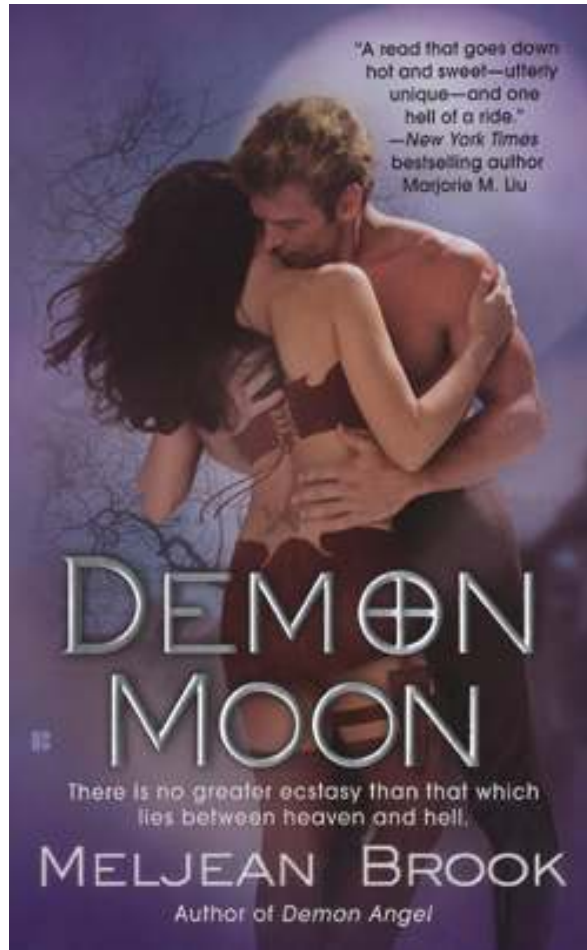


Demon Moon Sneak Peek

SNEAK PEEK

NOT FOR SALE OR DISTRIBUTION



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A BERKLEY SENSATION BOOK
JUNE 2007

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ISBN: 978-0-425-21576-0

DEMON
MOON

By

MELJEAN BROOK

To all of the Missys out there – may you never grow up.

*Special thanks to Megan Frampton, slayer of semicolons and guru of music;
and to Jennfer-with-an-I, for everything.*

Chapter One

Pray do not press your Guardian dictum upon me again. "Appearances are almost always deceiving"—how preposterous! I am beautiful and charming, and that is all my appearance promises. Any in Society who are disappointed when they do not find more can not fault my countenance. The deception is not mine; they have deceived themselves. But let them continue to look, whether they are fools or no; I rather enjoy it.
—Colin Ames-Beaumont, in a letter to Dr. Anthony Ramsdell, 1813

No club should be so crowded at nine o'clock in the evening; drinking and dancing should never reach such animated heights until one o'clock. Two, if it were summer. Any earlier, and it gave the appearance that one came to drink and dance, as if such things were to be pursued for themselves rather than as a means to more pleasurable activities.

It was almost vulgar, and Colin Ames-Beaumont watched with no small measure of dismay as the early crush of people became a smash. Perhaps buying Polidori's had been a terrible mistake. Restoring the nightclub had been an obsession that had quickly burned out, and whatever lingering interest he'd had was quickly snuffed when a human woman with waist-length ebony hair and a horror of a black leather dress slithered up to his private table.

A techno beat pounded through the club, reverberated through his chest. Sumptuous golds and reds enfolded the lounges; the dance floors vibrated with energetic blues and greens. The music was good, the décor excellent; becoming a cliché was not.

Colin resisted the urge to glance down and confirm that his charcoal-gray trousers and ivory cashmere sweater had not been transformed into a tuxedo, complete with satin-lined cape.

And to think he'd been charmed the first time he'd seen Bela Lugosi sweep onto the stage.

A smile curved the woman's blood-red lips, but it failed when her gaze ran over his face. He heard the startled catch of her breath, the sudden increase in her heartbeat.

Colin loved it when they did that.

The male vampire who'd been observing her from one of the second-level lounges did not; Colin heard his growl between the pulses of electronic music. More black leather, a studded collar – he blended with half of Polidori's human clientele, and most of the undead.

Though she didn't move, the woman in front of Colin seemed to flail about, trying to reclaim some of the seductive posture with which she'd started. He'd disrupted her without effort, without expression, but now Colin's smile came easily.

As he intended, she regained her confidence, if not her sense. Bracing her palms on the tabletop, she leaned forward and gave him a view of her ample cleavage. "May I buy you a drink?"

Oh, good God. Could they not have come up with something more original? How did they expect him to respond? *I never drink...wine.*

"No," Colin said, "but if it's free, I will take a sip." He slid his fingers across the back of her hand. She shivered, and his smile widened.

There was lust in her involuntary response, but also fear. Very good. It was foolish of them to approach him this way. Grasping her wrist, he pulled her around the table. After a brief hesitation, she sat on the cushion next to him. Her gaze never left his face, and her tongue flicked out to touch her lips. Her breathing deepened and slowed as she lifted her hair away from her neck.

Colin brushed his thumb over the pulse beating at her throat. "I can make it very good for you," he said softly, and rasped his teeth against her skin. Her lips parted on a gasp. How long would it take?

Not long. The vampire abandoned his post in the lounge.

Only a short lesson, then. Colin's fangs sank deep. He controlled his descent, contained the pleasure of it – and sent the bubbling ecstasy back to her, let it course through her bloodstream. She stiffened and shuddered as the orgasm hit her, tiny cries

breaking from her throat.

Ah, humans. Unable to experience the rapture in any way but sexual. He drew back before the bloodlust could rise, not bothering to close the punctures. Let her partner do that; he'd scent Colin on her skin – and hopefully, wouldn't forget.

She would.

Colin affected a bored expression as the vampire swept the still-quaking woman to her feet. After a furious glance at the streaming wounds, the vampire's head dipped, his mouth closing over the punctures. His dark head against her pale skin made a fascinating study in contrasts.

Colin sighed. It fascinated others as well, though for different reasons; the odor of blood was generating quite a bit of attention from the other vampires in the club. Perhaps it was for the best; he'd only have to explain this once.

"I could have ripped out her throat," Colin said pleasantly. The male lifted his head to stare at him, shaking with rage; the woman's hands clenched on his shoulders as if to hold him back. Good girl. The flush of orgasm had left her cheeks, replaced by pale apprehension. "You don't know me, yet you sent her to me."

The male's shame apparently left him speechless – or he'd finally taken a good look at Colin. If it was the latter, Colin might have pity on him.

Her eyes luminous, the woman replied, "It was my idea. We'd heard you don't kill." She swallowed. "Don't kill humans."

Colin lifted his brows; his smile mocked them. "And from whom did you gather this intelligence?"

"Everyone knows," she said, but some of her bravado deserted her. She glanced up at her companion, as if for assistance.

The vampire had been young when he'd been turned – twenty-five, perhaps. Judging by his late-1980s hairstyle, Colin estimated his transformation had been fifteen or twenty years previous. How unfortunate that so many of the undead clung to the fashions of their youth.

But then, so did humans.

"You are Beaumont, aren't you?" the vampire asked.

"*Ames-Beaumont*," Colin corrected. "My grandmother bought the hyphen, and paid dearly for it delivering an earl; I should hate to see her sacrifice wasted."

After a brief moment of disconcertment, as if he did not know what to make of Colin's reply, the male pulled out the chair tucked beneath the opposite side of the table. "May I?"

Amused, Colin inclined his head. The Goth façade had dropped from the vampire in all but appearance; out came the Midwestern farm boy. The woman settled into his lap.

"I'm Paul, this is Fia." He paused, and uncertainty flickered over his features.

Was he afraid that he'd inadvertently given Colin power over them by telling him their names? Alas, if only. Colin didn't deny or confirm his fear, though, and gestured for him to continue.

"We've recently returned to San Francisco," Paul said, and clasped his hands over Fia's. "Last year, when the...the..."

It wasn't pity that led Colin to help him out. "When the nosferatu began slaughtering us?" he supplied, and grinned as terror spiked the psychic scents of the vampires around them. None of these had fought the nosferatu – if they had, they'd not have survived. Nor had they been inside Polidori's when the cursed creatures had set fire to it, trapping seventy vampires inside...many of them the community's elders. But they would have seen how the nosferatu ripped their human victims apart; photographs from the rituals Lucifer and the nosferatu had performed had leaked into the news and online. A few might have witnessed firsthand their unbelievable strength and speed.

"The nosferatu. Yes." The vampire's pallor deepened; both he and his human guarded their minds well. If not for the physical response, Colin would have had difficulty reading him. "Most of us fled seven months ago, right before they burned this place down."

If fear of the nosferatu had inspired them to flee, they were more intelligent than

the elders had been. "A wise decision, I daresay."

"Most of us lost our sires," Paul added, and Colin suppressed his grimace of distaste. One did not *sire* vampires as if they were animals. Of course, the elders had acted as animals, allowed themselves to be herded into Polidori's and then massacred. Against the nosferatu, there had been no safety in numbers, and they'd only presented a larger target. "But you survived."

"Apparently," Colin said.

Fia shot a quick glance at Paul before she said, "There are rumors that you had protection from a demon. Perhaps a werewolf. You've frequently been observed in the company of a woman who isn't...isn't human, nor vampire." She reached up and slid her hand self-consciously over her hair, and Colin almost burst into laughter. The dye and the leather had been an attempt to simulate Lilith's appearance?

He wasn't certain what was more ridiculous: their obvious assumption that the halfling demon was his consort, or that this human thought she had hope of mimicking Lilith in presence or personality.

"And you've been focusing your hunts on dark-haired women," Fia continued.

They'd discovered that? But Colin's expression reflected none of his surprise as he said, "There is no such creature as a werewolf."

A psychic ripple of disappointment and disbelief from the vampires met his statement. Had their elders taught them nothing? Then again, the elders might not have known the truth about their origins, or the other beings that stalked the Earth.

Very few did.

"But there are demons? And they can offer us protection if the nosferatu strike again?"

Colin's humor fled. "No," he said flatly. "And entering into such a bargain with one would be more foolish than sending a human in an attempt to soften an unknown vampire."

Embarrassment emanated from both members of the couple, but they were determined. Paul said, "We've also heard that a few vampires have been recruited by a

government agency – and that those vampires were all connected with you in some manner. With Polidori's." He waved his hand in a sweeping gesture, as if Colin couldn't see the vampires around them, the club. "Do you intend to lead us? You are the eldest among us."

Fia touched her neck and said quietly, "The most powerful."

More vampires gathered near, and Colin's gaze swept over those assembled. Had they all planned this, or were they simply taking advantage of one couple's daring? He leaned back and rested his arm along the top of the sofa. A sword lay behind a panel in the wall, but he hoped he would not have to use it.

Establishing superiority through bloodshed was as outdated as their clothing, and better suited to beasts.

Colin's gaze didn't move from Paul's, but he directed his statement to them all. "I am pleased that you noticed," he replied. "Though I find it unfortunate that you assume my power has an obligation attached. Your elders were satisfied without having me as leader; you should follow their example in that – if only that. In their constant fighting amongst themselves for position, they killed each other as successfully, if not as quickly, as the nosferatu did."

Paul pressed his lips together and shook his head, clearly unhappy with such an answer. "But this club was the center of vampire activity before the nosferatu arrived. You've purchased and reopened it. For what purpose, if not to reestablish the community here in San Francisco?"

"John Polidori was a friend of mine; I didn't want to see his legacy – such as it is – in ashes. If you are seeking a leader, do not look to me. If someone else wishes the position, he need not fear I'll challenge him."

"We don't need just anyone," Paul said. "We need strength. The nosferatu massacred the elders, yet you remained in the city and lived. My consort was one of those killed; I won't lose another."

Colin glanced at Fia. The only humans brought into the community were those a vampire intended to turn. A human could not be fed from daily for long; it became too

dangerous. Yet she was comfortable among them, and obviously familiar to many. Either she had known of vampires before Paul had lost his partner, or she'd absorbed knowledge from him and entrenched herself in the community very quickly. "Then you'd best learn to protect her better. I've little interest in leading a group of vampires who would use a human as their weapon and shield."

"Yet *you* feed from them?"

And another had grown bold. Colin barely glanced at the speaker – dark and tall, shaven head, his leather vest exposing his muscular arms and a tattoo of a wolf. There were advantages to his extraordinary – *nosferatunlike* – speed: Colin memorized the vampire's appearance in that swift look, though to the vampire, it would seem as if Colin hadn't given him the slightest acknowledgment.

