for the beguiling woman who’d been caught in the crossfire.

Remare eyed his closest friend and lord. “What *exactly* do we know about her?”

As if on cue, Aiden, one of Remare’s best Torians and an ace at IT, strode down the hall and handed him a file. After a few whispered words, Aiden nodded, then departed. Remare read aloud from the file. “She’s been to our offices several times over the last few years. An art authenticator, works for the NYC Museum.” He paused for a moment as he sped through the file. “Also, professor of Art History at NYU—works part time in the evenings.” He looked up at Valadon. “No *known* political affiliations . . . known—being the key word.”

“She had nothing to do with the attempt. It was a simple coincidence that she happened to be in my office when the shots were fired.” He dismissed the idea with a wave of his hand. “Let it go, Remare.” Valadon paced a few steps; he had much on his mind, not just the attempt on his life, but Gabriel’s upcoming independence . . . and that he was partly responsible for jeopardizing one of his employee’s lives—one he’d been interested in for some time.

“Coincidence . . . never quite sits well with me,” Remare remarked, eyeing his friend as he stroked his tongue against his fang. “How many times has something *seemed* trivial and then turned out to be quite complex?” He walked closer to Valadon and said quietly, “she *needs* to be questioned.”

“*No!* It’s *not* necessary!” Valadon said with absolute finality and then exhaled with a pained expression. “Better you focus your men on who was behind the helicopter. After I speak with Miranda, I want to meet with you and the others. I want to view the videos of our outside perimeters as well as our internal feeds. I also want lists of who was in our building at the time: vampire and other. Get me data, Remare. We’ll take it from there. If our enemies are up to their old tricks, I want to know who.”

Remare nodded as he watched Valadon stalk back into the treatment wing. He was so convinced the young professor was not involved in the attack he wasn’t thinking straight. Remare wondered if Valadon wasn’t becoming soft on yet another human female. Christ, the last time Valadon had become involved with a human he had become dangerously detached and disinterested in the affairs of the VN. Remare was going to see to it that never happened again.

He would order a deep investigation into the art historian’s background and then . . . they would see *exactly* who she was connected to. It was just too convenient for him that she just happened to be there at the precise time the shots were fired. *A distraction, perhaps? To lure*

*Valadon into striking position?* His eyes narrowed pensively as he stroked his goatee and the thin line of his beard along his jaw with his thumbnail. There was something about her that didn't sit well. Her scent was different from most human females.

And to him, different was potentially dangerous.

Remare didn't trust her or the look of defiance in her eyes; eyes that showed no fear. She should have been terror struck, not rebellious of his authority. *Whatever do you know, professor? What are you hiding? Could it be as Valadon suspected: a coincidence? Not likely,* he thought, as he tapped the folder against his thigh; he didn't believe in coincidences. The attempt was close—closer than the others, but Remare would be damned if it happened again on his watch. Valadon didn't think she needed to be questioned. Well, he would see about that. His Torians were experts at information retrieval. And he knew exactly who to assign to her.

He smiled with lethal anticipation.

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After Gabriel had assured him he'd work on the chemical composition of the dart and report to him as soon as the findings were complete, Valadon watched as Miranda limped out of the treatment area toward the elevator. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I've been shot." Miranda snarked, but grinned at the vampire who seemed to hover over her.

"Will you allow me to make this up to you?" Valadon was perplexed at coming up with something to please a person who was nearly killed on his account and wanted Miranda to have something of his, a token of his . . . esteem. Something that would remind her of him.

Something special. He would give considerable thought to what that would be.

“You don’t have anything to make up for.” Miranda hesitated when she glimpsed the restrained emotion blazing through his eyes. “But I think you should find out who’s trying to kill you.”

“Be assured, we will.” Valadon knew his voice held a depth of darkness that terrified others, but smirking, he confided, “in no uncertain terms will I, or the vampires under me, rest until we find out who orchestrated the assassination attempt.”

Miranda looked up at him, not in fear, but in consideration. “If you really want to do something for me,” Miranda rubbed her hip, “find out what was in that dart. Dr. Gabriel assured me he suctioned it all out, but I still would like to know what was inside me.” She lifted her chin. “It’s important to me.”

“As it is to me, Miranda.” He stared down at her with eyes that held a profundity of knowledge. “Surely, there is something else I can do for you.” He compelled her to ask something of him.

“Forget it.” Miranda managed a pained smile as she stared into his eyes. “It was you they were after, not me.”

Valadon’s gaze peered deep into her thoughts. *Oh hell no! Not after I took a bullet for you!* Valadon knew the moment she realized he had entered her mind and nearly chuckled. His human was sensitive to his touch.

Miranda quickly broke eye contact. “Valadon, you’re not going to scrub my memories are you? By your own laws, you can’t do that to me.”

Valadon tried to reassure her by gently placing his hand on her shoulder, but she recoiled as if he intended harm. “No. I will not touch your memories. You never have to fear me, Miranda.” He watched her shoulders relax. “I give you my word on this.”

“Thank you,” Miranda said, even though suspicion remained in her eyes.

Valadon walked her to the elevator. “There’s going to be an ongoing investigation. Please refrain from discussing what happened here tonight, or what nearly happened, with your associates.” He reached over and pressed the button for the elevator. Male satisfaction surged at her feminine shudder at his near touch.

“My *associates* know I came here to collect my purse.” Miranda looked around for her handbag.

