



Guardians
of
Eternity



"A sensual demon plus a hot-blooded
vampire equals one hell of a book!"

—Jackie Kessler,
author of *Hell's Belles*

*Embrace
The
Darkness*

Surrender to forbidden desire...

Alexandra Ivy

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Embrace the Darkness

By

Alexandra Ivy

FIRST BITE

Without warning the vampire was flowing forward and Shay found herself trapped in the corner with his hands on either side of her head. "You are mine."

His face was so close that she could see the flecks of gold in the midnight eyes. Easily sensing her flare of desire, Viper stilled above her, his fangs lengthening as his own body reacted.

Her eyes widened. "Don't."

With a slow, relentless motion his head began to lower. "You fear me drinking your blood?"

"I don't like being a meal on wheels for anyone."

His cool lips skimmed her mouth before brushing her cheek. "There are many reasons for a vampire to share blood. Trust, friendship, love... lust."

Her heart crashed against her chest as a dark heat spread through her body. He was touching her with nothing more than his lips, but already a flutter of excitement was rushing through her.

It had been so long.

The satin of his hair tickled her nose as his mouth stroked down the curve of her neck. He smelled of expensive cologne and something far more primitive. Something starkly male.

His mouth lingered on the frantic beat of her pulse before his tongue traced the large vein in a winding path back up her throat...

Books by Alexandra Ivy

WHEN DARKNESS COMES

EMBRACE THE DARKNESS

DARKNESS EVERLASTING*

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*coming soon



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Chapter One

The auction house on the outskirts of Chicago didn't look like a cesspit.

Behind the iron fences the elegant brick structure sprawled over the landscape with a visible arrogance. The rooms were large with vaulted ceilings that boasted beautiful murals and elegant chandeliers. And on the advice of a professional, they had been decorated with thick ivory carpeting, glossy dark paneling, and hand-carved furniture.

The overall atmosphere was the sort of quiet hush that only money could buy. Lots and lots of money. It was the sort of swanky place that should be peddling rare paintings, priceless jewels, and museum artifacts. Instead it was no more than a flesh market. A sewer where demons were sold like so much meat.

There was nothing pleasant about the slave trade. Not even when the trade was demons rather than humans. It was a sordid business that attracted every decadent, demented slime ball in the country.

They came for all sorts of pathetic reasons.

Those who bought demons for mercenaries or body guards. Those who lusted after the more exotic slaves. Those who believed the blood of demons could bring them magic or eternal life. And those who purchased demons to be released into their private lands and hunted like wild animals.

The bidders were men and women without conscience or morals. Only enough money to sate their twisted pleasures.

And at the top of the dung heap was the owner of the auction house, Evor. He was one of the lesser trolls who made his living upon the misery of others with a smile on his face.

Someday Shay intended to kill Evor.

Unfortunately it would not be today.

Or rather tonight.

Attired in ridiculous harem pants and a tiny sequined top that revealed far more than it concealed, she paced the cramped cell behind the auction rooms. Her long raven black hair had been pulled to a braid that hung nearly to her waist. Better to reveal her slanted golden eyes, the delicate cast to her features, and the bronzed skin that marked her as something other than human.

Less than two months before she had been a slave to a coven of witches who intended to bring Armageddon to all demons. At the time she had thought anything was preferable to being their toad as she helplessly watched their evil plotting.

Hell, it's tough to top genocide.

It was only when she had been forced back to the power of Evor that she understood that death was not always the worst fate.

The grave was really nothing compared to what waited for her beyond the door.

Without thought Shay struck out with her foot, sending the lone table sailing through the air to crash against the iron bars with astonishing force.

From behind her came a heavy sigh that had her spinning to regard the small gargoyle hiding behind a chair in the far corner.

Levet wasn't much of a gargoyle.

Oh, he possessed the traditional grotesque features. Thick gray skin, reptilian eyes, horns, and cloven hoofs. He even possessed a long tail he polished and pampered with great pride. Unfortunately, despite his frightening appearance, he was barely three feet tall and worse, as far as he was concerned, he possessed a pair of delicate, gossamer wings that would have been more fitting on a sprite or a fairy than a lethal creature of the dark.

As if to add to his humiliation his powers were unpredictable under the best of circumstances, and he

courage more often than not missing in action.

It was little wonder he had been voted out of the Gargoyle Guild and forced to fend for himself. They claimed he was an embarrassment to the entire community, and not one had stepped forward when he had been captured and made a slave by Evor.

Shay had taken the pathetic creature under her protection the moment she had been forced back to the auction house. Not only because she possessed a regrettable tendency to leap to the defense of anyone weaker than herself, but because she knew that it aggravated Evor to have his favorite whipping boy taken away.

The troll might hold the curse that bound her, but if he pressed her far enough she would be willing to kill him, even if it meant an end to her own life.

"*Cherie*, did the table do something I did not see or were you just attempting to teach it a lesson?"

Levet demanded, his voice low and laced with a lilting French accent.