As an insult, the cut direct had been much more effective in London's drawing rooms – instead of being silenced, the vampire's voice rose and rang with challenge. "You endanger all of us. The elders should never have allowed such as you to roam the streets."

Such as him? Colin's amusement returned. "They attempted to stop me...once. Will you try to do the same now?"

"You fought them?" Fia's question was echoed by uneasy murmurs.

Colin raised his heel to the sofa cushion, rested his elbow on his knee. His smile was as lazy as his posture. "I'd no need for such drastic measures," he told her. "Would *you* kill such as me?"

Her lips parted as her gaze slid over his features. For an instant, she stopped breathing...then shook herself out of it. "Yes. If you didn't follow the community's rules."

Delighted by her response, Colin laughed softly. "Your elders found that they could not kill me. And why should they? When I first came to this city, there was no vampire community here, and worldwide the requirement of partnerships and bloodsharing was in its nascent stages; our numbers weren't high enough to warrant it."

As the vampire population rose, it became a requirement of most communities

that each vampire have at least one bloodsharer, so that they'd not feed from humans. Almost all vampires paired up in twosomes or threesomes and exchanged blood between themselves. It was an arrangement that had evolved from the need for secrecy: even a single vampire would be found out if he needed to hunt each night.

But for Colin.

He agreed with the reasoning behind bloodsharing, though he could not do it—and he could not tolerate being *told* how to live. "Why should I submit to a rule that didn't exist when I was born?"

"For our protection," Paul said, as if it were that simple.

"You have been watching me feed for months; have my activities drawn human notice?"

"No." Once again, the bold vampire with the wolf tattoo spoke. This time, Colin caught a hint of frustration and bewilderment in his psychic scent. From his inability to understand how Colin could feed undetected, unremembered?

Even Colin did not fully understand it.

"But that doesn't mean you won't be discovered in the future."

"I have not in two hundred years," Colin said with a careless shrug, and returned his attention to Paul and Fia. "I've no intention of bloodsharing, or discontinuing my hunts. I've no intention of leading you. I fear I don't have what you're looking for."

"You have answers."

Yes, but most of these vampires were too eager to fall into line, to follow. He couldn't imagine what they'd become if they received some of the truth. Individually, it might be safe, but a group would likely become a cult, speculating on realms they'd never see: Caelum, Hell, Chaos.

Participating in rituals, carelessly playing with curses and symbols.

"I also have a tan," he said as he rose to his feet. Several vampires took a step back; Paul and his human did not flinch. "If there is anything else I can provide you, do ask it of me."

Fia's mouth flattened with her disappointment. "Maybe you could lower the

thermostat? You've got the air-conditioning on at the bar and in the DJ station, but it's blasting heat everywhere else."

"I'd hate for my employees to suffer discomfort. Are *you* uncomfortable?"

"No, but—" She waved toward the vampires, her partner. Their skin glistened with perspiration.

"I daresay no human here is. More to the point, neither am I—so I'll not likely adjust it. I find that seventy-two degrees is a near perfect temperature." In the nightclub, at any rate. Colin lifted her hand from the table, pressed a kiss to the back of it, and left a folded business card in her palm.

She looked up, startled. He only smiled and walked away through the gyrating bodies, toward his suite of rooms.

He didn't bother to turn on the lights. Though he'd only moved in a month previous, he was as familiar with these rooms as he'd been with his house. He'd lived in the Victorian mansion in the Haight for over a century—now he waited for *its* restoration to be completed.

The soundproofing around the suite erased the heavy electronic beat. Three symbols were carved into the doorframe, and he might have used them to silence the noise from outside, but the spell they cast also prevented any communication from being sent or received. The form of communication did not matter: a phone call, an e-mail, or sign language were equally useless.

His computer screen glowed softly in the corner of his office. His message to Lilith was short: My dear Agent Milton, you may soon expect a call from Paul and Fia. She's human, but he'll likely transform her soon. She is the brains; they share the ballocks. Your compliments had best be poetry to my exquisite ears, because your sodding little experiment is a bloody pain in my arse.

Lilith could interpret that as she pleased.

Christ, what a nuisance this had all become. After Lilith and her unlikely partner—Hugh Castleford, a former Guardian, knight, and composer of horrid prose—

had out-wagered Lucifer and saved Castleford's students from the nosferatu seven months before, the nosferatu had been teleported to the Chaos realm and the Gates to Hell closed for five hundred years.

With such a resounding success, Colin had never imagined there'd be a need to recruit vampires to fight rogue demons, that Lilith would continue playing secret agent under the same Homeland Security directorate as the FBI – within the newly established and vaguely named Special Investigations division – or that she and Castleford would head operations from a dilapidated warehouse in Hunter's Point. The agency had three primary functions: to slay the demons and nosferatu who remained on Earth, to conceal from the human population and cover up all otherworldly activity, and to train novice Guardians and vampires.

Which, Colin supposed, suited Lilith and her partner well – she liked nothing better than to lie, and Castleford nothing better than to lecture.

Still, it was absurd. But nothing equaled the absurdity of the Guardians and their blasted Ascension, which had left the angelic corps reduced to a few dozen warriors – a force incapable of containing the hundreds of rogue demons who'd escaped from Below before the Gates had closed, or the nosferatu who'd yet to crawl from their caves. Even Castleford, for all he lacked in style, had the grace to Fall and give up his Guardian immortality, rather than Ascend and leave Earth defenseless.

Nor had Colin imagined that he'd involve himself in SI's operations and become part of that defense. He hadn't resisted Lilith's suggestion that he appear in public to gauge the vampire community's knowledge of things Above and Below, and to enlist those who could be of use to her. Initially, it had been an amusing diversion, but the level of attention he'd garnered from the vampire community had been...unpleasant.

They should look and admire; they shouldn't expect anything in return.

Colin leaned back, stared up at the ceiling. He'd known that others had watched him and his movements over the past few months, but he hadn't realized they'd catalogued his victims and analyzed the results. Statistically, dark-haired women would be his primary source of blood – but statistics wouldn't account for the trend they'd

observed.

An obsession, fueled by guilt. This one would burn out soon, as well.

A chime from his computer alerted him to the incoming mail. Lilith, likely with an effusive description of his beauty. He wasn't in the mood for it.

But he stayed his hand from closing the program. It wasn't from Lilith, but Savitri Murray, who lived in the apartment above Castleford's garage. Who played with her electronic devices and kept the books at her grandmother's restaurant. Who never looked at anything with fear, but instead a wide-eyed curiosity. Dark, lovely Savitri.

The message was probably a mistake – something in which she'd accidentally replied to all of the original recipients instead of just Castleford or Lilith.

The subject line said only, `A question...Help?`

His lips twitched. Always questions with her. Endless questions.

She wouldn't look to him for answers. His smile faded, but he opened the e-mail, intrigued.

`Is there any *good* reason for a nosferatu to take the overnight flight from London to New York?`

He stared at the screen, dread freezing an icy knot in his chest. No idle question, this. An airliner from Heathrow had crashed into the Atlantic the previous week, the cause of the malfunction unknown. And Colin knew Savi was scheduled to return from India via London that evening.

Oh, bloody hell.

The probability of this ending well was a big fat zero.

Savi went back once, just to make certain her eyes hadn't deceived her – she wished they had. There, in the aisle seat, near the starboard wing: a pale face with liver-slice lips. No eyebrows. Huge, muscular form. Cap pulled down over its ears to hide their pointed tips.

Nosferatu.

She quickly glanced away.

The flight attendant smiled apologetically when Savi returned to the cabin, as if good flight attending should have included the power to prevent Savi's bladder from reaching the breaking point while the two restrooms in first class were in use. "Is there anything I can bring to you, Miss Murray?"

Do you have a sword in your little beverage cart?

Savi shook her head. With luck, this would be over before Nani woke from her nap. She would be disappointed; Savi had promised her grandmother she wouldn't use the computer on the long flight home.

But then, Nani was often disappointed in her.

"Asha looked very beautiful," her grandmother said without opening her eyes.

"Yes, Nani," Savi said automatically as she sat down and checked her e-mail for replies. Thank god the airline provided Internet access through a LAN connection – it would be easier if she could use a phone, or the microphone in her headset, but the nosferatu might hear her speaking. E-communication was her safest option.

"Her hair was exactly as a bride's should be. You should grow yours out. No suitable boy is searching for a hedgehog to be his wife."

"No suitable boy is searching for a college dropout, either," Savi muttered, and glanced away from the screen.

Nani's face was drawn and tired; the trip to Mumbai had been difficult for her. Like Savi, she had delicate bones and a slim frame – but she'd not had Savi's luck in avoiding the parasites and bacteria that were so easy to pick up abroad. She'd spent a good portion of the month dehydrated, unable to eat or drink without losing it later.

Despite her frailty, Nani's voice was steady, strong. "You're twenty-six, *naatin*. You are beautiful, but if you wait much longer you will have only divorcés and shop owners to choose from."

Savi fought the hysterical giggle that rose in her throat. The nosferatu wouldn't leave much for a divorcé or a shop owner to marry.

Her instant messenger connected, and she scanned the list of online friends. No one she could trust to call Lilith or Hugh, or even the vampire. What time was it in San

Francisco? Nine in the evening, but perhaps Lilith and Hugh were near their computers at home.

Just in case, she duplicated the e-mail and sent it as a text message to their cell phones, then surfed to find a news article about the plane that had gone down the previous week. She'd only caught the headline during their trip. Now, she needed details.

Overnight flight – the *same* flight. No survivors. Preliminary inquiry suggested it hadn't been a mechanical failure, nor an explosive – and there were rumors the bodies found had sustained injuries inconsistent with a crash.

How easy would it be for a nosferatu to kill everyone on board, then leap out mid-air? It could fly quickly enough to reach Europe again before the sun rose, or go west to America – or simply dive into the ocean and wait for the next evening before emerging.

What time had the flight gone down?

Twelve fifty-eight Eastern. Savi's heart stopped. Less than an hour. Would the nosferatu keep the same pattern? Most likely; Hugh had once told her they hated change, hated to veer from a familiar course.

Nani sighed. "You've been so difficult since we returned from that place."

Caelum. Savi's throat tightened, but her voice was light as she said, "I was difficult before that."

A messenger window popped up. `No, my sweet Savitri. Are you in the air?`

Colin. She'd avoided the vampire for seven months, but now her eyes flooded with tears of relief. Except for brief meetings in which his affectations had known no bounds, she hadn't spoken with him. And he'd never been the least bit apologetic, as if he thought she didn't remember what he'd done in Caelum. A few times she'd caught him watching her – probably wondering why she hadn't said anything of it to anyone. It must prick his vanity to be ignored.

It pricked hers knowing how stupid she'd been to trust him. Now, she had no

choice but to trust him again.

Yes. She added the flight number and a link to the news article.

She didn't expect an immediate response. Colin would be trying to reach Lilith and Hugh, or one of the SI agents who handled this type of thing.

This type of thing. Again that hysterical laughter threatened. Seven months ago, she hadn't known *this type of thing* existed. Had known nothing of Guardians, who protected humans from demons and nosferatu. Nothing of vampires. What she had known she'd considered little more than a fantasy, spun from books into video and card games – and she'd profited well from it.

Now she'd probably pay.

It only took two minutes for Colin to get back to her. Lilith sent a fledgling to the Gate to collect Michael or Selah.

Michael or Selah. Both Guardians could use Savi as an anchor, and they could teleport from Caelum directly into the airplane. But the Gate nearest to San Francisco was in southern Oregon; how quickly could a young Guardian fly?

E.T.A.?

Forty-five minutes.

Oh, god. Too close. She stared at the screen and willed the number to decrease. But wishing had never helped her before; it wouldn't now. She didn't have time, she didn't have a sword or a hellhound or a gun – what did she have?

Hellhound venom. Hugh had given it to her along with a few other methods of protection. It was in a perfume vial – a significant payload, enough to paralyze the nosferatu, but she had no way to deliver it. Stabbing wouldn't work; the creature was too fast. And even if she managed to cut it with a venom-laced blade, it wouldn't slow it enough to allow her to get away. Not a lot of damage could be done with the few items she had – a plastic fork to the eye?

The big fat zero was growing morbidly obese.

As if concerned by her lack of reply, Colin wrote, Do not be afraid, sweet Savitri.

I'm not. Not for herself. But Nani, the other passengers?

You should be. A round yellow face suddenly winked up at her.