“Ahhh, yes, Lizandra.” Valadon grinned. It was delightful to know two of his key lieutenants, Morel and his wife, Cyra, were friends with Miranda as well as one of his most powerful allies, the Were Queen. He may have use for her Weres if it turned out who he thought was behind the attacks was, in fact, guilty of insurrection. “All right. You may confer with Lizandra, but no one else. It will make the investigation go more smoothly. Your purse will be waiting for you at the security desk.”

“All right then,” she agreed. “I need to go now. I’m considerably late to meet her down at Nightshade—one of your clubs, I think.” Miranda smiled, almost hesitant to leave him. There were so many questions she wanted to ask. She exhaled slowly and lamented that she would never get the opportunity to ask them again.

Valadon smiled, impressed she would frequent a known vampire club. But then Cyra had informed him she only went when she made the request, otherwise, Miranda favored the Black Star Clan’s habitat, Werhaven, the underground club in Central Park, where the wolves staked out their territory. Interesting, he contemplated, Miranda never recommended a human club for them to socialize in. “I’ll have a car waiting for you. The driver will take you anywhere you

want to go.” He lifted her hand and brushed a kiss along her knuckles. This time she didn’t draw back from his touch. “Thank you for saving my life.”

“Remember to duck quicker next time.” Miranda grinned as she stepped into the elevator. She watched the elevator doors close and pressed L for lobby. Of all the articles she’d read in the media reports, nothing—absolutely nothing, had prepared her for meeting the vampire lord of NYC. There was so much more to him than the reports hinted at, more than she ever imagined. Miranda had seen beneath the façade and glimpsed the man behind the enigma, but she knew it would be ludicrous to even consider becoming involved with a vampire. Wasn’t getting shot once bad enough? As with any human, she had dozens of questions about vampires, their histories and powers. She’d read all the public relations stuff the VN had issued: Carefully worded speeches about vampires being no threat to our well-being—after all, they’d been amongst us since time began.

But she was more curious about what was *not* in those speeches. Miranda thought she was hardly in a position to ask, even if Valadon was feeling indebted to her. The price would be too high. Another woman would have milked this for all she could. But Miranda wasn’t another woman. She would do her own research . . . and knew exactly who to go to for help.

When the doors of the elevator opened, she was about to step out—then nearly hissed as her body backed up a step before she could stop—her instincts on full alert, the air around her had become electrically charged. Dangerously so.

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“Your purse, professor.” With an arched brow, Remare smirked as he let her purse dangle from his fingers. Perverse delight danced in his eyes at her obvious discomfort at being alone with him.

Miranda refused to be bullied. Straightening her spine, she met his stare, refusing to be the first to look away. A stupid thing to do with a vampire who could easily glamour her, she knew, but didn't sense that particular power stirring. She watched as he silently stepped aside for her to exit the elevator. His movements mirrored those of a dancer: graceful, elegant, and carefully controlled. She wondered how anyone could move like that without making a sound.

"You seem to be in the habit of forgetting it."

"Thanks." She practically ripped it from his fingers, wanting to get as far from him as fast as possible. He was one vampire she had absolutely no interest in whatsoever. Dangerous males—no matter how handsome or sexy didn't appeal to her. The allure, the rush and excitement of experiencing something dark and dangerous didn't interest her. Miranda no longer felt the need to explore the dark corners of her psyche. She'd seen the depth of darkness, had nearly drowned in it except for one powerful Were's intervention. So the abyss could stare back at her all it wanted. She quickly brushed past him and headed for the exit.

"Professor Crescent."

*Damn*, she thought, as she cocked her head, how very distinctly and seductively he said her name.

"A moment of your time."

Again, that woody, earthy scent of his suffused her nostrils. Of all the vampires in Valadon House, the one she didn't want to find herself alone with was Remare. Miranda briefly shut her eyes and shook her head. She would not give him the satisfaction of knowing he got to her. "What is it?" she asked, meeting his eyes, refusing to show any fear, then added with an impatient exhale, "I'm already running late."

“What a coincidence you just happened to be in Valadon’s office when the attack took place,” he said, as he slithered closer to her, never taking his dark, penetrating gaze from her. “Valadon’s collection of Greek statues is superb. Don’t you think so? He’s been collecting them for some time now.” Like a predator sighting prey, he moved stealthily toward her. “Every time he goes to the Greek Isles he brings one back.” Remare crossed his arms over his chest. His breath was close enough to brush her hair back from her face. “Did you ask him to turn the light on so that you could see them better?”

Miranda watched his eyes focus on her. Remare obviously wanted a neck to strangle over the attempt on Valadon’s life and the neck he currently was eyeing was hers. She wouldn’t let him intimidate her, even though her heart was hammering in her chest. “I’m not your villain here, Remare.” She narrowed her own eyes at him. “You need to look elsewhere.” She stared at his cold, dark eyes and felt the tension rising between them. He stood perfectly still, but looked coiled enough to attack. The frequency she could detect in vampires hummed loudly in her ears.

Vampires could mute their powers and it was considered impolite to direct their level of power at a human. Remare was doing nothing to mute himself and it was beginning to piss her off. “I didn’t tell him anything, Remare.” She held her ground, feeling the muscles in her legs tighten in readiness. “It was his idea to turn on the light. Besides, he wanted to turn on the overhead lights, and I told him not to.”

“I wonder, why is that?” Remare began to circle her, trying to intimidate her.

It wasn’t working. “I was only there to retrieve my purse, Remare. I’m sure Valadon has already updated you.” She shook her purse for emphasis and met the vampire face to face. “If you’re so hell bent on finding out who attempted the assassination, why don’t you spend your

time looking for the responsible party?” She slung her bag over her shoulder and turned to leave. “It’s not me.”