Not at all the sort of thing to improve his status among the gargoyles.

Shay smiled wryly. "I was imagining it was Evor."

"Strange, they do not greatly resemble one another."

"I have a good imagination."

"Ah." He gave a ridiculous wiggle of his thick brow. "In that case, I do not suppose you are imagining I'm Brad Pitt?"

Shay smiled wryly. "I'm good, but not that good, gargoyle."

"A pity."

Her brief amusement faded. "No, the pity is that it was a table and not Evor smashed to pieces."

"A delightful notion, but a mere dream." The gray eyes slowly narrowed. "Unless you intend to be stupid?"

Shay deliberately widened her eyes. "Who me?"

"*Mon dieu*," the demon growled. "You intend to fight him."

"I can't fight him. Not as long as I remain held by the curse."

"As if that has ever halted you." Levet tossed aside the pillow to reveal his tail furiously twitching about his hoofs. A sure sign of distress. "You can't kill him, but that never keeps you from trying to kick his fat troll ass."

"It passes the time."

"And leaves you screaming in agony for hours." He abruptly shuddered. "*Cherie*, I can't bear seeing you like that. Not again. It's insane to battle against fate."

Shay grimaced. As part of the curse, she was punished for any attempt to harm her master. The searing pain that gripped her body could leave her gasping on the ground or even passed out for hours. Late in the day, however, the punishment had become so brutal she feared that each time she pressed her luck it might be the last time.

She gave a tug on her braid. A gesture that revealed the frustration that smoldered just below the surface.

"You think I should just give in? Accept defeat?"

"What choice do you have? What choice do any of us have? Not all the fighting in the world can change the fact we belong—" Levet rubbed one of his stunted horns. "How do you say... lock, stock, and jug. -."

"Barrel."

"Ah, yes, barrel to Evor. And that he can do whatever he wants with us."

Shay gritted her teeth as she turned to glare at the iron bars that held her captive. "Shit. I hate this. I hate Evor. I hate this cell. I hate those pathetic demons up there waiting to bid on me. I almost wish they had let those witches bring an end to all of us."

"You will get no arguments from me, my sweet Shay," Levet agreed with a sigh. Shay closed her eyes. ~~Dammit. She hadn't meant the words. She was tired and frustrated, but she was~~ no coward. Just the fact she had survived the past century proved that.

"No," she muttered. "No."

Levet gave a flap of his wings. "And why not? We are trapped here like rats in a maze until we can be sold to the highest bidder. What could be worse?"

Shay smiled without humor. "Allowing fate to win."

"What?"

"So far fate or destiny or fortune or whatever the hell you want to call it has done nothing but crap for us," Shay growled. "I'm not going to just give in and allow it to thumb its nose at me as I slink into my grave., One of these days I'm going to have an opportunity to spit fate in its face. That's what keeps me fighting."

There was a long silence before the gargoyle moved to stand near enough so that he could rub his head on her leg. It was an unconscious gesture. A quest for reassurance that he would rather die than admit it.

"I am uncertain I have ever heard such an inelegant speech, but I believe you. If anyone can get away from Evor, it's you."

Absently, Shay shifted the horn poking into her thigh. "I'll come back for you, Levet, that much I promise."

"Well, well, isn't this touching?" Abruptly appearing before the iron bars of the cell Evor smiled to reveal his pointed teeth. "Beauty and the Beast."

With a smooth motion, Shay had pressed Levet behind her and turned to regard her captor. A sneer touched her face as the troll stepped into the cell and locked the door behind him. Evor easily passed for human. An incredibly ugly human.

He was a short, pudgy man with a round, squishy face and heavy jowls. His hair was little more than tufts of stray strands that he carefully combed over his head. And his small black eyes had a tendency to flash red when he was annoyed.

The eyes he hid behind black-framed glasses.

The thickly fleshed body he hid behind an obscenely expensive tailored suit.

Only the teeth marked him for the troll he was.

That and his utter lack of morals.

"Screw you, Evor," Shay muttered.

The nasty smile widened. "You wish."

Shay narrowed her gaze. The troll had been trying to get into her bed since gaining control of her curse. The only thing that had halted him from forcing her had been the knowledge she was quite willing to kill the both of them to prevent such a horror.

"I'll walk through the fires of hell before I let you touch me."

Fury rippled over the pudgy features before the oily smile returned. "Someday, my beauty, you'll be happy to be spread beneath me. We all have our breaking point. Eventually you'll reach yours."

"Not in this lifetime."

His tongue flicked out in an obscene motion. "So proud. So powerful. I shall enjoy pouring my seed into you. But not yet. There is still money to be made from you. And money always comes first." Lifting his hand he revealed the heavy iron shackles that he had hid behind his body. "Will you put these on or do I need to call for the boys?"

Shay crossed her arms over her chest. She might only be half Shalott, but she possessed all of the strength and agility of her ancestors. They were not the favorite assassins of the demon world without cause.