"Shh, *naatin*," Nani admonished a moment later. Savi stifled her laughter; it had too sharp an edge, anyway. "You waste too much time with those friends online." The rest lay unspoken: Had Savi not spent so much time on her computer, she'd have passed her classes, finished her studies, obtained the almighty degree. It did not need to be spoken; it had been said a million times. Nani meant well, of course—it was just that Savi's idea of what was good for her conflicted with her grandmother's.

But it was hard to blame it on a generation gap when a two-hundred-year-old vampire finished a sentence with a smiley.

She closed her eyes, tried to imagine his expression at that moment. His features were impossible to forget: his short hair, like burnished gold; the darker, slashing brows; thick lashes around wintry gray eyes. A blond god, with a deity's careless cruelty; the firm line of his mouth suggested it, and his smile was a predator's.

Was that wink to reassure her or to mock her?

Talk to me, sweet. Can you see him?

Savi turned, leaned out over the aisle. The top of its head. It took only another minute to locate the seating plan from the airline website and send him the link and seat number.

You're in first class?

Nani's with me. And the reason she'd chosen the ridiculously expensive tickets. Savi had insisted over Nani's protests, citing reasons that ranged from her grandmother's age to the fatigue of the endless flight and multiple connections.

Did it accomplish anything? Is she impressed by what you've made of yourself, or does she think you more reckless than ever, tossing away money?

Ah, there it was. She could almost hear the aristocratic accent, the lazy viciousness.

Are you deliberately trying to piss me off?

Yes. The nosferatu will eat your fear. It's ambrosia to

such as us.

She sighed. Surely he realized that seven months of living near Lilith had inured her to such melodrama. And he didn't need to convince her that the nosferatu was terrible, evil – she knew what it was.

I'm not afraid, she repeated.

She didn't add that if he asked again in forty minutes and Michael still hadn't shown, he'd get a completely different answer. Colin took as much pleasure in producing fear as he did in his appearance. And Savi was easy – but not *that* easy.

Chapter Two

Caelum is...beyond beautiful. A fitting home for once-humans who call themselves Guardians, and who claim their powers have an angelic source.

I've heard Hell described exactly as you imagine it: fire and brimstone, cities crawling with demons, and torture pits. But Chaos—no one will tell me anything about Chaos. I've had to guess most of it.

—Savi Murray, in a secured e-mail to Detective Taylor, 2007

Colin tore his hands through his hair and tried to ignore the voice yelling at him through his speakerphone. "Make sure she stays calm, Colin, or I'll rip your balls off! Tell her to get into that bathroom right now and use the fucking symbols."

Shut up, Lilith. He didn't say it aloud, because she *would* rip his balls off. They'd regenerate, but he liked that part of his anatomy too much to lose it, even temporarily. He said through clenched teeth: "Agent Milton, my dear, you are *not* helping. Where's Castleford?"

At times, it was much easier to deal with the former Guardian; his self-control was near legendary, his focus unrelenting. Lilith's was...not, and the more she cared for the person threatened, the more demonic she became.

Colin had no intention — *no time* — to manage her fear over his own.

He heard the deep draw of her breath through the speaker, the buzz of her motorcycle. Her tone was slightly more even when she continued. "Training the newbie vamps over in the Mission. He's on his way now. I'm almost to our place. That plane — I *knew* it. The bloodsucker probably thinks it's an abomination for humans to fly. Goddammit, I've been stonewalled for a week by the FAA and the British — "

"Lilith!"

Another deep breath. Then softly, "This is going to kill him, Colin."

No, the only thing that might kill Castleford would be losing Lilith, but Colin realized it was something he could use to convince Savitri to hide. Her relationship with Castleford echoed that of a brother and sister — she might not fear for herself, but she might do as Colin asked for Castleford's sake.

"Get her in there, Colin. I don't care what you have to do or say. You're beautiful; promise her use of your glorious body for the next fifty years."

"You don't have to manipulate me, Lilith," he muttered. Recollection of Savitri's caramel skin, her scent, and the taste of her blood might tempt *him*, but he doubted he would have the same effect on her.

Castleford wants you to take Auntie to the washroom and use the protection of the symbols to keep the nosferatu out.

He waited restlessly for her reply, rubbing at a spot of Prussian blue on his palm. Caelum had become yet another obsession, but it slipped away with each stroke of his brush. And as with all that was elusive, he only pursued it the more. Soon his memory of Caelum would be a pale imitation of the images on canvas.

Run, Savitri. Hide.

"Is she going?"

If Michael and Selah arrive before the nosferatu begins killing everyone, there's no need to hide. And if I use them to put the spell around the restroom and hid inside, Michael and Selah wouldn't be able to teleport into it to save us if they arrived after the nosferatu killed everyone. The symbols couldn't protect us from a crash. So unless Michael can carry an airplane, we'd die anyway.

She had to be logical. "Can Michael carry an airplane?" Colin asked aloud. It wouldn't surprise him if the Doyen could. Michael could heal injuries, transform humans into Guardians, and teleport across realms; all other Guardians possessed only one unique Gift in addition to incredible strength, speed, and the ability to shape-shift and create clothing with a thought—but their leader was an exception to that rule.

"What? No." Lilith paused, and the sound of the motorcycle died. "I don't think so. It doesn't matter, Colin: lie to her. Hell, give me two minutes to get inside and online and I'll do it myself."

I have venom. I have an idea—just in case.

He typed his response with inhuman speed. No, Savi. Whatever it is, don't try it. Lilith's almost ready to talk to you. Wait for

her.

She'll lie to me. I'm giving Michael until 9:50. I can't wait longer than that. There are four hundred people on here, Colin.

His gaze fell to the clock in the corner of his screen, and his gut twisted. He tried to think of a lie, tried to think of anything that might convince her.

Tried to think of anything he could say that she would trust.

I have to close my computer. Give my love to Hugh and Lilith.

Suicide. No question where she'd learned it. Just like Castleford.

You're human, sweet. Wait for the Guardians. And to make her smile, even if he could not: You must wait to see me again, if nothing else.

They'd better hurry, vampire. Even you aren't pretty enough to stop a nosferatu. But perhaps I'll flash a picture of you at him first, just to see.

A smiley grinned up at him. He stared at it, unable to believe she'd be such an idiot. He had been attacked by one of the nosferatu two centuries before; the result had not been as lovely as his face suggested. Three people—two of them Savitri's friends—had been mutilated and killed earlier that year. Did she think because Castleford and Lilith had pulled off the impossible that she had gained some kind of imperviousness by association?

What the bloody fucking hell was wrong with her? Did she have absolutely no sense of self-preservation? Had she learned nothing when she'd been in Caelum? She'd evaded his presence so well since they'd returned he knew she'd not forgot *all* of it. Why would she be so stupid and careless, taking another risk with her life like this?

The messenger logged her out.

"I'm going to kill you, Colin." Lilith's voice was low and dangerous.

He bit his tongue. Blood filled his mouth, and he rang off without a word.

Savi decided that she wouldn't need protection from the nosferatu – it would either kill her or it wouldn't – but she would from the other passengers. Did Britain have anything similar to the U.S.'s Federal Air Marshal program? Would there be armed guards undercover on international flights? Savi had been shot before; she didn't want to repeat the experience. But it would take too much time to find out – better to just look after herself and Nani as best she could after she'd killed the damned thing.

The battery pack slid out easily. Not much room to maneuver, but her hands were slender, her fingers long. Her lovers had often complimented them, as if she'd come by their design through accomplishment instead of genetics.

Her other tools were in her checked luggage; it was impossible to carry on screwdrivers and clippers. They'd have made this easier, but they weren't necessary.

She smiled to herself. A screwdriver to the nosferatu's eye – *that* would have been interesting, though probably no safer or more effective than a plastic fork.

She reached into the empty battery slot, and paused. Not smart to let anyone see her do this. Though most of the passengers reclined in their seats and slept, a few were reading or using their computers. The flight attendant might pass by at any moment, and would be justifiably suspicious if she saw Savi tearing out the guts of her laptop.

No, it's not a bomb that I'm making, but I do intend to maim – and hopefully kill – a cursed bloodsucking fiend. Do you mind holding this penlight for me?

That wouldn't go over well. Nor would Savi's assurance that it would all be unnecessary if Michael and Selah arrived. *I know a couple of humans who've been given angelic superpowers and Gifted with an ability to teleport; they can pop right into the plane and teleport the fiend away faster than you can blink. You probably won't even notice.*

No.

A blanket over her lap hid evidence of her not-quite-terrorism, if not the movements beneath it. Perhaps the flight attendant would think she was masturbating.

Dammit. That's what she should have told Colin she'd be doing in her final hour: imagining Michael's face as she brought herself to multiple orgasms.

The insult to his vanity would've probably made his head explode.

"What are you doing, *naatin*?"

"Trying to find my power inductor, Nani." Savi ignored her grandmother's exasperated sigh and waited until she closed her eyes again. Nani had the ability to nap anytime, anywhere – within moments her breathing deepened, and a soft snore came from her throat.

Savi hooked her fingers in the gap between the battery housing and the power supply, clenched her jaw, and pulled with steady pressure. The plastic was the same as the outside casing, resistant against impact.

It finally cracked; she gasped in pain, then worked loose the small, flat piece and removed it. Her nail had torn in half. Fighting tears, she sucked on her fingers until the sting eased.

At least the injury was useful; she'd need the blood later.

The inductor retained the heat from its use, and it was probably better to unwind the wire while it was warm. No time to let it cool, anyway. It must be done slowly and carefully – a single kink in the thin length would ruin everything.

Another steady pull around the inductor's copper coil; this one was more difficult. Tiny screws held the inductor in place. They wouldn't give, but the iron bobbin in its plastic seat would.

Maybe. If her hand didn't give first; it already cramped from the awkward position and the force she applied. The edge of the broken casing cut into her knuckle, then suddenly sliced deeper as the bobbin snapped free. *Oh god, oh god.* She could barely move her fingers, so badly did they ache.

Breathing shallowly between her teeth, she used the nail of her left forefinger to find the end of the wire. It had been sealed, but she picked at it until the tip came free of the spool. Twenty-four gauge copper wire, seventy-five wraps around the bobbin. Almost two meters. She'd ordered it to those specifications less than two months before. The wire was thicker than a typical inductor coil, but she'd wanted to see how it performed with international voltage.

Not well; it fluctuated and overheated too easily. But it was as thick as piano

wire, if not as sturdy – the tensile strength one-tenth that of steel.

It *should* work; the only real question was if she was strong enough, quick enough.

Probably not. But she had to try.

She gingerly placed the laptop beneath her seat and began unrolling the wire. Glanced at her slim gold watch. Twenty minutes.

Savi knew very little about magic. She knew nothing of how the symbols worked, only that they did. *Silence. Surround. Lock.* Hugh had shown them to her for an emergency and explained the rules: the lock was keyed to the blood of whomever cast it. That person could go in and out as they pleased. Anyone else inside when the spell had been cast could leave, but not return. If no one remained inside or the symbols were destroyed, the spell broke.

And no one outside could hear through, enter, or break through the surround. No *being* could – but fire, flood? The structure was not impervious to damage from natural sources, including gravity and the crushing pressure of the Atlantic.

She wound the copper into a huge coil, slipped it over her neck. It had taken her five more minutes to prepare it than she'd anticipated.

"Nani!"

She didn't wait for her grandmother to come fully awake before pulling on the older woman's arm.

"*Naatin*, what – "

"I cut myself," Savi said quickly. "Help me in the bathroom?"

The restroom was vacant, thank god. She'd have hated to walk past the nosferatu bleeding like this. She pushed her grandmother in ahead of her, turned, and locked the door. Her earring post barely made a scratch in the plastic, but it was enough. She finished it with a dab of blood over each symbol.

Silence. The hum of the engines disappeared, though she could still feel the vibration beneath her feet.

Her heart pounded. It must have been doing so for a while, but this was the first she'd noticed its rapid pace, or the clammy perspiration on her face. Gooseflesh raised the fine hairs on her arms.

She took a deep breath to steady herself, to rebuild her mental blocks. Hugh had been teaching her to guard her mind since she'd returned from Caelum; she'd put the shields into place as soon as she'd recognized the nosferatu, but the toll of pain and stress might have weakened them.

No psychic emissions could penetrate the spell; before she exited, she'd make sure her shields were solid.

"*Naatin?*" Her grandmother's query held a sharp edge of fear.