Remare elicited a smile that would have made the Grinch proud—if the Grinch had long, sharp fangs. “Oh, don’t worry, Mir-r-anda.” He said her name as if it were spelled with two or three r’s instead of the one, betraying his European roots. “I assure you we *will* find out who was behind the attack.” His voice darkened and held an edge of danger as he looked pointedly at her. “And any persons found to be in consort with the attackers will be punished. Harshly.”

He said the last with a hiss, like the snake he was, she thought, as she left the building. Where the hell was *he* when Valadon was nearly killed?

## *Chapter 4*

Eyes watched as the ancient kept at his task. The overlord would not be pleased at the news of the latest attempt on Valadon's life. "*The attempt and not the deed confounds us,*" he thought bitterly of Lady Macbeth's famous line. Mulciber, named for the Greek god, Hephaestus, the ugly god in Greek mythology, preferred his solitude. After all, true vampire rituals needed privacy. Humans could never comprehend a vampire's desire to celebrate his heritage in a manner some would consider barbaric. Soon, there would be no need to be concerned with what the humans thought.

"Master, forgive me. The plan failed. It appears there was someone else with him, someone who protected him." The messenger thought if he gave the news quickly Mulciber would not take his anger out on him. He watched as the ancient continued cutting the thorns off the roses in his solarium, a place Mulciber only frequented during nighttime hours. Although the ancient couldn't tolerate the sun's rays, he could enjoy the fruits of the sun's labors. Gardening was the only thing that seemed to sooth the primordial vampire.

"But the poison was tested, was it not?" Mulciber asked without turning his attention from his task.

“Yes. It should have done what it was designed to do, but it seems the other person in the room, a woman—a human was injured instead.”

“A human.” Mulciber said the words with distaste as if he was talking about insects. “The drug will have no harmful effects on her.”

“She’s already been released from the infirmary.”

“How fortunate for her. She’s of no concern to me. Who has the dart now?”

“Gabriel.”

Mulciber smiled. *Valadon’s fledgling*. “He’ll have to be dealt with, won’t he?”

“Yes, my lord. I will see to it.” He hesitated to get closer to the ancient. Mulciber possessed a speed unmatched by other vampires and had been known to rip out the throats of those who displeased him. “Is there anything else you require?”

Mulciber looked at him with a face that would frighten any human who never saw what damage sunlight inflicted on a vampire. Over the millennia, certain vampires had evolved enough to develop a natural immunity to the sun’s harmful rays, while others possessed only partial immunity. But the old ones never developed that immunity. They had lived too long beneath the earth’s surface. Vampire medicine had tried to develop a vaccine for the ancients, but was met with disastrous results, as in the case of Mulciber.

“Yes, I require another blood source. See that it’s delivered before sunrise and make this one . . . pretty.” Mulciber smiled with an evil glint in his eye.

The messenger sighed at the thought of another sacrifice. Mulciber’s hunger was growing stronger and he did not do well when he was deprived. He refused the bagged blood most vampires used and would not consider the synthetic blood that ValCorp manufactured.

“You let him live?” Knowing Mulciber’s intolerance for failure, Persephone waited until her father’s favorite spy left to join him.

“He has his uses.” Mulciber slyly smiled. “For now.” Mulciber finished placing his roses in the vase. “Now tell me. What brings you here?”

“You have a message from the council. They wait on your reply.” Mulciber was an ambassador of the Euro-Council, the governing body of vampires worldwide; as an overlord, one of his responsibilities was to oversee how the vampires in America were accruing wealth and report back to the council.

“Did you complete the task I assigned you?”

“Yes, the folder’s on your desk in your study.”

Mulciber looked approvingly at his only living offspring and thought of her mother: The one woman he had loved . . . before he’d killed her for her betrayal. Persephone was beginning to look more and more like her. With her soft, angelic features, long blond hair and blue eyes, people often underestimated her craftiness. She knew well how to use her looks to acquire what she wanted. He knew this, because he had been the one to teach her. “I want you to start hanging out more with Valadon’s Torians. Learn what you can about Valadon’s movements.”

“As you wish, father.” Persephone smiled, knowing who she would focus her attention on.

Mulciber watched his daughter leave. So much like her mother, he thought. As beautiful as she was cunning. He walked down the hall to his study to read the message on his computer. “Well that’s interesting,” he murmured. The council would be sending another agent. “Ah, the possibilities,” he smirked as he relaxed back into his chair. It seemed someone else on the council had his own plans where Valadon was concerned.

He approved of their choice. Passionately.

Mulciber felt like celebrating and ordered his favorite acolytes to attend him: Jeremy entered his study dressed only in a short wrap around his hips. Mulciber remembered when he first came to New York from . . . wherever the hell it was he came from. One of his lieutenants had lured him to the overlord's home under the pretense of a modeling job where he resided ever since with Mulciber's other child bride, Kaylee—who followed Jeremy in dressed in a similar wrap that hung low on her hips. She'd been only twelve years old when another of his people had lured her to his home. Brave thing had fought him in the beginning. But Jeremy and he had taught her the pleasures of the flesh until she had forgotten her past life and he'd been gracious enough to addict them to his blood, which would keep them young and strong for as long as they pleased him.

And they were both pleasing him now as they began fondling each other. Mulciber liked that they were near mirror copies of each other with their dark blond hair and hazel eyes. They could have been siblings for all their similarities. Each was disrobing now for his viewing pleasure. He encouraged them to continue and watched with glee as they began to fuck in earnest. When Jeremy began to climax he would enter him from behind and ride them both to ecstasy.