"After all these years you still think those goons can hurt me?"

"Oh, I have no intention of having them hurt you. I should hate to have you damaged before the bidding." Very deliberately his gaze shifted to where Levet was cowering behind her legs. "I merely wish them to encourage your good behavior."

The gargoyle gave a low moan. "Shay?"

Shit.

She battled back the instinctive urge to punch the pointed teeth down Evor's throat. It would only put her on the ground in agony. Worse, it would leave Levet at the mercy of the hulking mountain troll. Evor used as protection.

They would take great delight in torturing the poor gargoyle.

As far as she knew their only pleasure was giving pain to others.

Freaking trolls.

"Fine." She held out her arms with a furious scowl.

"A wise choice." Keeping a wary eye on her, Evor pressed the shackles over her wrists and locked them shut. "I knew you would understand the situation once it was properly explained."

Shay hissed as the iron bit into her skin. She could feel her power draining and her flesh chaffing beneath the iron. It was her one certain Achilles' heel.

"All I understand is that someday I'm going to kill you."

He gave a jerk on the chain that draped between the shackles. "Behave yourself, bitch, or your little friend pays the consequences. Got it?"

Shay battled back the sickness that clutched at her stomach.

Once again she was going to be placed on the stage and sold to the highest bidder. She would be utterly at the mercy of some stranger who could do whatever he pleased with her.

And there wasn't a damn thing she could do to stop it.

"Yeah, I got it. Let's just get this over with."

Evor opened his mouth as if to make a smart-ass comment only to snap the fish lips shut when he caught sight of her expression. Obviously he could sense she was close to the edge.

Which only proved that he wasn't quite as stupid as he looked.

In silence they left the cell and climbed the narrow stairs to the back of the stage. Evor paused only long enough to lock her shackles to a pole anchored in the floor before moving toward the closed curtains and slipping through them to face the crowd.

Alone in the darkness, Shay sucked in a deep breath and tried to ignore the rumblings of the crowd just beyond the curtain.

Even without being able to see the potential bidders she could feel the presence of the gathering demons and humans. She could smell the stench of their sweat. Feel the smoldering impatience. Taste the depraved lust in the air.

She abruptly frowned. There was something else. Something that was subtly laced through it all.

A sense of decaying evil that sent a chill of horror over her skin.

It was vague. As if the being was not truly in the room in full form. More like a looming, intangible presence. An echo of foulness that made her stomach clench in fear.

Swallowing back her instinctive scream she closed her eyes and forced herself to take a deep, steady breath. In the distance she heard Evor loudly clear his throat to command attention.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, demons and fairies, dead and undead... it is time for our main attraction. Our *pièce de résistance*. An item so rare, so extraordinary that only those who possess the golden token may remain," he dramatically announced. "The rest may retire to our reception room where you will be offered your choice of refreshment."

Despite the lingering certainty she had just been brushed by some malignant gaze Shay managed a disgusted grimace. Evor was always a pompous blowhard. Tonight, however, he put even the cheesiest

ringmaster to shame.

"Gather close, my friends," Evor commanded as the dregs of bidders were forced to leave the room. To be granted a golden ticket a person or demon had to carry at least \$50,000 in cash on them. The slave trade rarely accepted checks or credit cards. Go figure. "You will not wish to miss your first glimpse of my precious treasure. Do not fear, I have ensured that she is properly chained. She will offer no danger. No danger beyond her perilous charm. She will not rip your heart from your chest, but I do not promise she will not steal it with her beauty."

"Shut your mouth and open the curtain," a voice growled.

"You are impatient?" Evor demanded, his tone edged with anger. He didn't like his well-practiced act interrupted.

"I don't have all night. Get on with it."

"Ah, a premature... bidder, a pity. Let us hope for your sake that it is not an affliction that taints your performance in other areas," Evor sneered, pausing to allow the roar of coarse laughter to fade. "Now where was I? Oh, yes. My prize. My most beloved slave. Demons and ghouls, allow me to introduce you to Lady Shay... the last Shalott to walk our world."

With a dramatic motion the curtain disappeared in a puff of smoke, leaving Shay exposed to the next two dozen men and demons.

Deliberately she lowered her gaze as she heard the gasps echo through the room. It was humiliating enough to smell their rabid hunger. She didn't need to see it written on their faces.

"Is this a trick?" a dark voice demanded in disbelief. Hardly surprising. As far as Shay knew she truly was the last Shalott remaining in the world.

"No trick, no illusion."

"As if I'd take your word for it, troll. I want proof."

"Proof? Very well." There was a moment's pause as Evor searched the crowd. "You there, come forward," he commanded.

Shay tensed as she felt the cold chill that warned her it was a vampire approaching. Her blood was more precious than gold to the undead. An aphrodisiac that they would kill to procure.

With her attention focused on the tall, gaunt vampire, Shay barely noticed when Evor grabbed her arm and used a knife to slice through the skin of her forearm. Hissing softly the vamp leaned downward to lick the welling blood. His entire body shivered as he lifted his head to regard her with stark hunger.