"Nani, there's a nosferatu on board – those things that killed Ian and Javier, you remember?" She lifted the hem of her long linen skirt and dabbed at her upper lip, her brow. Her fingers left a stain on the pale green.

It was going to be a bitch to run in.

Nani's mouth set in a thin line, and she shook her head. "Hugh destroyed them –"

"No, not all of them. There were a few that weren't part of Lucifer's bargain, and there's one here." Savi turned on the tap, clenched her teeth as the water washed away the blood. The wounds still seeped, and she wrapped tissue around them. Added more around her palms. "You're going to be safe in here – but you can't leave, okay? I'll be back in a minute or two."

"No, *naatin*. I forbid it."

She met Nani's gaze in the mirror. The same dark eyes – the same features, but for Savi's wild, spiky hair and slightly lighter skin. "There's no one else."

"Yes, there's no one else. You are the last, Savitri. I can't lose you, too."

"You won't," Savi said, her voice thick. "I promise you won't."

Nani's braid fell over her shoulder with the force of her headshake. Savi tucked it back. "You'll make me cry. You are too impetuous, too unsettled."

"I know." She bent and kissed her grandmother's forehead, then turned.

"Savitri! Make a promise you can keep." Nani gripped her forearm. "Promise you will let me find a husband for you, so that you marry this year. Let me know you are in a good position before I die. Make an old woman happy for once."

She hesitated only for a moment. "Will you stay here if I promise?"

"Yes, *naatin*."

A short laugh escaped her, and she closed her eyes. "Alright, Nani. We'll find a suitable boy."

Michael didn't come.

Despite everything, Savi had waited another two minutes, leaning back against the lavatory door and pasting a smile on her face as if nothing was wrong, as if her grandmother wasn't locked inside a toilet and surrounded by magic made from symbols Lilith had learned from Lucifer.

Savi had been rescued by a Guardian once before; perhaps that one time was all her karma allowed. Perhaps every bit of good had been used up when she'd been nine years old and Hugh had thrown himself in front of her, attempting to shield her from a pair of bullets.

Even then, velocity had almost triumphed over virtue – one lead slug had passed a millimeter from her spine, the other an inch above her heart. Small distances in a small body, but had Hugh not been there, had his flesh not changed the bullets' speed and trajectory, she wouldn't have survived; the gunman had aimed for her head.

Her parents and her brother had not been so fortunate.

The flight attendant gave her a sympathetic smile: *Yes, they've been in India. Oh! their poor intestines. The grandmother will be in there for some time. And there goes the younger, stretching her legs as she tries to settle her stomach.*

At least that's what Savi hoped she thought. Surely she wasn't thinking of breaking strain, force per square inch, friction, James Bond villains, and magical venom. But it was hard to determine; maybe those things did occupy the mind of a woman who spent most of her time thirty-five thousand feet in the air between Britain and America,

surrounded by a thin shell of aluminum.

But the flight attendant probably didn't think about the venom. Savi didn't think about it much, either – she knew that Lilith had to cut into venom sacs beneath her hellhound's tongue to collect it, and that Sir Pup was awake when it happened.

It wasn't an operation that Savi liked to consider, and she was grateful she'd never seen it.

Down the portside aisle, past the sleeping businessmen and -women, to the coach class. Two blue seats near the windows, four in the center. The nosferatu was in the second row; she didn't look at it as she made her slow circuit, crossing to starboard behind the last line of seats in the cabin. Most of the passengers slept.

Michael, Selah? Now would be really, really good. The nosferatu's arm hung over its armrest, its fingers flexing. In anticipation? How had it afforded the flight? Where had it obtained identification? Had it simply slipped in with its inhuman speed? Was there a body in the cargo hold – or in the airport – belonging to the person who was supposed to have been in seat 29B?

She shook her head. It took some effort, but she quieted the portion of her brain that screamed for answers. Some things were very simple: gravity made airplanes fall out of the sky when pilots and passengers were dead; a long distance divided by a short time made a fledgling's speed *too slow*; nosferatu were Evil, with a hatred of humanity, and no Rules preventing them from murder.

Worse than demons. Or vampires.

Or suitable boys.

She uncapped the hellhound venom and poured it into her mouth, held it on her tongue. It tasted oddly sweet and heavy, like nectar from a sun-warmed peach. It was too bad her face had to be the delivery system.

The passenger behind the nosferatu had reclined his seat. Hopefully asleep – and hopefully he wouldn't mind that Savi was going to sit on his lap for a few seconds.

She lifted the wire coil from around her neck. Made a single loop.

Then she stepped into the row behind the nosferatu, dropped the loop over its

head, and fell into hopefully-sleeping-guy's lap.

She didn't have to pull much; the nosferatu's powerful surge to its feet did most of the work. It yanked her forward, and she smashed into the seatback, almost swallowed the venom. The wire slid through her left hand, providing enough friction to tear and rip – her fingers, and judging by the sudden spray, its throat. Like pomegranate juice.

The copper snapped. *Oh god, oh god. Please let it have cut the carotid artery.* It wouldn't kill it, but give her time. Sleeping-guy yelled and struggled beneath her. She leapt up, her stomach against the headrest. Blood was everywhere. She sealed her lips against the side of the creature's gaping neck, the pumping blood, felt its hand come up, its nails digging into her right shoulder – and she expelled the venom.

Like blowing up a balloon, Savi. A wet, cold, disgusting balloon.

Screams rang in her ears. The hand fell away from her shoulder as paralysis set into the creature – maybe it would be enough. It would have to be; it was all she could do.

She ran. A passenger managed to grab her skirt – but he couldn't hold on. That was the thing about momentum and velocity: it often won despite good intentions.

Locking the door was unnecessary, but she did anyway. Nosferatu blood covered her chin, was *in* her mouth, her throat. She gagged and spat into the sink, splashed at her face. Her right arm and her fingers were numb. Nani sat on the commode and quietly sobbed into her hands.

Savi smiled weakly, forcing out her words through the chattering of her teeth, the sudden shivering that had overtaken her body. "A surgeon? A neurosurgeon. Ivy League. Fair-skinned. Tall and handsome."

But not too handsome.

"...so...beautiful..." The blonde moaned the words as she came. The third woman that night, but he could not stop drinking. A dull ring in his ears – his cell phone, Colin realized dimly. Lilith.

He didn't want to know. Neither Selah nor Michael had been in Caelum; the fledgling Guardian Lilith had sent had been forced to wait until one of them had returned. It had taken more than an hour and a quarter before the fledgling alerted Selah. Colin had flipped on the television once, only to hear of "Terror in the Skies."

Then he'd left to hunt.

He broke away and pushed the sleep onto her. She fell limp, unconscious in his arms. He sliced his lip and mixed his blood with hers to heal the punctures. He'd almost taken too much, but she was strong, young. She'd recover quickly.

He let her slide to the linoleum floor in a boneless, quivering heap. Her groceries still sat on the counter. He paused to inhale the scent of oranges, then shoved the bags into the refrigerator and carried her to her bedroom. A nice, tidy flat. A moderately intelligent woman, but she shouldn't have invited a stranger up, no matter how lonely she was, nor how handsome and strong and helpful he'd seemed.

She'd not learn a lesson from it, however; she'd forget him by the morning. Or, at best, remember him as a very pleasant – and very beautiful – dream. Perhaps she'd question the haphazard placement of the groceries in the refrigerator, but she'd never think a vampire had fed from her in that kitchen.

No, she'd likely blame her job, her exhaustion, or tell herself she was being fanciful.

Small wonder they needed the Guardians' protection.

He pulled her blankets over her; she sighed and rocked her hips against the mattress. He contemplated waking her, but he'd indulged that lust with the first woman.

And it was not bloodlust that had driven him to the third.

His phone rang again as he walked through the living room. A mirror hung over the sofa. He'd closed his eyes and refused to listen when he'd passed it before, loaded down like a footman. Now he stared into it. Perhaps the screams would drown out Lilith's voice when he answered her call. She wouldn't hear them, though she was no stranger to their like.

"Yes, Agent Milton?"

"I'm not going to kill you after all. I need a favor."

"Do you?"

In the mirror, a human body was devoured, torn apart by a flying beast. The human's face remained, frozen into the glacial sky, shrieking.

Chaos.

"Damage control. I'm flying to New York with Michael; Hugh's there with Selah, and she's ready to jump in, but we need her back as soon as possible. That means you have to handle...Colin, what the fuck is wrong with you? You should have asked me to call you beautiful by now."

"I was feeding," he said, his voice flat.

"And her declarations were enough? That's revolting. Listen, I need you to take Savi out, let her be seen by as many people as possible. Preferably a cop or two, as well. Auntie, you can leave at home with Sir Pup."

He looked away from the mirror, massaged his eyelids with thumb and forefinger. "She killed it?"

"Garroted it with a wire from her laptop, then pumped it full of venom," Lilith said, and laughed. Colin thought he detected a note of pride beneath it. "It's not dead, though, just paralyzed. Michael teleported it to the holding cell at SI. Savi's in the bathroom with Auntie; Hugh says Savi will wait until there's no other choice before she lowers the symbols' protection. But we're going to have to deal with the mess, spin a story – there must be a lot of witnesses, and the body disappeared mid-flight. The plane lands in half an hour. Selah will bring them to our house, so be there. I should arrive in New York just after that; we're over Nebraska or some godforsaken place now."

He'd have Savi to himself for the entirety of the evening? A slow grin slipped over his mouth; Colin walked out of the flat, careful to turn the lock on the doorknob. He couldn't engage the deadbolt from outside, but it wouldn't have kept something like him out anyway. "You're flying there with Michael; is he *carrying* you? How primitive, Agent Milton."

"Yeah, and I'm fucking freezing. A garrote!" She burst into laughter again.

A masculine voice rumbled in the background. Lilith must have covered the mouthpiece with her hand; Colin could only hear the sharp tones of her reply. He stepped outside. The clouds had thinned into pale ribbons, and the moon hung round and heavy above the skyline. A block away, his Bentley sat by the curb; it'd take most of the half hour to drive across the city to Castleford's house in Merced Manor. Much faster to run, but not half as stylish.

"Michael says to tell you that he found something of yours by the fountain. What the hell does that mean?"

He almost stumbled over the curb. Why hadn't the Guardian killed him? Castleford would have. "It means that Savitri is going to have a very, very good time," he finally managed.

Ridiculous, to think of this as a second chance with Savi. A second chance for what? He'd only spoken at any length with her twice: fifteen minutes in her grandmother's restaurant, and a few hours in Caelum. She was a bright young woman, certainly, but one he'd vowed not to pursue. His temporary obsession and their mutual enthrallment in Caelum was hardly reason to risk his friendship with Castleford and Lilith.

The motor roared to life, but its growl was nothing to Lilith's. "Colin, it's not just Hugh anymore — she's my sister now, too."

As if he could forget.

The vibration of the engines stopped. Savi lifted her head from Nani's silk-covered lap. Only two and a half hours had passed; the pilots must have continued on to New York instead of returning to England.

A swipe of wet tissue across the symbols erased the blood. From outside, she heard orders to come out, threats of armed agents and lethal force.

"Michael, Selah," she said softly. "We're ready."

Selah immediately appeared in front of her — all golden skin and blonde hair. A

white flowing gown. No wings, but they probably wouldn't have fit in the bathroom.

And then she and Nani were home.

Chapter Three

I do not see any danger in telling P—the truth, but for the details regarding the sword. We should not let it become known our family harbored your Doyen's dragon-tainted weapon from the time of the Crusades. It is not the curiosity of humans I fear, should the connection be discovered, but we ought not to risk the attention of the horned and winged set.

—Colin to Ramsdell, 1814

Somehow, Selah managed to avoid the piles of hardware and wiring materials littering Savi's apartment. Despite the successful landing, Savi had to help steady her grandmother, though she wasn't too steady herself; teleportation was disorienting.

Their luggage appeared on the wooden floor next to them, along with her laptop, and Savi sighed in silent envy. Guardians, demons, nosferatu, and hellhounds had the ability to hold items in an invisible pocket of space...or something. No matter how many questions she'd asked, Savi had never been able to determine exactly what it was, but it resembled the hammerspace in a video game: it didn't matter the size or shape of the item, the Guardians could shove it into their cache, carry it around without effort, then make it reappear with a thought.

Selah gave a quick smile before shifting her form. For a moment, Savi stared at a mirror image of herself, down to the clothes and jewelry. Then Selah altered it slightly, darkening her skin, widening her face, narrowing her eyes, thinning her lips.