## *Chapter 5*

Nightshade was crowded as usual when Miranda finally arrived. The topical Gabriel gave her was wearing off and she could feel the throbbing in her hip and tried to walk without limping. She spotted Lizandra and her other friends in their usual corner in the back of the club and made her way to them. The reflecting lights of the mirror ball made it appear as if shadows were dancing on the smoked mirrors covering the walls.

“And look what the cat just dragged in,” Lizandra bellowed to her entourage who were leisurely sitting and drinking around her as befitting the queen she was. She rose from the leather sofa with her long braids flaring out. Her shimmering, sleeveless gold top accented her well-proportioned breasts and showed off her muscular form. Black leather pants caressed her long, shapely legs. No one had a better statuesque physique than the Were Queen. “You’re late . . . and this time more than usual.” They exchanged hugs and kisses to each cheek—no girly-girl near kisses for Lizandra; the Were Queen liked to show and receive affection. She held Miranda at arms’ length and knew something was wrong. “What the hell happened to you?”

“I stepped on some broken glass.” Miranda didn’t want to lie to her friends so she kept it as close to the truth as possible. “It’s all good now, just a little sensitive.” Miranda eyed the remains of Buffalo wings, nachos and veggie platters and sighed as her stomach growled.

Gavin—the red wolf, Liz’s bodyguard and latest lover, stood and gave Miranda a tight hug, then let her sit on the couch near Lizandra. “Don’t worry. I’ll get you something to eat.” He grinned at her. “What’s your poison?”

Miranda had a warm spot in her heart for Gavin. He was tall, gorgeous, with the most amazing reddish-brown hair. His eyes twinkled with humor, but it was his quick grin that Miranda found most striking. When he walked his muscles rippled. Miranda tried hard not to stare at his butt—but, as Liz would say, *“Dang! That is one fine ass!”*

The Were Queen was a fitness guru who often led exercise classes for her pack mates in Central Park that would make any drill sergeant proud. Several times Miranda had nearly passed out from exertion, but damn, if her body didn’t develop the way Liz promised it would.

“C and V, the usual.” Miranda winked back at him. She’d been drinking cranberry juice and vodka for years now.

“How have you been?” Cyra, the third in the girlfriend love-fest asked. Cyra had long red hair and the most amazing green eyes. The fact that she had a pale complexion had nothing to do with her vampirism, but more with her Irish/English heritage. She was happily married to another vampire, Morel—who was noticeably absent tonight.

“Pretty good.” Evasively, Miranda smiled at her. “So, what’s everyone been up to?”

“Orion has a new gig at Oasis, he’s gonna start next week and we’re all invited to hear him play.” Maxine, the newest member of Lizandra’s Black Star Clan was bouncing in her seat. She was young, vibrant and quickly becoming a clan favorite. Max didn’t believe one hair color was enough and often had at least two different shades at the same time—sometimes more. She got teased a lot about being the runt of the litter at only five-foot two, but the clan would fight to the death to protect her. That’s what family was all about. And Black Star was family.

“Give me some time to get used to the sound system there, then you’re all welcome.” Orion was a very handsome Were with long black hair and when he looked at you with his baby blue eyes, it was as if he could see your most intimate thoughts. His smile was one of the most welcoming she’d ever seen, but it was his scintillating voice that made people swoon. It was no wonder women flocked from all over to hear him sing. And he played a mean guitar. One that was currently residing in Miranda’s home.

Coming home late from work one night, Miranda had found Orion a block away; he’d been badly assaulted and bleeding from multiple claw wounds. After she had called Lizandra to treat him, they had managed to get him into her home and nursed him back to health.

Liz had warned her it was dangerous to take a wounded Were into new surroundings, but Miranda wasn’t going to leave him to bleed to death on the street. As it turned out, it worked out well for the both of them: Miranda got a new roommate, one that was rarely home because several months out of the year he was on the road touring. And Orion found a safe place to stash his prized guitars.

“Now, sorry to leave you guys, but I promised Max I’d show her how the recording studio works.” Orion kissed Miranda and Liz goodnight as did Max.

“I gotta leave too,” Cyra chimed in as she shut her phone. “Morel texted he was called back to work.”

When they were finally alone, Lizandra shifted forward in her seat, keeping her eyes on the club and the patrons in the nearest vicinity. “Your foot’s not injured, is it?”

“No . . . it’s not.” Miranda also kept her eyes on the crowd as she started to play with the flame on the candle in the glass holder on the coffee table. Liz watched as she held the flame in one hand, closed her fist, transferred it to her other hand and then back to the candle holder. As

an *Elemental*, Miranda had some control over the elements—but especially with fire, a power she hid from everyone, except Lizandra.

Glancing at her friend, she knew Lizandra would know she was favoring one hip from the way she was sitting. Liz could see through a lie faster than anyone.

The Were Queen shifted her gaze in her direction. “Gonna tell me what’s going on?”

“Yup.” Miranda mirrored the way Liz was sitting and moved forward with her elbows on her knees and began rubbing the palms of her hands together, the way she often did when she was thinking. “Just not here.”

“Anything I need to be concerned about?” Liz eyed her people who were scattered throughout the club.

“Not in the immediate scheme of things,” Miranda whispered. “But soon.”

Gavin came back with a steaming plate of nachos rancheros, chicken fingers and her drink.

“Oh, thank you. I’m starving.” Miranda bit into the nachos and almost drooled. When she took a sip of her drink, she frowned. The C was missing the V.

She looked up at Gavin, who smiled. “Painkillers and booze don’t mix well.”