"There is human blood, but she is genuine Shalott," he rasped.

With a smooth motion Evor had placed his pudgy form between the vamp and Shay, shooing the predator away with a wave of his hand. Reluctantly the undead creature left the stage, no doubt sensing the impending riot if he gave in to his impulse to sink his teeth into her and drain her dry.

Evor waited until the stage was cleared before moving to stand behind his podium. He grasped his gavel and lifted it over his head. Ridiculous twit.

"Satisfied? Good." Evor smacked the gavel onto the podium. "The bidding starts at fifty thousand dollars. Remember, gentlemen, cash only."

"Fifty-five thousand."

"Sixty thousand."

"Sixty-one thousand "

Shay's gaze once again dropped to her feet as the voices called out their bids. Soon enough she would be forced to confront her new master. She didn't want to watch as they wrangled over her like a pack of dogs slavering over a juicy bone.

"One hundred thousand dollars." A shrill voice shouted from the back of the room.

A sly smile touched Evor's thin lips. "A most generous bid, my good sir. Anyone else? No? Going once... Going twice..."

"Five hundred thousand."

A sharp silence filled the room. Without even realizing what she was doing Shay lifted her head to stare into the crowd jamming the auction floor.

There was something about that silky dark voice. Something... familiar.

"Step forward," Evor demanded, his eyes shimmering red, "Step forward and offer your name."

There was a stir as the crowd parted. From the back shadows a tall, elegant form glided forward, A hushed whisper spread through the room as the muted light revealed the hauntingly beautiful face and satin curtain of silver hair that fell down his back.

It took only a glance to realize he was a vampire.

No human could so closely resemble an angel that had fallen from heaven. And fallen recently. Could move with such liquid grace. Or cause the demons to back away in wary fear.

Shay's breath caught in her throat. Not at his stunning beauty, or powerful presence, or even the flamboyant velvet cloak that shrouded his slender form.

It was the fact that she knew this vampire.

He had been at her side when they had battled the coven of witches weeks ago. And, more importantly he had been at her side when she had saved his life.

And now he was here bidding on her like she was no more than a piece of property.

Damn his rotten soul to hell.

Viper had been in the world for centuries. He had witnessed the rise and fall of empires. He had seduced the most beautiful women in the world. He had taken the blood of kings, czars, and Pharaohs. He had even changed the course of history at times.

Now he was sated, jaded, and magnificently bored.

He no longer struggled to broaden his power base. He didn't involve himself in battles with demons or humans. He didn't form alliances or interfere in politics.

His only concern was ensuring the safety of his clan and keeping his business profitable enough to allow him the luxurious lifestyle he had grown accustomed to.

But somehow the Shalott demon had managed the impossible.

She had managed to linger in his thoughts long after she had disappeared.

For weeks she had haunted his memories and even invaded his dreams. She was like a thorn that had lodged beneath his skin and refused to be removed.

A realization that he wasn't sure pleased or annoyed him as he had scoured the streets of Chicago in search of the woman.

Glancing at his latest acquisition, he didn't have to wonder if Shay was pleased or annoyed. Even in the muted light it was obvious her glorious golden eyes were flashing with fury.

Clearly she failed to fully appreciate the honor he was bestowing upon her.

His lips twitched with amusement as he was returning his attention to the troll standing behind the podium.

"You may call me Viper," he informed the lesser demon with cold dislike.

The red eyes briefly widened. It was a name that inspired fear throughout Chicago. "Of course. Forgive me for not recognizing you, sir. You... ah..." He swallowed heavily. "You have the cash upon you?"

With a motion too swift for most eyes, Viper had reached beneath his cloak and tossed a large pack onto the stairs leading to the stage.

"I do."

With a flourish, Evor banged the gavel on the podium. "Sold."

~~There was a low hiss from the Shalott, but before Viper could give her the proper attention,~~ there was the sound of low cursing and a small, wiry human was pushing his way through the crowd.

"Wait. The bidding is not yet closed," the stranger charged

Viper narrowed his gaze. He might have laughed at the absurdity of the scrawny man attempting to bully his way through towering demons, but he didn't miss the scent of sour desperation that clouded about him, or the blackness that darkened his soul.

This was a man who had been touched by evil.

The troll, Evor, frowned as he regarded the man, clearly unimpressed by the cheap, baggy suit and secondhand shoes. "You wish to continue?"

"Yes."

"You have the cash upon you?"

The man swiped a hand over the sweat clinging to his bald head. "Not upon me, but I can easily have it to you—"

"Cash and carry only," Evor growled, his gavel once again hitting the podium.

"No. I will get you the money."

"The bidding is over."

"Wait. You must wait I—"

"Get out before I have you thrown out."

"No." Without warning the man was racing up the stairs with a knife in his hand. "The demon is mine."

As quick as the man was, Viper had already moved to place himself between the stranger and the Shalott. The man gave a low growl before turning and stalking toward the troll. Easier prey than a determined vampire. But then again, most things were.