"Colin will be here in a few minutes," the Guardian said, and her voice was also like Savi's—perhaps a bit lower in tone. "Follow his instructions. I need your clothes; I can't return them. Tomorrow, take the files you need off the computer. I'll come back for it then."

Lilith must already be at work changing the story, creating lies, and destroying evidence. Savi nodded her permission for Selah to take them; her skirt, sandals, and shirt vanished into Selah's hammerspace, and Savi stood barefoot on the cold floor in her underwear.

Nani shook her head. "You won't leave me nude," she said in her accented English.

"We'll worry about yours later. With luck, they won't get past Savi to look at you. I've got to get back before they charge the bathroom. I hope they don't shoot me."

Savi winced. "Sorry." Bullets wouldn't kill a Guardian, but they'd still cause considerable pain.

"No worries; I'm tough." Selah disappeared.

Nani sank onto the sofa with a sigh, kicked off her sandals. "Dress yourself, *naatin*. You'll become ill."

Savi crossed her arms beneath her breasts, shivering. Not just clothes – a shower was a necessity. She didn't want to stink of fear and blood and nosferatu when Colin arrived.

She found her bathrobe in her luggage and shrugged it on, wincing as the rough terry slid over her shoulder. She had to tie the belt one-handed.

A scratch sounded at the door connecting her apartment to Hugh's house. Sir Pup. And the vampire, if the knock accompanying it was any indication.

Dammit. She glanced around the apartment – the silk paintings, the DemonSlayer posters, the jumble of mismatched furniture – and sighed. No time to straighten anything. Nani would likely spend the entire meeting apologizing for Savi's clutter.

She opened the door, and the hellhound streaked through and almost toppled her over in his eagerness to welcome her home. Then he stopped and growled, each of his three heads swinging around as if to search out the source of the nosferatu scent.

"It's okay, Sir Pup," Savi told him. "It's just Nani and me. I had an adventure." Smiling wryly, she lifted her gaze to Colin's face.

Oh, god. It wasn't fair. She'd prepared herself for it, yet still her breath caught and her heart began to hammer in her chest. And he knew it. Her psychic shields blocked her emotions, but couldn't hide her physical reaction.

Yet there was no mockery in his eyes as he looked her over. His perusal was

quick, intense. "Invite me in, Savitri," he said quietly.

The request startled a laugh from her. "Vampires don't need an invitation." She pitched her voice low as well; Nani knew Colin wasn't human, but probably assumed he was like Michael and Selah. Perhaps even Lilith. No one had disabused her of the notion – her fear of the nosferatu was too great. She had accepted Hugh's friends and background, but she wouldn't like knowing Colin was basically half-nosferatu.

Demons, Guardians...they were tolerable. Nosferatu were not.

"No," he said, and the tips of his fangs showed when he smiled. "But I am a gentleman, and a gentleman doesn't enter a woman's house uninvited."

She willed her heartbeat to return to its normal pace. She needed to step away from the door, put some distance between them, but it was difficult not to stare. That golden hair, artistically messy. His sculpted cheekbones and angular jaw. The lean, elegant length of him in his tailored trousers and soft, clinging sweater. How did he manage it when he couldn't even see himself in a –

There, a reason for escape. She swallowed and nodded. "Alright, but give me a second?"

His smile widened. "Of course, sweet Savitri."

She felt his gaze follow her as she walked across the living room to the cheval mirror that stood in the corner. Nani rose to her feet and narrowed her eyes disapprovingly. "You cannot leave him at the door, *naatin*," she said in Hindi. Then added in English, "Mr. Ames-Beaumont, please come in."

"It's okay, Nani." Savi turned the mirror to face the wall, and looked around for any that she'd missed. "I'm just making sure he'll be good company, instead of ignoring us in favor of admiring himself."

"Savitri!"

"Don't scold her, Auntie," Colin said, laughing. "She has the right of it. There is another by the kitchen, Savi. *Sailor Moon*?"

She shot him a surprised glance as she flipped over the small frame depicting anime characters in schoolgirl uniforms.

"A short obsession...with their equally short skirts," he added as if in explanation, then turned his attention to her grandmother. "Mrs. Jayakar, you are as beautiful as ever."

She blushed and patted her hair. "And you are too kind to an old woman."

His brows rose. "Hardly old." He bent and kissed her cheek. "If it weren't akin to cradle-robbing, I'd steal you away and ravish you so completely you'd never leave my arms."

Savi couldn't stop her grin as her grandmother swatted his arm and protested his audacity, laughing. Even Nani was not immune to his looks and charm. After the tension and fear of their flight, this was exactly what she needed.

But unfortunately, they couldn't stay there. "I'm going to get ready," Savi said. "Where are you taking me? Any dress code I should follow?"

His assessing gaze swept from her bare feet to the tips of her hair. "Not a tattered housecoat."

And that easily, he declared her inadequate. Her mouth flattened, and she bit off her automatic reply. Nani did not approve of *gaalis*.

"You're going out?" Dismay filled her grandmother's voice, and Savi sighed.

"I have to be seen, Nani, so that no one can say I was on that plane. No suitable boy is going to marry a girl who's a terrorist."

She ignored the sharpening of Colin's expression and waited for Nani's reluctant nod before she headed for the bathroom.

"Savi," Colin said, and she glanced back over her shoulder. "Anything you put on will be appropriate."

"Only because they won't be looking at me anyway."

His delighted grin warmed the room—or her blood. It just wasn't *right* for a man to be that beautiful. Even Guardians and demons who could shape-shift into ideal forms couldn't equal Colin when he smiled.

"They will," he said, "...after a while."

Colin angled the lamp, shining the light more fully onto the painting. His masterpiece, if he'd ever had one. But it had not been his brushstrokes, the color, nor the composition that made it beautiful: it was the subject.

Caelum. The realm the Guardians made their home.

Seven months before, only Guardians and their angel predecessors had ever seen Caelum. But when Lucifer had threatened Savitri's life, Michael had teleported her to his temple in that realm, out of the demon's reach. Several days later, the Doyen had taken Colin so that Lucifer would not discover Colin's link to Chaos.

Lilith had not been able to escape as easily: a symbol on her chest anchored her to Hell and prevented her being teleported to Caelum. Moments before Michael had taken Colin to Caelum, before she and Castleford had left to face Lucifer, Castleford had requested that Colin bring Caelum back to her, and the painting Colin had created filled one wall in Castleford's living room.

He'd chosen the prospect from outside the doors of Michael's temple. It had been from that spot Colin had first seen the splendor of that realm; he didn't know if he'd managed to capture the effect for Lilith, but it still overwhelmed *him*.

He traced his fingers over the rough canvas, followed the curve of a spiraling tower in which the anterior edge of the lower spiral was the same as the posterior edge of the higher. What had Savitri said of the shape? He pondered for a moment. That it was the result of the Gestalt effect, he suddenly remembered; that they couldn't truly see it and their minds completed the form with the most rational interpretation. He'd painted what he'd seen — but she was correct; there was no sense in such a structure.

And she'd been as awestruck as he, naming most of Caelum's forms irrational. Indeed, the spires seemed too tall and thin to hold their weight; the sky too blue and the sun too bright; the waters surrounding the city too still.

How many times had she stopped him to point out a physical impossibility? How many times had he pulled her along to show her another sublime arrangement of shape and shades of white?

She'd had to leave the day after Colin had opened the doors of the temple. He'd

had two months; time given by Michael so he could paint – and recover.

But had she seen it better than he?

The click of Savi's heels sounded quick and light on the stairs. He resisted the urge to shut off the lamp, to give himself the advantage of darkness. In the months since his return, he had never observed her reaction to the painting.

She'd always run too quickly; the moment he arrived, she'd fled for the safety of her flat or the dark little office she kept downtown.

Savi stepped through the entrance to the living room, and paused. Her gaze slid past him. Her eyes darkened, her lips parted on a sharply indrawn breath.

And it was the only time in his long life he'd been pleased that something other than his face had caused such a response. Would that he could read her emotions as well, but as usual, her shields were firmly in place.

He smiled, and the change of his expression must have caught her attention; she narrowed her eyes at him. "Did you put my grandmother to sleep?"

"Yes," he said.

"I didn't know you could do that."

"You've never asked me, Savitri. I did not take her blood."

Oh, but to have Savi's again; to have the whole of her. He settled for looking, though he shouldn't have taken so much pleasure in that, either.

She'd chosen low-waisted, black trousers and a crimson silk top with sleeves that split at her shoulders, leaving her slim arms bare. Her skin seemed the warmer for the blue tones in the crimson; it shouldn't have. A long cream coat was draped over her forearm.

He didn't look at her shoes for fear that he might fall to his knees to examine the contrast of strap against ankle, the arch of her foot.

She glanced at the painting for an instant, and her mouth tightened. "Can other vampires? Can nosferatu?"

"No. Yes, if the human has little psychic resistance or if the nosferatu drinks the blood."

"Does Nani have resistance?"

"Not to me."

"Do I?"

"Yes."

She walked slowly into the room, circled the sofa, and leaned her hip against the upholstered back. "Why?"

"Why do you have more resistance? Or why did I suggest she sleep?"

A wry smile touched her mouth. She'd slicked clear gloss over her lips; they glistened as if she'd eaten a ripened fruit and forgotten to lick away the juice. "Both?"

He gave a small shake of his head.

"Why did you suggest she sleep?"

Was she aware of how much she gave away with that decision? Concern for her grandmother rather than protection for herself.

He had only six feet to cross to her side; he did it in an instant. She blinked, and he lifted her right hand. "I didn't want her to see me do this," he said. The scent of her perfume eddied around them: vanilla, jasmine. His mouth watered, and he swallowed before adding, "I can't heal it in the same way as Michael, but I can accelerate it and ease some of the pain."

His thumb smoothed over the raw tip of her forefinger, the gash on her knuckle. She winced and tugged her hand from his grip.

She shifted her coat to her opposite forearm and opened her left fist. "This?"

His breath hissed through his teeth. Deep, straight cuts across the first bend of her fingers; shallow slices over the center of her palm. They'd been cleaned, but they must be stiff and sore. "From the garrote?"

"Yes. I didn't have piano wire in my gold watch, unfortunately."

He chuckled softly. "The nosferatu is no 007. What are these?" Faint mahogany lines formed an intricate design on her palm. He gently turned her hand over, saw the same on the backs of her fingers. "Henna?"

"My friend's wedding."

A sudden image of those decorated hands sliding over his skin made him ache. He glanced up; she was staring at his mouth.

Would her lips taste as she smelled? Sweet Savitri. He'd only had her blood and her body – her tongue had been busy speaking of beauty that wasn't his. "Do you trust me?"

"No," she said. "But I'll let you, as it is your blood that will be spilled this time."

He stared at her for a long moment, his jaw clenching. Why hadn't he healed her in Caelum, and immediately put her to sleep? Whatever vague, lingering memory produced this continued resistance could have been prevented with little effort – but he'd not made it.

It didn't matter. This obsession *would* fade.

He viciously scraped his tongue beneath his fangs, and brought her hand to his mouth. She gasped as he painted the blood in short strokes over the wounds, then spun her around and pulled down the neckline of her shirt to do the same to four punctures on her shoulder. They were surrounded by livid bruises; the nosferatu's dark scent clung, despite her shower.

He lifted his head, fought to control his breathing, his arousal, his bloodlust. Her pulse raced in the hollow beneath her jaw.

"Colin –"

He closed his eyes at the tinge of fear in her voice. Wasn't that what he'd wanted? "Clean it off, Savitri. I'll wait in the car."

A cop pulled them over on Sunset. Savi wordlessly gave Colin her driver's license, and he handed it over along with his license and registration.

"I apologize for speeding, Officer," he said pleasantly. "I was distracted by my companion's sparkling repartee."

Savi squinted as the cop shined his flashlight over her face, and tried not to laugh. Silence had reigned between them from the moment she'd slid into the passenger seat, but in the midst of this absurdity, it was impossible to hold on to her anger or her

fear.

"You were going ninety in a forty."

"Sparkling Savitri Murray," Colin said. "Like champagne. Sweet Savitri, my sparkling wine."

Two sobriety tests and a warning to install rearview and side mirrors later, Colin pulled back into traffic and sent her a sidelong glance. "Do you have credit cards?"

"Yes, but it's not necessary. I can fake the charges."

He shook his head. "We need more than a paper trail."

He took her to a convenience store, where she debated longer than necessary over the candy bars, making certain her face showed to the camera aimed down the aisle. A fast-food restaurant, where she argued with the manager about the temperature of her French fries.