Miranda shook her head; she’d forgotten how sharp a Were’s sense of smell was. “Could the others smell it as well?” she asked.

“Probably, that’s why they left.” Liz smiled knowingly. “Finish eating. We’ll go back to Werehaven.”

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Werehaven was Black Star’s underground stronghold in Central Park across from the Museum of Natural History; the hidden entrance was under one of the many overpasses in the park. Werehaven started out as a cave where Weres socialized without having to hide their true

natures, but with the clan working laboriously, it was turned into a sanctuary for Weres. Besides the dance club, which could rival any NYC club—though the type of dancing that went on around the full moon was not to be found in any human club, there were two long bars located along the sides of the sunken dance floor.

Miranda considered it her home away from home.

Besides being a powerful leader, Lizandra was a good businesswoman and used the money from Werehaven to invest for the clan. She only required two things from her clan: Every member had to tithe a percentage of their income and get a tattoo of a black star somewhere on their body. Lizandra inspired loyalty because she ruled in a democratic manner; her decisions, though intelligent and fair . . . were final.

They walked past the dance floor, through the shadows of the curved bar and then passed the Were Queen's VIP lounge at the back of the club, which many Weres simply referred to as *TheThrone Room*. Gavin grabbed Liz and kissed the hell out of her; Miranda admired the heat that passed between them and felt the magnetic energy of the Weres tingling on her skin. Perhaps her news could wait until tomorrow.

As if he heard her thoughts, Gavin stopped kissing Liz, winked at her and went to the bar.

Liz didn't say a word as they walked down the hall to her rooms which were decorated with paintings and figurines from the Caribbean islands where Liz's family originated from. African masks lined the walls as did tapestries from South America. Native American pottery adorned the shelves along with several pictures of her family. Her brothers had the same aquamarine eyes and mocha complexion Liz possessed.

Liz's apartment was where her close friends hung out to watch old DVD's. Many of the clan's informal meetings were conducted here. Miranda watched as her friend strode over to the

fridge and took out two Coronas. She was amazed at the Amazon strength Liz exuded when she walked. How a nearly six foot woman could walk with the grace of a ballerina was beyond her. *Had to be a Were thing*, she thought.

Lizandra sat down on the sofa next to Miranda and handed her a beer. They tapped bottles and took one long swallow as usual. “Now, tell me. What kept you so late?”

Since Liz was the closest thing to a sister Miranda had, she turned and faced her. “Why would anyone want to assassinate a vampire lord?”

Liz nearly choked on her beer. “Several reasons . . . take your pick.” She relaxed into her sofa cushions. “Why do you ask?”

After Miranda relayed the earlier events of the evening, Lizandra rose to pace with her hands on her hips, her long nails digging in. “So, they’re starting this business up again.”

Miranda looked up at her. “What do you mean, *they*?” Her eyes narrowed. “You know something.” There was much about the paranormal community humans didn’t know—never would. Although Miranda knew more than the average human ever would. “You paranormal types hang out together. What do you know that I don’t know?”

“It’s probably better you don’t know.” Lizandra prowled back and forth. “Men that powerful, that wealthy . . . have many enemies.”

Miranda knew her friend well enough to know when she was being conflicted about wanting to tell her something vital—but having to adhere to the codes of the preternatural alliance. “This isn’t the first attempt, is it?” Miranda sat up straight tapping the tips of her fingers together.

Liz turned back to her. “What makes you say that?”

“Just a feeling I had when all the vampires rushed into the room—like they weren’t all that surprised.” Miranda stood up to place the empty beer bottles in the recyclables, then turned to face her friend, arms crossed over chest. “Now why would that be?”

Liz paused from her pacing and ran a finger slowly over a picture of Grandpa Wells and smiled as she looked back at Miranda. “Sometimes, I forget you were only a child when the vampires decided on ‘*The Grand Reveal*.’”

“I was eight years old,” Miranda said. “I remember that day clearly. I was home sick from school—lying on the couch flipping through the channels. When the announcement was made about the existence of vampires I thought I was on the friggen Si-fi channel.” Miranda remembered the world leaders had tried to alleviate the fears of the public by saying vampires had always been here and had evolved just as we had, but for political reasons the vampires had kept their identities secret. *Political reasons?*

“Valadon came on screen, shaking hands with the president in a strong show of support.” Miranda remembered thinking he didn’t look any different from a human grown-up. “Then a famous blond actress came on screen to reveal her fangs and the nation had a collective sigh; after her, others in the arts and entertainment industries also revealed themselves. The Vampire Nation made assurances they were more like distant cousins, rather than the monsters of pop literature. After the last war, Valadon promised the vampires would help in the rebuilding of hospitals, schools, and businesses. And they did.”

“You remember well.” Liz stopped pacing. “But there was a lot that went on the media never reported. There was a lot of controversy whether or not to make the announcement. The conservative vampires said they had remained hidden for centuries and wanted to stay that way. They thought they would become targeted and deeply resented Valadon’s decision.”

“There were riots with injuries and fatalities on both sides.” Miranda remembered. “When the human authorities failed to contain the mobs, many innocent vampires perished in fires.”

Liz continued. “The progressives stated with all the technology, surveillances around the world, it was impossible to keep their existence secret anymore and that if they didn’t make the decision to come out, someone else would . . . and it wouldn’t be handled as properly as it could be. Eventually, the progressives won out and the rest they say is . . .”

“History.” Miranda decided she needed to learn more.