"Now, now. There is no need to become unreasonable." Evor hastily gestured toward the hulking bodyguards at the edge of the stage. "You knew the rules when you came."

With lumbering motions the mountain trolls moved forward, their hulking size and skin as thick as tree bark making them nearly impossible to kill.

Viper folded his arms over his chest. His attention remained on the demented human, but he couldn't deny that he was disturbingly aware of the Shalott behind him.

It was in the sweet scent of her blood. The warmth of her skin. And the shimmering energy that swirled about her.

His entire body reacted to her proximity. It was as if he had stepped close to a smoldering fire that offered a promise of heat he had long forgotten.

Unfortunately his attention was forced to remain on the seeming madman waving the knife in a threatening motion. There was something decidedly strange in the human's determination. A startle panic that was out of place.

He would be an idiot to underestimate the danger of the sudden standoff.

"Stay back," the small man squeaked.

The trolls continued forward until Viper lifted a slender hand. "I would not come close to the knife. You are hexed."

"Hexed?" Evor's face hardened with fury. "Magical artifacts are forbidden. The punishment is death."

"You think a pathetic troll and his goons can frighten me?" The intruder lifted his knife to point directly at Evor's face. "I came here for the Shalott and I'm not leaving without her. I'll kill you all if you have to."

"You may try," Viper drawled.

The man spun about to confront him. "I have no fight with you, vampire."

"You are attempting to steal my demon "

"I'll pay you. Whatever you want."

"Whatever?" Viper flicked a brow upward. "A generous, if rather foolhardy bargain."

"What is your price?"

Viper pretended to consider a moment. "Nothing you could offer."

That sour desperation thickened in the air. "How do you know? My employer is very rich... very powerful"

Ah. Now they were getting somewhere.

"Employer. So you are merely an envoy?"

The man nodded, his eyes burning like coals in their sunken sockets. "Yes "

"And your employer will no doubt be quite disappointed to learn you have failed in your task to gain the Shalott?"

The pale skin became a sickly gray. Viper suspected that the sense of darkness he could detect was directly related to the mysterious employer.

"He will kill me."

"Then you are in quite a quandary, my friend, because I have no intention of allowing you to leave the room with my prize."

"What do you care?"

Viper's smile was cold. "Surely you must know that Shalott blood is an aphrodisiac for vampires? It is a most rare treat that has been denied us for too long."

"You intend to drain her?"

"That is none of your concern. She is mine. Bought and paid for."

He heard a strangled curse from behind him, along with the rattle of chains. His beauty was clearly unhappy with his response and anxious to prove her displeasure by ripping him limb from limb.

A tiny flicker of excitement raced through him.

Blood of the saints, but he liked his women dangerous.

Chapter Two

Shay cursed the shackles that held her bound to the pole.

She cursed Evor, the greedy, remorseless son of a bitch.

She cursed the strange human who smelted of mat foul evil she had sensed before.

And most of all she cursed Viper for treating her as no more than an expensive party treat.

Unfortunately the worthless cursing was all she could do as the clearly crazed human waved about his knife.

"She's mine. I must have her."

The vampire never flinched. In fact, he stood so still that he appeared more dead than alive. Only the cold power surging through the air warned there was something stirring beneath the beautiful facade.

"You intend to battle me with no more than a hexed knife?" he demanded.

The man swallowed. "I cannot defeat a vampire."

"Ah, you are not quite so stupid as you look."

The tiny eyes darted about and Shay felt everyone tense. The man was desperate enough to try battling his way through a vampire. When he moved, however, it was not toward Viper but instead toward the gawking Evor. With astonishing skill he had his arm around the troll's neck and the knife pressed into the flabby skin of his throat.

"I will kill him. As long as he holds the Shalott's curse she will die as well." His gaze remained trained on Viper, no doubt aware he was far more dangerous than any other demon in the room. "She will do you no good if she dies before you can drain her."

Shay sucked in a sharp breath. She wasn't afraid to die. But, by God, if she were going to her grave she didn't want it to be while she was shackled to a pole and helpless to fight back.

Viper didn't move but his power was filling the room like an icy wave. The air stirred the silver strands of his hair and billowed the velvet cape.

"You will not kill her," he said in tones that made a shiver run down Shay's spine. "I do not believe your employer would be pleased if she is brought to him as a corpse."

The man gave a wild laugh. "If she ends up in the hands of another, I'm worse than dead. She might as well go with me."

"So does your employer desire her, or fear her?" Viper murmured, smoothly moving forward. "Who is he? A demon? A sorcerer?"

"Stop or I will kill her."

"No." Viper continued his flowing snide. "You will drop the knife and walk away."

"You can't glamour me with your eyes. I'm immune to mystical crap."

"Fine, then I will have to kill you."

"You can't—" The words of warning were still upon the man's lips when Viper had him by the throat and tossed him into a nearby wall.