"I feel like a bitch," she told him as she returned to the car with a free apple turnover. "Here I am, in a Bentley with Ramsdell Pharmaceutical's primary shareholder, and I'm complaining about a dollar's worth of food to a guy who probably makes less a week than I spent on my coat."

His smile didn't touch his eyes; his gaze was fixed on the red box in her hand. He inhaled deeply, then turned to look out the windshield. "We've done enough for now. We can go to a sit-down, if you're hungry."

She wasn't. "Are you?" Once, she'd seen him eat food at her grandmother's restaurant.

A smile hovered around his mouth. "I ate."

"Polidori's reopened when I was away; I'd like to see it." After a brief hesitation, he gave a stiff nod. She watched him steadily, trying to discern the reason for his tension. She opened the box and pinched off a bite. "Do you want some?"

"No."

"Do you like food?"

"I can't taste it. But the scent..." His lips firmed. "I remember some, particularly fruits and sweets. The cinnamon, the apples. Oranges—I had them several times." He

looked at her, then away. "The privilege of aristocracy."

"Too exotic for the plebs?" As the younger son of the seventh earl of Norbridge, he'd have had access to a variety of luxuries a commoner could never have afforded.

"Yes. We had – have – an orangery at Beaumont Court. Though my nephews had transformed it into a fort upon my last visit."

"Do they know what you are?"

"Yes. I'm their beloved blood-drinking Uncle Colin, as I have been for generations."

"They don't think it's weird?"

"My youngest niece's response upon learning the truth was, 'Brill!'" Colin shook his head. "She was not a bit disturbed, though I'll admit to some dismay at her vocabulary. Worse, that the longer I visit, the more I adopt their speaking habits. That is the true horror, my sweet Savitri."

"Do they know about your sister and Anthony Ramsdell?"

He heaved a long sigh, but the amusement crinkling the corners of his eyes belied the harassed sound of it. "Yes. Indeed, I have to recount the events every Christmas season; the children especially enjoy it when I linger over my part – bedridden and starving, attacking Emily and trying to drink her blood until Castleford and Ramsdell arrived at the penultimate moment and rescued her from my evil clutches."

"Evil?" Grinning, she popped another bite of the apple turnover into her mouth.

"Quite, though they do not seem to believe it." His voice lowered dramatically. "Instead I must tell them stories of the evil demon Lilith, and of how Ramsdell thwarted her and returned Michael's magical sword to his possession after centuries in Beaumont Court's library. So, Ramsdell has become a family legend, Castleford and Lilith slightly less so; alas, despite my exquisite appearance and the immortality I gained from their actions, I'm neither legend nor villain."

"I guess it's more exciting to hear tales of winged Guardians and demons than a mere vampire." She caught her tongue between her teeth to stop her laughter when he

turned his head to stare at her, an aggrieved impatience creasing his brow. But his lips twitched slightly as he looked back toward the road.

"It's *most* disagreeable."

"And I suppose it also helps that his medical practice was the basis for Ramsdell Pharmaceuticals," Savi said. "Your family still reaps the benefit of it."

"Yes. When creating legends, possessing both virtue and money is an unbeatable combination. I have one, but have no inclination to acquire the other." He smiled briefly. "You do not have the history or familiarity with such things that my niece does, yet you have adjusted very well. Particularly considering your pagan roots."

"I don't know if that helps or hurts—have you seen Detective Taylor lately? Since she found out about all of this?" She shook her head when he arched a brow and replied in the negative. "Never mind. Despite all of the stuff in the restaurant, even in my apartment, I can't really say that Nani and I are pagan—or much of anything. Between Nani and Hugh, my upbringing was completely secular."

"Perhaps it is more shocking, then, your adjustment."

"Well, I'm not convinced anything I've learned is faith-affirming or -destroying; at most, a shifting of a paradigm. We don't really know."

Colin gave a short, disbelieving laugh. "Savitri, don't be absurd. You've not seen enough evidence? You've a rational explanation for Caelum, and its effect on us? For the symbols' protection, and the spell's prevention of communication of *any* form, as if it can recognize intent?"

"No. I don't," she admitted. "But what's the reason behind it? We have an explanation that it all derived from Heaven, that demons were created when they followed Lucifer in his rebellion, that the nosferatu were cursed with bloodthirst and vulnerability to the sun when they refused to take sides in the First Battle—but who witnessed this? The demons and nosferatu, who *say* they were once angels."

"Ah. But they're all liars, so you assume they lie about this as well."

"Well, I don't *know* that they do; I just don't rule it out as a possibility. And doesn't it benefit them to say they came from Heaven? Maybe they're just capitalizing

on things people already believe, and they change the details of their story according to the culture. It inspires more power, more fear – is more impressive."

"And what of Michael and the Guardians? Do you doubt his word as well?" His fangs gleamed when she shifted uncomfortably. "Do you think his story of the Second Battle is a lie?"

"No. Demons are real; I'm not questioning that – or that they probably were jealous of the angels who were on Earth, protecting it. I live with a hellhound, so I don't doubt Lucifer bred them, and used them to massacre the angels during that battle. And I've seen what Michael can do."

"So you are willing to believe that he really did lead an army of men who fought against the demons, and killed a Chaos dragon with his sword?"

"Yes."

"How generous of you, Savitri." His voice was teasing. "And what about afterward – that the angels gave him the power to transform other humans into Guardians, and take their place as protectors in Caelum?"

"I'm willing to accept that, too. I just don't necessarily think it has to all come from some huge, ineffable source. There might be other explanations. Stop laughing, it's not that funny," she said, but when he glanced at her and sucked in a long breath as if he was trying to suppress it, then failed and burst into laughter again, she had to join in.

"Oh, Savitri," he said. "You are incredible. Still a skeptic."

She shrugged. "They – you – do things I have no explanation for, but maybe in three hundred years, there will be one. A thousand years ago, the world was flat, gravity didn't exist, and lightning was a sign from the gods. And no one's studying Guardians or demons – except for the quacks, scientists don't even know they're supposed to be figuring this shit out. They don't have terms for most of it. But once people take a look at it, pull it apart...demystify it all, maybe they'll find a reason for it. So I'm not saying it isn't true – but I'm not ready to say it is, either."

"Do let me know when you are; I think I shall very much enjoy hearing your conclusions, however convoluted they may be."

"I may take a long time."

He grinned. "I'll wait."

The turnover had almost completely cooled; she took another bite. His lids lowered as he inhaled, his gaze falling to her mouth. "That is apple?"

She nodded.

He blinked and gave his head a slight shake, turning his attention back to the road.

"Actually," she said, "the only reason I'm not running away screaming is because it's all so interesting. I live with a two-thousand-year-old woman and an eight-hundred-year-old man. Did you know Lilith once tried to tempt Isaac Newton?"

"She told you that?" Colin glanced at her. "She may have been lying."

"Hugh said she wasn't. But even if she had been, it's still fascinating."

"And are you so certain Castleford tells you the truth?"

"I think so. Usually, if I ask a question he doesn't want to answer, he just says it's not for me to know." He didn't say it very often – and the majority of the times he had, it had been in relation to Colin and Chaos. "Except it doesn't sound so condescending when he says it. Is all that stuff about you in his book true? Have you read it?"

After he'd Fallen, Hugh had written a manuscript describing his life as a Guardian – a life he'd dedicated to saving Lilith. Savi had stumbled across the file on his computer and had assumed he'd been writing a fictional novel. She'd found out later he'd intended it for the library in Caelum, to be included with the Scrolls that detailed Guardian rules and history. But by then, Savi had already developed popular card and video games from its storyline.

"Yes. With a title such as *Lilith*, how could I not? But I am never mentioned."

"Not by name. But it's not all that hard to figure it out. The dates, the locations – they match up. You really lived a month only half-transformed?"

A puzzled frown pulled at the corners of his mouth. "I'm certain Derbyshire was not mentioned, Savitri. Nor were there specific dates."

"Oh!" She shook her head. "No, I don't mean the printed version – god, you read

that?"

"Yes," he said. "It's quite terrible."

"It's not surprising: I ran his original Latin document through a language translator, then tried to spiff it all up before I had it printed for him."

He turned his head to stare at her.

"It was a present," she said, grinning. "I was young."

"It's *atrocious*." He passed his hand over his hair. "Oh, good God. What does the Latin include that your version does not?"

"Not much. Something about your brother-in-law, and Hugh taking over a vow Ramsdell made to your sister, promising to watch over you."

"Anything of Michael's sword? Mirrors?"

"No. Nothing about Chaos, either."

His jaw tightened. He slowed for a red light, and remained silent until he accelerated again. "I did survive a month half-transformed."

She blinked. Had he returned to her earlier question to avoid speaking of Chaos? "The nosferatu wouldn't have given you blood. Lilith said she tried to cut off his head while he attacked you – did it get into your mouth or something?"

"No. I bit him whilst trying to get away."

"How uncivilized."

"Exceedingly."

"What did you eat afterward?"

"Nothing, but for the broth Emily forced down my throat." His brows drew together. "And I believe I tried to eat raw meat from the larder, but I'm not certain."

"You don't remember?"

"No. I've only a partial recollection of those days."

Some things, she supposed, were a blessing to forget. "And Hugh and Lilith used the blood of the nosferatu who originally attacked you to complete the transformation?"

"That is correct."

"When did you find out you can withstand the sun?"

"The first morning I did not return to Beaumont Court before sunrise." He turned to look between the seats before switching lanes. "I'm surprised you do not know all of this already, my sweet Savitri. I'm well aware of how you located me last year. An illegal bit of computer wizardry."

She slid her tongue over her bottom lip to catch the last of the cinnamon and apple juice, and hoped the darkness would hide her blush from him. Probably not. Even if he didn't look at her, he could probably feel the heat and blood.

"It was only financial information— IRS and bank account records, a list of assets. Your address and phone number." It hadn't told her anything personal. Savi knew a lot *about* him, but she didn't know *him*.

And though she might have asked in Caelum, she had been occupied— enthralled— by the impossible beauty of that realm.

Enthralled by Colin.

The streetlights washed over his features at regular intervals. His profile was as incredible as the rest of him. Even the rough shadow along his jaw enhanced his masculine perfection. She rubbed her tongue against the roof of her mouth; it suddenly seemed hot, tingly, as if she'd added too much cayenne to a dish.

He took a deep breath, and his fingers clenched the steering wheel. The movement shook her out of her silent inspection. God. It was so easy to fall into a friendly banter with him, but she knew too well how his mood could change without warning. He could go from passion to humor to cruelty in the span of a smile; she'd be an idiot to forget what he was, just because it felt like heaven to look at him.

And it was probably best to cover her stare with her curiosity. "Do you have to shave?" She bit her lip to contain her grin before she added, "Did you have a valet?"

"Rarely; I also have to cut my hair, as do most vampires. And yes, until 1945."

"What happened in 1945?"

"He died, and I learned to use a razor."

Without a mirror. Though she wanted to know what happened in Chaos, she wouldn't broach that subject. Even after seven months, it must still be too raw. And

Colin's voice had taken on a rough edge; it hadn't been there before, not even when he'd used his blood on her wounds.

He reached out and pushed a button on the CD player. To silence her? She knew he could hear her over the music.

The Velvet Underground. Lou Reed and a soft, delicate melody. Her smile widened when he shut it off. He had a lovely baritone; did he sing when he was alone?

"Do my questions annoy you?"

He glanced at her, his surprise evident. "No. I'm far too vain to object; I am my favorite topic."

His easy admission startled a laugh from her, but it faded when his gaze sharpened. The warmth spread from her mouth, burned through her stomach and settled low in her abdomen. "What is it then?"

"We need to get out of the car," he said, and turned onto Eddy Street. Near Polidori's. "Your scent is...like a peach. Or a mango. And I'm starving." A muscle in his cheek flexed. "I don't always have control."

A shiver ran up her spine, but she couldn't name its cause. Not simply fear or lust; what was in between? "You said you'd eaten." Vampires – even Colin – didn't need more than one feeding a night.

"I did." Frustration tightened his voice. "Is it your soap?"

"No. It's probably in my skin. I must've eaten a hundred mangoes when I was in India, and two more just before I left. I have no control over myself, either, but I stopped short of taking a mango bath," she said, and waited for his smile. It came slowly. In the dim light, his teeth shone brilliantly white. "The mango *wallahs* sell them right on the street. Have you ever had one?"