“After the vamps revealed themselves and the world didn’t stop, we decided to do the same,” Liz added. “Several clan leaders got together and decided to make the announcement as well. We didn’t cause quite a start as the vampires did, though.”

“So, do you have any idea who might want Valadon dead?”

Liz closed her eyes. “When the vamps first came out, there were several human hate groups who called for the eradication of the vampire race. Their fears, their hatred of vampires could not be assuaged.”

“But it’s been twenty years now; surely those extremists are long gone?”

“Are they?” Liz raised an eyebrow. “Do you think racism dies in only one generation?”

Miranda shook her head. History showed the ignorance of the few caused the pain and suffering of the many. “You think those hate groups are still around?”

“Wanna find out?” Liz arched her brow and smiled. “Just what kind of effect did da handsome vampire king have on you? Sex’eh beast, ain’t he?”

Liz and Miranda made their way into the kitchen where Liz was getting out the leftover chocolate mocha cake from the fridge: The seven layer cake with the rich, thick, creamy, chocolate frosting. Orgasmic cake.

“You made that yourself, didn’t you?” Miranda could feel the drool gathering in her mouth as she watched Liz slice the decadent dessert. “You’re going to make me pay for this, aren’t you?”

“You bet your round, white ass I am. Which by the way, gran says looks far more like a black woman’s ass than a white woman’s,” Liz snickered as she handed Miranda her slice.

Miranda nonchalantly ran a hand over her backside. *Chocolate*, she moaned, *it had to be chocolate mocha!* Liz would use any means necessary to get what info she wanted.

“Mmmmmm, it’s so good. Better than sex.” Liz taunted her with sounds of intense orgasms as she swallowed a piece and smiled the most satisfied, evil smile Miranda had ever seen.

“Give me the goddamned fork! You *so* don’t play fair. You won’t put on an ounce and I’m gonna have to run up three flights of stairs for a week to lose it.”

“So—tell me now what da very hot vampire lord told you not to tell me.”

“You’re so sure he did?” Miranda paused to savor the silky smoothness of the cake agreeing with Liz that chocolate was the next best thing to orgasms.

“Of course. Vampires are the most secretive of us all. Tell me, what did ya tink of Valadon?” Liz laughed as she got out the skimmed milk. Seven layer cake and skimmed milk: Makes perfect sense.

Miranda thought back to the way Valadon stood in the shadows and the look on his face as he watched the city below. There was a wealth of emotion in that one look. “He’s not what the media says about him. There’s more to him.” Miranda remembered thinking he had some elusive quality she couldn’t identify. “There’s something sensitive. I get the feeling he doesn’t often show that to others.”

“How can he? He can’t afford to. He has to maintain a certain image.” Liz gulped down some milk. “Hell, even I have to maintain a certain decorum with my own people.”

“He asked me not to discuss the assassination attempt . . . except with you.”

“He knows we’re friends.” Liz rinsed out their glasses.

“Think so?”

“You enter his territory. You work in his building on a consistent basis. Baby, he knows all about you and some things you probably didn’t.”

“Really?” Miranda shuddered. “I haven’t said more than half a dozen words to him before tonight. Why would he know me?”

“Have you looked in the mirror lately?”

Miranda narrowed her eyes. “What are your impressions of him?” She wanted to see if Liz picked up on the same things she had.

“He’s a fair ruler and has done right by the city. Especially after the war. His corporation, ValCorp, gave millions to the hospitals, schools, your museums and others in the rebuilding process.” Liz began to pace. “His people love him, would die for him. From what I hear he is well-respected in the business world, even his competitors admire him.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.” Miranda read the financial reports; she thought it important to have some knowledge of the business world when socializing with museum patrons at fundraisers. She eyed her friend closely. “What do you really think of him . . . personally?”

Liz had that twinkle in her eye that often meant trouble. “I think, if someone is trying to kill the vampire king, we should find out who.”

“*We*? What do you mean *we*? He has an army of soldiers to protect him and investigate for him! He doesn’t need us.”

“Aren’t you curious? After all, it was your ass that got shot,” Liz laughed.

“Not *that* curious.” Miranda thought about it while she flexed her fingers on her hip.

“Okay, a little curious, but I’m sure he has people to look into it.” She shivered at the thought of Valadon’s second, and the extents Remare would go to find the truth. “I met some of Valadon’s Torians tonight. One of them was Remare.”

Lizandra fell back into her favorite recliner. “Ah, da other sex-eh vampire. I know him. He’s been here a few times on business from Valadon.”

“He’s been here? At Werehaven?” Miranda looked shocked. “When? I’ve never seen him. I thought Werehaven was for Weres only.” Miranda was aghast the intimidating vampire was even allowed in Werehaven. Werehaven was *her* haven.

Liz watched her friend closely noting her reaction to Remare. “On occasion we entertain *others*.” She slowly smiled as she swiveled in the recliner. “Especially those we consider friends.”

Miranda rolled her eyes. “He scared the bloody hell out of me. He thinks *I* had something to do with the plot.” She began to pace. *Lizandra considered him a friend of the clan? How was that even possible?* Lizandra was no fool; she was a great judge of character. But still . . . *Remare?*

“You should be scared.” Liz narrowed her green eyes. “He’s a highly-trained assassin and *fiercely* loyal to Valadon. I’m sure he’s already deep into his investigation and probably has more answers than you or I will find.” Liz smiled at the way Miranda became unsettled at the mention of Remare’s name. “Relax Mira, he’ll soon find out you had nothing to do with it. If he’s not aware that you’re a friend of Morel’s and Cyra’s, he will soon enough and they will vouch for you.”