For such a small man he managed to make a hell of a racket when he hit the paneling and slid to the floor. Astonishingly, however, he was back on his feet and reaching beneath his baggy coat in the blink of an eye. Clearly he was more than a mere human. No doubt a wizard with enough magical talent to offer some protection.

Lifting his hand, he clutched what looked to be a small rock. Shay frowned. She had lived with the witches long enough to know the crystal held a powerful spell.

"Viper."

She called out the warning without knowing why. What did it matter who won the battle? Was being nightly drained by a pack of vampires preferable to whatever the unknown monster might have

store for her?

In the end it didn't matter.

Even before his name had rumbled from her lips, Viper was leaping to the side and allowing the blast of black magic to strike the far wall. Flames crawled over the paneling and with cries of panic the wealthy guests began scrambling for the nearest door. Magical fire was the one thing that was as deadly to demons as to humans.

"Get the fire extinguishers, you fools." Evor cried, flapping his pudgy hands with growing panic. "I'm going to lose everything."

The mountain trolls reluctantly lumbered to battle the flames, but Shay's attention remained glued to the duel between the vampire and the increasingly desperate man.

Viper was on his feet, his black cloak flowing about him as he stalked in a half circle about the man.

"The spell that protects you will not keep me from ripping out your throat," he said in silky tones.

"Are you that anxious to die?"

"Better my throat ripped out than what my master would do." the man rasped as he lifted the crystal and released the power toward the vampire.

Once again Viper smoothly moved aside to allow the blast to hit the podium. It burst into flames and Evor squawked in horror.

"Over here. Bring the extinguisher over here," the troll cried.

There was another blast and Shay fell flat on the floor, only her quick reflexes keeping her from being toast.

A low growl filled the air and Shay lifted her head to watch as Viper launched himself toward the terrified man. The hairs on the back of her neck stirred at the sight of his features honed to a starry deadly mask and his fangs lengthened to kill.

He was no longer the beautiful angel but a lethal instrument of death.

The man screamed as Viper's teeth sank into his neck. The scream became a gurgle as the blood trickled down the man's throat and dripped onto the ivory carpeting. He was a heartbeat from death but with futile desperation the man lifted the knife to stab the vampire in the back. Over and over the blade bit into Viper's flesh.

Shay winced. Although the knife couldn't kill a vampire it still had to hurt like a bitch.

There was another ghastly gurgle and Shay deliberately turned her head. A part of her was grateful not to be handed over to the looming evil that still tainted the air, but she preferred not to watch the vampire enjoy his midnight snack.

Especially when she might very well be breakfast.

There was a thump as the man was allowed to drop to the ground then the faint swish of fine velvet.

"I would suggest that you take better care of who you invite to your little auctions, Evor," the vampire drawled. "Black wizards are never good for business."

"Yes ... yes, certainly." Dry washing his hands the troll glanced about the room. The flames had been put out, but there was no salvaging the podium or the paneling on the far wall. Or the ivory carpeting that was now stained with blood. The elegant ambiance had taken a definite blow. "I offer my most sincere apologies. I cannot imagine how he managed to get through my security."

"The question is not how. It is obvious he had help from a very powerful master. The question is who the master might be, and why he was so determined to get his hands upon the Shalott."

"Ah ... well, I don't suppose it matters now." Evor gave a nervous shrug.

"Unless his master comes to search for him."

Evor's eyes flashed red. "You think he will?"

"My talents do not include reading the future."

"I must move the body." The troll shot a glance toward the lifeless body. "Perhaps I should burn it?"

"Not my problem." Viper shrugged his indifference. "I will take my property now."

"Oh, of course. Such confusion." Nervously searching his pockets Evor at last came up with a small amulet that he held out to the impatient vampire. "Here you are."

Holding the amulet in his long, slender fingers Viper regarded the troll with a lift of his brows.

"Explain."

"As long as you hold the amulet the Shalott must come when you call her."

The midnight gaze slid toward Shay. She stiffened at the smoldering satisfaction that glinted within it.

"So, she cannot escape me?" he murmured.

"No."

"What else does this do?"

"Nothing. I fear you shall have to control her on your own." Evor dug in his pockets once again to extract a heavy key that he handed to Viper. "I would suggest you leave the shackles upon her until she is safely locked in a cell"

Viper's gaze never left Shay's tight expression. "Oh, I do not fear controlling her," he said softly.

"Leave us."

Evor gave a smooth bow as he motioned toward his goons. "As you will."

Careful to collect the money still laying on the stage, Evor hustled the trolls before him and left the room. Once alone Viper moved to kneel before Shay who was still crouched beside the pole.

"Well, my pet. We meet again," he murmured.

Ridiculously Shay felt her breath catch. My God, he was so beautiful. Eyes as dark and beguiling as the velvet night sky. The features chiseled by the hand of a master craftsman. The spill of silver hair that shimmered like the finest satin.

As if he had been created for the sole purpose of pleasuring every fortunate woman who crossed his path.