"No." Another deep inhalation. "Tell me."

Tell me. Memory of the last time he'd issued that command flashed through her. She shifted in the seat, pressed her thighs together to ease the pulsing ache. "They're more intense, brighter in flavor than a peach, and the flesh is firm and smooth and slippery. And the juice...cold, sunwarm – it doesn't matter." She looked down at her

hands, remembering how sticky they'd been. "There aren't any like them imported into the U.S.; you've got to be there to know what a really, really good mango is like."

Caelum on her tongue.

"Did you return with any?" His question was so low, she almost didn't hear it. He parked in a reserved space, killed the engine.

"No; it's too difficult to get through Customs. It's easier to kill a nosferatu on a plane than take a piece of fruit on one." She smiled wryly and glanced up. Her breath caught. He'd turned toward her; his face was expressionless but for the heat in his gaze. His eyes glittered with pale fire.

Her mouth was parched; she seemed to be burning from the inside. She tried to moisten her tongue, to swallow. His hungry gaze followed the movement of her jaw and throat. "I need a drink," she said hoarsely.

His laugh was short, hard. He opened the door and cold air flooded in. "So do I."

Chapter Four

The nosferatu suffer from bloodlust, but they don't have to eat. That's how they hide undetected in caves for so long—there isn't a trail of corpses for the Guardians to follow. Vampires have to feed every day, though; and the bloodlust can make the urge to feed and the urge to have sex nearly indistinguishable. And the feeding feels incredible for whomever is being sucked on—that's what they tell me, anyway.

—Savi to Taylor, 2007

Colin rested his hand against the small of her back as he guided her past a long line of clubbers. As an act of courtesy, it proved a masochistic one; beneath his palm, the gentle curve of her spine moved in rhythm with her steps, the beat of the music from inside. Matched the need throbbing within him.

He ground his teeth together, urged her forward a little more quickly. How could he be so desperate to feed? He'd taken enough for two days from the last blonde alone.

"It was popular before, but not like this," Savitri murmured.

Colin glanced at the queue. Mostly human, but a few vampires waited, as well. A growl rose unbidden in his throat. He didn't want her here, he didn't want to be here — yet he'd been unable to refuse her request.

And she hadn't even flattered him.

His gaze dropped to her neck; her short hair left it deliciously exposed. He should mark her as his. Protect her from the vampires here and the others inside. Inhale her, drink her, sink into her —

He swallowed thickly and forced the territorial hunger aside. What he wanted to do to her could not be considered protection.

"It's morbid fascination," he finally replied.

She sighed, and her lashes swept down against her cheeks. The investigators — and the press — had linked Polidori's to last year's ritual murders; burning it had been determined a cult's symbolic way of beginning its quest for immortality.

All lies, of course; Colin had helped fabricate them. But the story had entertained the public for months, and many of the people standing outside had only come because of the club's connection with death. Her friends' deaths.

"And I spent a sordid amount of money on it," he added. "I can't fault them for recognizing my unparalleled taste and flocking here to revel in it."

Her lips curved into a smile, and she slanted a glance up at him. "Was it truly that much? Lilith claims you are the cheapest bastard she's ever known."

Pleased with himself for turning her thoughts from her grief, he said, "Agent Milton has a demon's tongue. I am not *cheap*, my sweet Savitri. I've an eternal retirement; I budget wisely."

Her throaty laughter pulled at already tight nerves along his skin. Her hip bumped against his leg as they rounded the corner to the entrance. Her fragrance wafted around her. In her heels, she stood only a few inches shorter than he. So easy just to bend and press his mouth against...

He dropped his hand from her waist, clenched it into a fist. This was bloody ridiculous. A fruity perfume, and he had as much control as an adolescent pulling himself off on his sheets.

A huge vampire guarded the entrance and ran the guest list; he towered over Colin by a bald head, outweighed him by half. His muscles bulged through the tight black T-shirt. An intimidating presence, and one most vampires respected; but then, they were often fooled by appearances. Colin had deliberately chosen him for his resemblance in size and baldness to the nosferatu – but though the vampire was strong, Colin could have torn him in two with little effort. It was one of the advantages of Colin's transformation with nosferatu blood instead of an exchange with another vampire.

And the taint Michael's sword had left in his blood had generated the other differences.

The bouncer's eyes widened – Colin usually didn't use the front entrance – and he quickly unhooked the velvet rope. "Mr. Ames-Beaumont."

The urge to dash inside, to find the nearest willing body and glut was almost overwhelming. "Mr. Varney, this is Miss Savitri Murray. She should be on the short list."

Her chin tilted up, her gaze leveled on Varney's features. It was difficult to tell human from vampire, but Castleford would have taught her to recognize the signs: the careful placement of the lips during speech, the slight perspiration in heated rooms or warm nights, abnormal respiration and reflexes. "What's the short list?"

"Full access, miss, including Mr. Ames-Beaumont's personal suite. No charge." There was more, but Varney didn't mention that any vampire who tried to drink from someone on that list would receive a visit from Colin. It hadn't happened yet; there were very few people this side of the Atlantic to whom he'd give anything for free, and Lilith and Castleford were the only other names listed.

A vampire would have to be a blithering idiot to attack *them*.

"Except for tonight." Colin led her forward and descended the stairs. "You'll pay the cover and for your drinks." An auburn-haired beauty was going up; she glanced at him, then froze with her foot in the air and watched as he passed. "Do you know the Guardians' sign language?"

"No," Savi said, and looked back over her shoulder. "I hope she doesn't fall."

He suppressed his laughter with difficulty, and said in Hindi, "I'll walk with you to the bar, then I must leave you alone for a few minutes. Because you came in with me, you'll be a curiosity to the vampires inside. They may approach you. Don't ask them questions, don't talk to them."

"Why? Isn't the point of all this that I'm seen?"

"You'll be seen, sweet Savitri." But he didn't want them to have any more of her than that.

And hopefully, once he'd fed, his need for more would also fade.

It was inelegant, perhaps even ill-mannered, but Savi eschewed the straw and gulped straight from the glass. Lime and salt, sour and sweet. And cold — she couldn't

get enough of it.

Delayed reaction from the flight? Her breath fogged the inside of the tumbler. Heat from the mass of bodies?

Perhaps he'd been too stingy to pay for air conditioners.

She fished out a cube of ice, sucked it into her mouth. The bartender glanced at her. Another vampire. Colin had been right; they'd all watched as he'd taken her hand and led her through the club. As he'd dropped a quick kiss onto her forehead.

Like a little girl. A little sister. She'd known what it was: a display of protection. Because Hugh had saved Colin's sister, the vampire felt obligated to guard Hugh's adopted sister in return. She should have been grateful. Perhaps she would have, if she didn't feel so restless, as if she'd suddenly been caged.

It was a familiar feeling, but it usually didn't make her angry.

She crushed the ice between her teeth. Why was it so fucking hot in here?

She lifted her hand and gestured for another, asked for a water to accompany it. The wounds on her palm had almost completely healed; only a lingering stiffness remained. She examined the thin pink lines on her fingers. The blood sped healing — is that what allowed them immortality? Accelerated regeneration or cell replication, with no degradation over time?

But wouldn't their hair grow more quickly if it was replication? Did it simply keep existing cells in perfect repair, not speed the manufacture of new ones?

Why did it only heal humans when applied topically, or through a transfusion? And why was it safe? A transfusion would temporarily give a human some strength and healing ability, but it didn't last. Only through ingestion was there a danger — blessing? — of transformation.

Was it the *choice* to drink that provided the power, or the blood itself? Before Michael could transform a human to a Guardian, the human had to agree to the change; she'd heard the same was true of a vampire — the transformation didn't take well if it wasn't voluntary. Could blood recognize choice and free will?

The *bloodlust* supposedly did — except for the free will of the vampire it

controlled.

She felt Colin before she saw him; he stood next to her, leaning gracefully against the bar. His expression was unreadable, his gaze hooded. Even in the dim lighting, she could see the slight flush on his skin.

She'd seen it before.

Lifting her glass, she took another long drink, licked the salt from her lips, and forced a bright smile. "The redhead on the stairs?"

His mouth tightened, but he gave a slow nod.

She arched a brow. "You must lose a lot of clients if those you feed from leave bleeding."

"She wasn't. And I don't often feed here; I prefer the hunt. Pursuit offers a challenge." He looked away from her toward the dance floor, his mouth pulled down in a grimace of distaste. "When it is readily available, it is merely scavenging."

Her chest squeezed painfully. She'd not only been available, she'd thrown herself at him. "So the aristocrat surveys the unwashed masses, and finds them lacking," she murmured.

And she was just a brown little girl.

"They have use during revolutions, but there is no rebellion here. Only a mess of conformity." His gaze met hers again. "But I do not care if they bathe, Savitri, as long as they bleed."

The glass was slick with condensation; she wiped her palm across her forehead, hoping to ease the heat with cold and wet. "I thought, because of—" She paused, switched to Hindi. He probably didn't want anyone to overhear that he couldn't create other vampires. Surely his impotency embarrassed someone like him, and she wouldn't prick his vanity again. "Because of your *incapability*, that you couldn't heal me. I was wrong."

He contained his emotions too well for her to interpret his response. "Yes. You also believed Castleford when he confirmed your assumption that I was gay."

It had been easier; a woman had little defense against a face like that—except to

believe it couldn't be hers. But she'd been mistaken in that, too. Gloriously mistaken, until it had turned into something...painful.

"Did she tell you what you wanted to hear?"

A mocking smile. "She screamed it."

She nodded, drained her glass. "I'm going to go dance." Sweat out some of the heat boiling within her. Feel someone's touch on her skin.

Anyone's but his.

She'd known better.

Before a few bullets had destroyed her family, Savi had been surrounded by stories—her mother had loved them. Both surgeons, her parents had limited time dedicated to Savi and her brother. But in those rare evenings when her mother had been home, fairy tales and fables had been standard bedtime fare.

The music drowned out the voices of the men dancing with her, but she could still hear her mother's voice clearly— one of the advantages of a memory like hers.

...and the girl came across a cobra curled up against the freezing night air. The cobra begged her to stop and carry him in her pocket until the sun rose in the morning, but she refused. "You will bite me," she said. But the cobra promised not to. "I will die here; if you save me, I will treat you as a friend." The girl was too soft-hearted to let him freeze, and so she picked him up and put him in her pocket. She'd taken not two steps before she felt his fangs against her breast. "Why?" she cried, her voice weak from the poison. "You said you would not!"

"It is my nature," the cobra replied, "and you knew what I was."

Cold hands clasped her hips, pulled her back to gyrate against him. Vampire, but not Colin's hands. His were warm. He could walk in the sun. He was beautiful and charming.

She'd thought if she offered her blood to him, she wouldn't be hurt by it.

She should have known better.

Frigid fingers drifted beneath her shirt, along the curve of her waist. It felt fantastic. Her skin was tight, burning, and his hand trailed over her stomach like a block

of ice. His cold form rocked against her back. His erection. Perhaps he could cool her from inside, make her forget...

But no – that was one of the drawbacks of her memory. Her mother's screams, forever captured. Her brother's tortured, bubbling breaths. Her father's silence.

And Colin's fangs buried in her throat, desolation and horror tearing through her mind as her body shuddered beneath his.

He'd done it to teach her a lesson – and by god, she had learned. Her brain had gotten the message.

Her body had not.

She was on fire. Alcohol hadn't dulled it, water hadn't doused it. She hated being drunk; she couldn't think.

A shiver wracked her when his fingers slid higher. Her nipples drew tight beneath the silk.

"You're so hot," said the rough voice behind her.

Like a demon. Averaging 106.7 degrees Fahrenheit, 41.5 degrees Celsius, 314.65 degrees Kelvin. Or did he mean it in that you're-sexy-come-home-with-me way? Didn't he have a partner to share blood and a bed with? Perhaps he was one of those vampires whose partner had been killed by the nosferatu.

Vampires didn't drink from humans, not unless they intended to transform them. If that was what he offered, why not take him up on it? She was going to eventually, anyway.

He could turn her, and she would live forever.

Clammy lips touched the back of her neck. Cold, wet – like the nosferatu. *Oh, god.* This wasn't what she'd promised Nani. She ripped out of his grasp, staggered forward.

Colin caught her. He hadn't been there a moment before; she was certain of it. She'd seen him at his table, where he'd spent the whole of the night. Watching her.

She hadn't known he could move so quickly.

His arm circled her waist, his chest hard and warm against hers. He didn't look

at her, but over her head. His jaw clenched in a tight line.