Miranda's breath evened out. "Okay . . . it's late and I'm tired. I'm going to crash here tonight."

"No, you're not. You're going to hit the computers as soon as you leave, *Pan-dor-a*."

"Funny!" But Miranda knew Liz was right and she wouldn't sleep until she downloaded what she could. Like Liz said, it was her ass that got shot.

"Your room is always available, whenever you want. I'll send one of my best computer geeks your way."

"Who?"

"Dane just got back from Chicago. I'll send him to you."

Miranda's face lit up at the mention of the attractive blond Were who kept his hair in a long braid. Dane wasn't as big as some of the other Weres; he was only about five foot ten, had an average built, stunning brown eyes and an easy, sexy smile.

And at one time or another Miranda had woken up next to him. Naked.

"Liz, don't pimp for me." Miranda sighed.

"Someone should. If I don't, you'd never get laid."

"I get laid enough. I don't need you to keep setting me up."

"Really? When was the last time you got some?"

Miranda looked puzzled and squinted her eyes trying to remember.

Liz nearly laughed. "Um-hmm! My point exactly!"

## *Chapter 6*

*Bitch was right! She was Pandora!* Miranda read exceptionally fast—a skill that came in handy at work and now as she sped through everything she could find online concerning vampires that happened twenty years ago. So immersed in her reveries, she barely heard the quiet knock and the door opening to reveal a handsome blond Were.

After reading so much disturbing news about hate groups, seeing Dane’s smiling face was a welcome distraction. “My God, you’re here!” Miranda cried as she jumped up from the chair and sprang into Dane’s arms locking her legs around his hips.

“Hello, gorgeous.” Dane laughed as he gave her a bear hug and a kiss hot enough to melt her bones. “How’s my favorite girl doing?” He nipped her bottom lip. “I’d ask if you missed me,” he said, as he glanced down at her legs, “but I kind of have the impression you did.”

Miranda let her legs slide to the floor. “Oh, sorry. I was just happy to see you. I’m glad you’re back. How was Chicago?” California Boy was looking good, she thought, but then he always did. With his long blond hair, tanned skin and smiling brown eyes, Dane was a looker.

“Windy. But the consultations went okay and the project is complete. Enough business talk—Lizandra said you needed help with something?” Dane gave her one of his most radiant smiles that warmed her heart.

Dane was one of the most unassuming men Miranda ever met. He was brilliant, but never made anyone feel like an idiot because they didn't have his tech skills. She needed to stare at him a minute longer just to take him in. The guy generated good karma and after her night, she needed as much as she could get. "Yeah, but if you just got back you probably want to get some sleep."

"Got sleep on the plane." He tilted his head to the side and cracked his neck. "Whacha need help with?"

"What did Lizandra tell you?"

"Not much. Just that you needed help doing research on some project."

Miranda frowned. She wasn't supposed to share what happened at ValCorp, but she could really use his help.

"Relax, princess," he laughed. "She told me you were shot protecting the vamp king."

Miranda grimaced. "She wasn't supposed to tell anyone."

"Jay-sus, Miranda. Bad timing or what?" He kissed her forehead. "Well, we can pretend she didn't." He grinned sexily. "What happens at Werhaven—*stays at Werhaven.*"

"God's truth." She gave him another kiss, this one gentle and then gave him a much condensed version of events. "So I'm looking at known hate groups, competitors, anyone who might have a grudge against him."

"I see." Dane flipped his ponytail over his back and cracked his knuckles. "Let's see how far you got." He checked her sites with lightening quick strokes over the keys and then looked up at her with his lips beginning to curve. "So . . . did the vamp king bite you?"

"I think he had *other* things on his mind." Miranda rolled her eyes. "I found information on a bunch of different groups. But mostly it looks like press releases, some court documents,

charges that were filed, counter-charges processed, but then dropped. Every now and then I hit a wall or something that says “*access denied.*” I’m wondering what’s behind those walls. Can you get through without causing red flags?”

“You doubt my comp skills?” Dane smiled as he wagged his eyebrows at her. “Or *any* other skills?” He let his fingers fly over the keyboard letting them do their magic. “Hmmm, a few minor challenges, nothing impossible.” Several files and links opened then something shut him down. A few encrypted files and warning flags got his attention. “That’s interesting.”

“What is?”

“Some of this information should be public record, but have been sealed. I’ll check more with my equipment at work.” Dane stretched as his stomach began to growl. He had already downloaded substantially more information than Miranda had. “Got anything to munch on?” He smiled sexily at her.

“Sure, in the fridge.” She read the files as he went to raid the mini-fridge.

Dane came back drinking a bottle of chocolate milk. He took off his shirt and stretched out on the bed leaning on one elbow and watched her work. “So did you find out what you wanted to know?” he asked in a sleepy, sexy voice.

“Huh? Oh yes, and then some.” She yawned loud enough her jaw cracked. “God, what time is it?”

“Late. You mind if I crash here tonight? Don’t have the energy to make it back to my room. Besides, Liz said if she sees me leave before dawn, she’s gonna feed me the family jewels.” Grinning, a low, sensual sound emitted from his mouth. “I’m rather attached to them.”

“Did you just growl?” Miranda asked amusedly.

“Maybe.” He smiled warmly. “So, do I get a reward for sharing my expert comp skills?”

“Depends.” She smiled sexily back at him. “What did you have in mind?”

Keeping his eyes on Miranda, Dane sat up and took off his boots, then proceeded to take the rest of his clothes off. He liked how her body blushed for him. He walked the short distance to the dresser, took off his watch and ring, and gave Miranda an eyeful of his slim, but nicely shaped butt.