The urge to reach out and touch those perfect features and discover if they could possibly be real shuddered through her.

Shay discovered her hand actually lifting when she caught herself. Crap. What was wrong with her? This... treacherous rodent had just bought her lock, stock, and barrel, as Levet would say. She wanted to stick a stake in his heart, not discover if he could deliver on the pleasure he promised.

"I would say it's a pleasant surprise, but it isn't," she muttered.

"Not pleasant, or not a surprise?"

The silken words spread over her skin making her shiver in response. Even his voice was created to make a woman climax on the spot.

"Guess." she gritted.

He arched a brow that was several shades darker than his hair. "I would think you would be a bit more grateful, pet. I did just rescue you from what I suspect was a very grim future."

"I am not your pet, and my future is hardly less grim with you."

"You do not yet know my plans for you."

"You are a vampire. That's all I need to know."

He reached out a slender hand to touch the curls that had come loose from her braid to trail over her cheek. A cool rush of power swept through her body making her stomach clench with sharp pleasure.

Damn vampire.

"You believe we are all the same?"

"Vampires have been after my blood for a hundred years. Why should you be any different?"

His lips twitched with amusement. "Why indeed."

She pulled back only to be halted by the shackles that dug painfully into her wrists.

"Did you know I would be here when you came?" she demanded.

There was a momentary pause before he gave a nod. "Yes."

"And that's why you're here?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Obviously because I wished to have you."

That pang of disappointment returned to stab through her heart. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

"Even after I saved your life?"

He tilted his head to one side to allow the long silver hair to trail over his shoulder.

"Saved my life? Perhaps."

Shay widened her eyes in shock. "What do you mean, perhaps? Edra intended to kill you. I took a spear blast meant for you."

He shrugged. "Certainly you prevented a nasty wound, but it is impossible to determine if it would have been a killing blow."

"You jackass," she breathed, beyond caring that she was now his slave and utterly in his power. "You saved my life and yet you came here to buy me."

"Was there another among the bidders you would have preferred?"

"I would have preferred to kill you all."

His soft chuckle floated on the air. "So bloodthirsty."

"No, I'm sick of being at the mercy of every demon, monster, witch, or freak who has the money to buy me."

He stilled as the midnight gaze searched her flushed face. "Understandable, I suppose."

"You understand nothing."

His faint smile remained, but for the first time Shay noticed the lines of strain around his magnificent eyes.

"Perhaps not, but I do understand that I am in no humor to battle you this evening, pet. I have been injured and I need blood to recover my strength."

Shay had nearly forgotten the stab wounds he had received during his battle with the man. Not that she particularly cared at the moment.

She didn't like his mention of blood.

"And?"

The amusement returned to his eyes as he easily read her unease. "And while I prefer to escort you to my lair in a civilized manner, I can keep you shackled and drag you there kicking and screaming. The choice is yours."

She refused to show her relief. It was only a matter of time before she became an unwilling donor.

"Some choice."

"For the moment it is the only one you have. What is it to be?"

She glared at him before at last sticking out her arms. There was no point in fighting the inevitable. Besides the iron rubbing against her skin was hurting worse than she wanted to admit.

"Take off the shackles."

"I have your word that you will not attempt to fight me?"

Shay blinked in surprise. "You trust my word?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I can read your soul." He held her gaze with ease. "Your word?"

Well... crap.

She didn't want him to know that once she gave her word she would never go back on it. It gave him yet another hold over her.

For a moment she refused to make the pledge. How could she live with herself if she didn't at least try to put a stake through his heart? She did have her pride, after all. But as he continued to stare at her with that unnerving stillness only a vampire could pull off, she heaved a grudging sigh. He was prepared to remain in that precise position for an eternity if necessary.

"For tonight I will not attempt to fight you," she said through gritted teeth.

He smiled at her grudging promise. "As good as I'm going to get, I suppose."

"Damn straight."

Viper found a smile tugging at his lips as he escorted the Shalott from the auction house to his waiting car. He wasn't at all sure why he was pleased. He had come to the auction because he couldn't get the beautiful demon out of his mind. He didn't have a clue what he intended to do with her. He had only known he couldn't allow anyone else to own her.

His plans, however, hadn't included a battle with some minor dark wizard, or pissing off a powerful enemy that would no doubt want revenge, or being treated like some bloodsucking monster by his very own slave.

So why the devil was he smiling?

His gaze lowered to watch the angry twitch of Shay's hips as she walked in front of him. Ah, yes. Now he remembered.

A lick of pure desire curled through his stomach.

The scent of her potent blood was enough to make any vampire hard and aching. She perfumed the very air with lust. But that was not what captured and held his attention.

It was her exotic beauty, the manner in which she moved with that liquid grace, the fierce determination that shimmered in the golden eyes, and the danger that swirled about her like a cloud of enticement.

She would never be just an easy lay. Her lover would never know when he kissed her whether she would wrap her legs around him or rip his heart out.