Behind her, the vampire babbled incoherently.

"He didn't do anything," Savi said quickly. This vampire didn't deserve to pay for her mistake, her stupidity, her drunkenness. But how to convince Colin? She tried not to slur. "Your lips are beautiful."

He flinched, and lowered his gaze. "You bloody foolish chit. You think to manipulate me?" he gritted, but his eyes softened as he searched her features, as he inhaled her breath. "Christ. You're completely foxed."

"Deep in my cups," she agreed, nodding.

He blinked. After a long moment, a smile teased the corners of his mouth. "Sweet Savitri, what have you been reading?"

She needed to stop looking at him; surely he was worse for her brain than alcohol. But the firm curves of his upper lip were extraordinary – the dip in the center looked as wide as her forefinger. She reached up to test it.

"I had a phase about five years ago. I read about lords and ladies. Waltzes. Did you waltz?" The faint stubble was rough against her fingertip; a perfect fit.

Colin gripped her wrist, pulled it away, and slid his hand down to clasp his palm against hers. "Yes." His other hand settled over her hip. "Toss him out," he said to someone behind her. "Clear them all out."

And he swept her off her feet.

She didn't know how he did it; though past closing time, dancers still bumped and ground across the floor – yet he twirled her through them without touching a single person. She couldn't keep up or match his steps. He lowered his forearm to cradle her bottom, then lifted her against him and glided.

"Oh my god." Lights and colors whirled around her.

"Focus on my beautiful lips, Savitri, lest you become dizzy."

"And cast up my accounts?"

"Yes," he said, laughing; how could she *not* look at his mouth when he did that? At his elongated canines, the sharp white line of his teeth. But it was safer than looking

at his eyes and risking seeing the wholehearted, almost boyish delight that had so captivated her in Caelum.

The sound of his amusement rumbled through her, combined with the heavy beat of the music. He wore cologne, a light masculine fragrance with notes of orange and papaya and sandalwood. She buried her face in his neck, wrapped her thighs around his lean hips.

Oh my god. His cock was thick and hard beneath his trousers, nestled between her legs. Another perfect fit; she remembered all too well how perfect.

She could come just from this.

"It didn't work," he said in Hindi. He sounded almost apologetic.

She was burning, burning. Just like Polidori's. "What didn't?"

"The woman from the stairwell. Acting the ass at the bar, that you would put distance between us. It seems I can protect you from everyone but myself."

Her body went rigid; her eyes flew open. *I don't always have control.* He'd tried to regain it by feeding, but that had been hours ago. How thin was it now? Her heart pounded. "You were lying at the bar?"

"No. But a gentleman can tell the truth without being cruel, if he wishes it." He slowed next to his table, and eased down onto the sofa without letting her go. Her knees sank into the cushions. His arm across her lower back trapped her hips against his. "Do not mistake me for a kind man, Savitri."

She wouldn't. Not again.

"What are you going to do?" She pushed at his chest.

"Taste you." He cupped her jaw. His thumb smoothed across her cheek. "Only your mouth, and only if you agree."

Tension coiled through her stomach, arousal and fear. And heat. He was a fever inside her, a sickness. "What if I don't?"

"I'll carry you to my suite and do it there." The apology dropped from his tone. "I don't intend to take your blood, Savi. I simply want—*need*—to taste you." His chest rose and fell beneath her hand. "I think I will die if I do not."

She wouldn't believe that; only poets and horny teenagers did. But her gaze dropped to his lips. "Just a kiss?"

"Yes." With gentle pressure, he urged her nearer. "A sword lies behind the wall panel. The spring is two inches above the sofa, one foot in."

Did he think she would need it? But if he lost that much control, she'd have no possibility of defense.

She'd had a better chance against the nosferatu.

Her palms slid over his shoulders, up to curve around the back of his neck. Her fingers buried in the hair at his nape. So thick and soft.

"This must be because I'm drunk," she whispered as she lowered her mouth to his. "I know better."

So did he.

Surely nothing good would come of this. He'd measured his desire against his sense for hours. In the end, he was simply too selfish a creature; no matter how heavy the consequences, his need outweighed them.

Her scent had tormented him. Distance hadn't helped. He'd watched her on the dance floor, as she sat at the bar and drank with an unquenchable thirst that seemed to equal his own, alternating between alcohol and water as if searching for anything to give her ease.

Her skin burned through the silk of her shirt; whatever she'd been searching for, she apparently hadn't found it.

Terrible and frightening had been the moment when he'd taken the woman he'd seen on the stairs, and realized his hunger had not abated – when he'd realized Savitri had caused it, and was likely the solution. But she was no different from any other woman: all without flavor but for their blood.

Her lips pressed tentatively against his, and his stomach hollowed in relief. He was hard, aching for her, but there was nothing magical in this. Just a kiss, something he'd experienced thousands of times with thousands of women.

Just her fragrance, tickling at a memory and creating an involuntary response. It must be.

Her mouth opened, and she swept her tongue between his lips.

And he *tasted* her. Sweet. Warm and mellow, and beneath it, a dark, rich essence. Impossible.

Colin held himself still, disbelieving. Pleasure spilled through him, thick and heated. Not the same as bloodlust, but as powerful.

She drew his lower lip between her teeth. He wanted to beg her to return to a deeper kiss, but didn't trust himself to speak, to move.

Don't frighten her. Don't let her stop.

He released her, dug his hands into the sofa cushions.

Her tongue sought his, stroking. A moan rose in his throat. Her slight weight was a delicious pressure against his rigid shaft, and she moved in time with her kiss.

How? Why? Chocolate, fries, apples and cinnamon, lime and salt – he could not taste them, nothing but that incredible sweet flavor, the heat of her mouth.

With each rock of her hips the ache of his cock became more exquisite, more unbearable. She suckled softly on his tongue. *Yes, Savi – don't stop. Don't –*

Bloody hell, he was going to spend. Right here, with this slip of a girl atop him. Astounded, he opened his eyes, met her velvet brown gaze.

She'd been watching him, gauging his response. Surprise and knowledge filled her psychic scent before she lowered her lids and began devouring his mouth, tasting and licking.

His heart raced. Her fingers tugged on his hair, and she sank deeper, deeper. She worked him over as easily as he had Fia, or any of the other women he'd fed from that evening...or in the past two centuries. He couldn't stop her – didn't *want* to stop her, but she couldn't do this to him, couldn't, not without –

She bit his tongue; blood flowed into his mouth. His own, but it mixed with her flavor and flashed through him, a bolt of lightning arcing along his veins. He stiffened, panted into her lips.

She raised her head, her gaze narrowed on his face, triumph and pleasure chasing across her expression. Incredulous, he couldn't muster the slightest embarrassment, though it was impossible for her not to realize what was happening. Her sex pressed against him. She couldn't mistake the ecstasy that shook him. He could feel the heat of her, but the wet was his own.

Good God. She'd made him come in his pants.

And she'd done it with a single kiss.

His chest heaved, and he stared at her lips. Moist and swollen. He could smell her arousal beneath that ever-present peach scent; she'd be moist and swollen everywhere.

If someone didn't come and save her in the next few moments, she would be in his suite and in his bed. He'd taste every inch, just to see if it was only her mouth, or all of her.

He was going to eat her up.

"It must be the hellhound venom," she said, and sighed. The soft curves of her breasts pressed against the silk blouse, her nipples outlined by crimson.

And he wouldn't let her go. Not again. Vows and sisters and friends be damned.

"Or the nosferatu blood," she added, her voice thoughtful. She no longer slurred her words; had she sobered so quickly? She touched his lower lip.

Scarlet dotted her fingertip: his blood. Dread slipped through him; he caught her hand and frowned up at her.

"Did you swallow any?"

Another scent intruded on his senses; not physical, but psychic. Sickly sweet and rotting. Familiar. He shook it away. Impossible that it was here—it was only a memory, a hallucination brought on by his fear that she might have ingested his tainted blood.

"I think so," she said quietly. "It must be why I'm burning. Why I have been for hours."

Hours? Unease settled in his stomach. He slid his hand around her hip, under her shirt, and felt the skin on her back.

Hot. He'd expected that, from the exertion of dancing and the arousal between them. But there was no perspiration, none of the cooling slick sweat that should have accompanied it.

Dry. Feverish.

Her strange statement from a moment before struck him now, made him tense. "You swallowed venom?"

"I had to get it into his blood. I spit it." She blinked slowly. Her eyes were bright, glassy. "It doesn't harm humans or halflings."

"If they're *bitten*," he said through clenched teeth. Why hadn't Castleford told her of the dangers possible, that there was still so much unknown? "God knows what it does if you drink it. And the nosferatu blood? Did you ingest that, too?"

"It was spraying everywhere – in my mouth. Someone grabbed me when I was running, and I swallowed. It must have mixed with the venom a little. Not very much."

Beneath her fragrance, the psychic stink of rot grew stronger. He fought to control it; he'd been months without the flashbacks striking with such intensity. Why now? Could he not have one memory of her left untainted by Chaos?

"Why didn't you tell me before? How long have you been like this?"

"The car." She took rapid, shallow breaths. "The venom tasted like a peach, but I rinsed out my mouth on the plane."

He reached into his pocket for his phone. "You're supposed to be smart, Savitri."

"You fuck with my brain, vampire. And every time I've been with you I've been enthralled or drunk, so I can't think."

Her body swayed before she jerked herself upright again.

"Christ." He pulled her tight against his chest and pushed the auto-dial for Lilith's cell. *Bloody fantastic job protecting her*. How could he not have noticed the fever? He'd only thought of his cock and his fangs and her mouth.

She'd twisted him up; he'd been out of his mind. That scent...from a fucking *dog*.

"You smell so good," she said against his neck, and her tongue swiped over his skin. He closed his throat against his groan of pleasure. She was delirious; even he

wouldn't take advantage of her now.

A violent commotion came from the entrance of the club. Only a few vampires lingered inside, slowly gathering their things. Colin looked up as they stopped and turned toward the sound.

A sharp, male shriek of pain followed a deep shout of warning. Varney.

Colin opened his senses, searching for the source of the threat, and the putrid stink swept into his mind. He forced himself not to gag. Not to scream.

"Colin? Colin!"

Lilith's voice in his ear pulled him back from the edge. What the— *Savitri*. He compelled the words from his frozen tongue. "Savi ingested hellhound venom and nosferatu blood. She's taken fever."

Colin closed the phone and dropped it, then slapped his hand against the wall. The panel sprang open.

Savi slid from his lap. Even in this state, she must have realized he needed to move.

"Stay here."

She nodded, and rubbed her face to rouse herself.

He selected two swords and rose to his feet. A dark form streaked across the dance floor, headed directly toward them.

Icy fear splintered in his gut, cut through the numbness.

A wyrmwolf. Scales and exposed flesh. Not as large as a hellhound, with only one head, but almost as deadly. Sweat broke over his skin. How could it be here? *It couldn't be here*; no Gate led from Earth to Chaos, no portal. The only anchor to that realm was in Colin's blood, and the only access through him.

Had he brought it back? Could he never escape it? Did he have to pay for one foolish mistake for eternity?

A vampire tried to stop the wyrmwolf, and lost his arm to a quick tear from its jaws. Screams echoed through the club.

"Bloody fucking hell," Colin muttered, and ran to intercept it.

Savi had never seen anything like the battle that followed – *couldn't* see most of it. Only a flash of swords, then two figures blurring as they moved. An instant in which they paused, caught in a violent tableau of blades and fangs.

She looked away once, toward those watching with her. The vampires' expressions were easy to interpret: horror and awe. They could see what was happening. Why didn't they help him?

But Colin didn't need it. He stopped suddenly, angling his left sword up like a batsman after smashing a cricket ball, his chest heaving and his face glistening with sweat.

The creature's head hit the wall and thudded to the floor.

The strength left her body at the same time, and she slipped down, laid her cheek against the sofa cushion. The heat burned through her, but she couldn't feel it anymore. Only tired, so tired.

Through half-closed eyes, she saw Colin return to her side, his gaze fierce upon her. Blood spread over one ivory sleeve, and from a slash on his thigh.

He lifted her from the sofa and began walking toward his suite. Her head swam.

"They have five seconds," he said softly.

Who? Before what? She couldn't make the effort to form the questions. Jet lag? A strange time for it, when she was flying, flying.

Colin's arms tightened around her, and he shuddered. "Castleford. Michael." His voice was flat. "And as usual, you've arrived too bloody late."