Nudity wasn't an issue for the Weres. To them skin was the same as fur, natural. And Miranda was admiring his natural form. How slender men could have such distinct muscles intrigued Miranda as she watched them ripple across his back. Dane never seemed to lose his tan and his golden skin gleamed over his muscles.

“Come and keep me warm, woman,” he said playfully as he stretched out on the bed in all his glory.

“You're a Were, you're warmer than I am.” Miranda grinned. Damn, the man was hot. What was it about a man's butt that got her going? She wondered.

“Maybe, but now I'm tired and I want to sleep,” he said as he turned on Miranda's Bose music system to a song by Coldplay called *White Shadows*, “and I want my favorite cuddle bear.” He pulled the sheet over him and growled again, this time more playful than the last.

Miranda stretched the muscles in her neck and back. She took in the sight of the sexy Were in her bed. His lazy, sensual smile got her every time.

Dane watched her undress and let out a howl of approval.

Miranda laughed. “Move over,” she said as she shut the lamp off. She heard more low growls as she slid under the sheet and let him pull her back to his front. The warmth of his body quickly enveloped her and she could feel his smattering of chest hairs along her back; it was

something that always roused her. “Am I really your favorite cuddly bear?” she smiled over her shoulder.

Dane played with her hair and whispered, “for tonight, you are,” then proceeded to sing along with Chris Martin’s song.

Miranda smiled as he nuzzled her neck. Weres liked to touch and be touched, not just for sex, but to show affection or support. Sleeping naked didn’t always imply sex, sometimes it was just for comfort. That was another thing she liked about him: When Dane wanted sex, he simply asked for it. That was all there was to it. Sex to Weres was very different than sex with humans, Miranda thought. It was humans who complicated the hell out of it. However, making love with a Were was a little tricky. They were built bigger than the average human so male Weres had to take care when in bed with a human woman.

Also, under no circumstances was a human allowed anywhere near Werehaven the nights before, during, or after the full moon. When Weres went into heat those three days of the month, they turned feral. In their Werewolf form, they were much larger and much more dangerous. Sex at that time would be painful if not impossible for a human.

When he let his hand slip down to her hip, he found the small bandage that covered her tiny wound and a snarl erupted. “This where you got stuck?”

“It’s healed,” she murmured. “The doc went in, cleaned it out, and then stitched me up. It went numb for a little while, but feels okay now.”

Dane turned her on her back and was concerned at her muffled groan. “It still hurts?”

“Not really. Though, I think the local wore off. It really doesn’t hurt. I just get this weird zinger every now and then.” She kissed his bicep. “Get some sleep. And thanks again for helping me.”

“My pleasure, princess.” Dane continued singing to her as she felt herself drifting. The last few haunting lines of Chris Martin’s song echoed in her mind and she knew it would always remind her of Dane.

## *Chapter 7*

Valadon sat silently considering his most trusted Torians, who were seated in his conference room waiting for the last arrival. His elite circle of guards had been his loyal friends and advisors for centuries; each had proven themselves under the most dire circumstances. All were strikingly handsome, acutely intelligent and each had sworn blood oaths to him.

Aiden, with his fallen-angel looks, had assisted him in many diplomatic missions. When too much testosterone would flood one of their meetings, it was Aiden who calmed the others. Tonight, tension was etched into his dark blue eyes. “We caught a shadow on one of the feeds, but haven’t been able to make out a face.”

“Keep working on it,” Valadon whispered back.

Across from him sat Tristan, the youngest of the Torians, who was known for his demented sense of humor and stylish clothes. As his weapons master, his aim in hitting targets was perfect; his knowledge of weaponry nearly surpassed all of his Torians. “Bastien and Gregori are still canvassing the neighborhood. They’re due to report in shortly.”

“Good.”

Next to him sat his beloved nephew. Nick wasn’t a Torian; he was a Blueblood, the only surviving son of his sister, Bianca. Nick’s parents had been killed when their private jet crashed

in the south of France. Valadon had hoped Nick would one day take his place as leader of the Vampire Nation, but much to Valadon's regret, Nick had shown little interest in finance or the affairs of the VN.

Morel, the only fair-haired male and the tallest of his elite force, was being briefed about the assassination attempt. He and his wife, Cyra, were communication specialists. Known for his taciturn manner, Morel's golden green eyes missed nothing. "Cyra's in the communications room and reports no unauthorized transmissions were detected from within ValCorp."

Gabriel was also in attendance—reluctantly. Although not a Torian, his knowledge of medicine and science was crucial. His golden brown eyes had the same red rims that were a trait of all vampires—whether born or made. *Amory is sending the reports now*, he communicated silently to Valadon through their blood bond.

His two female Torians, Irina and Katya were at the far end of the table. When they completed their rigorous training, scoring higher than some of the men, he agreed to let them join his private guard. A decision he never once regretted. Katya, the more reserved of the two with her darker features, was an intelligent strategist. Irina was a beauty with her long, platinum blond hair and tall, svelte figure. She was lethal in the art of seduction and his Torians called her, "*The Ice Queen*." Her piercing blue eyes always stayed frosty, betraying her Russian-Siberian heritage. His Torians said the look in her cold eyes was matched only by her cold heart.

Finally, the current leader of his personal guard and second in command entered: Remare, his most trusted advisor and loyal Torian, the oldest and most powerful of them all. Remare was his closest friend throughout the centuries and his ambassador to the other courts, and when needed, his war commander. Because of his long tenures in the European courts, Remare still