It added a delicious dash of excitement that he hadn't felt in far too long.

With his eyes still transfixed by the gentle sway of her hips Viper was forced to step to the side as Shay came to a sharp halt in front of the gleaming black limo.

"Is this yours?" she demanded.

"For my sins."

She forced a smile to her lips, but Viper could feel her wariness. She seemed more disturbed than impressed by his blatant display of wealth.

"Nice."

"I like to live well." With a smooth motion Viper pulled the door open and motioned with his hand.

"After you."

There was a tense beat, and then with a tilt of her chin, Shay was climbing into the dimly lit depths.

"Holy crap." she muttered beneath her breath.

He smiled as he settled in the seat across from her. The car was a work of art. Plush white seats, polished satinwood, moonroof, built-in wine cabinet, and plasma TV.

What more could a discerning vampire desire?

Waiting until the car smoothly purred from the curb, Viper pulled out two crystal glasses and poured them a generous measure of his favorite vintage.

"Wine? It is a particularly exquisite burgundy."

She took the glass only to sniff at it as if she feared it might be poison. "I wouldn't know the

difference if you had brewed it in your bathtub."

Viper hid his smile by taking an appreciative sip of me wine. "I see I shall have to introduce you to the delights of fine living."

The golden eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why would you bother? It can't matter to you if I appreciate expensive wine or mile-long limos."

He gave a small shrug. "I prefer a companion who possesses a bit of sophistication."

"Companion?" Shay gave a short, humorless laugh. "Me?"

"I did pay a great deal of money for you. Did you believe that I intended to hide you away in some damp cell?"

"Why not? You can drain me as easily in a damp cell as anywhere."

Viper sprawled with elegant ease in his seat, wincing slightly as his injuries protested at the pressure against them. They would be healed within a few hours, but until then they would be a painful reminder of his most recent battle.

"It is true that I could make a fortune off your blood," he murmured, regarding her tight expression over the rim of his glass. "Vampires would pay any price for a taste of your potent elixir. However, I have no desperate need for more wealth, and for the moment I prefer to keep you to myself."

"Your own private stock?" she rasped, folding her arms over her stomach.

"Perhaps," he murmured in distracted tones as he reached into a small compartment beneath his seat and removed a small ceramic pot. "Hold out your arms."

She predictably stiffened, her breath catching in horror. She had made it clear that she considered sharing her blood with a vampire a fate worse than death.

"What?"

"I said, hold out your arms."

"Now?"

"Now."

Her jaw worked as she glared at him with fury. Viper held out a slender hand, calmly waiting. Long moments passed before she muttered a low curse and thrust out her arm.

"Here."

Grasping her forearm in one hand he used his other hand to scoop out the pale green cream from the ceramic pot and carefully began to smear it on the red and blistered skin of her wrists. The wounds from the iron shackles would scar unless proper care was taken.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"There is no need for you to suffer. I have no liking for witches, but not even I can deny they know how to brew a hell of an ointment."

A frown touched her brow as he reached to tend to her other wrist.

"Why are you doing this?"

"You're injured."

"Yes, but... why do you care?"

Viper met her gaze steadily. "You belong to me now. I take care of my own."

Her lips thinned, not entirely happy with his explanation, but her muscles relaxed beneath his gentle touch and she didn't try to pull away. Not until he lifted her wrist so he could press his lips to her raw skin.

"No, please," she whispered, "I..."

Without warning her eyes widened, and with a powerful movement that caught him off guard, she had pulled free of his hold and had her hand pressed to the window.

Viper tensed at the sudden danger in the air. "What is it?"

"The darkness from the auction house," she whispered. "It's following us."

"Get down," he commanded, once again reaching beneath the seat. On this occasion he pulled out a sleek handgun.

There was a sudden thump as the limo was hit from behind and Viper muttered a low curse. He wasn't concerned they would wreck. The car had been built to withstand a small nuclear bomb. And, of course, his driver was a vampire. Pierre's reflexes were the best he had ever seen. Not to mention the fact he was immortal.

The perfect chauffeur.

But he would have the heart of anyone stupid enough to so blatantly attack him.

Leaning sideways Viper slowly lowered the smoke-tinted window. A gust of air whipped through the interior, stealing the comforting warmth. Fall had descended without mercy, leaving a chilled edge to the night.

Behind them a large jeep was continuing to accelerate in a futile effort to run them off the road. Even at a distance he could tell that there were two passengers, and that they were both human.

"Give me one."

Startled by Shay's soft demand Viper turned to regard her with a narrowed gaze.

"You know how to use a gun?"

"Yes."

Keeping his gaze locked on her wide eyes he reached beneath the seat to offer her a handgun similar to his own. With startling efficiency she measured the balance of the gun in her hand, before smoothly flicking off the safety.

He would wager his finest ruby it was not the first occasion she held a gun.

Not precisely reassuring.

At least she wasn't about to accidentally shoot off her foot, or worse his own, he wryly acknowledged as he rolled down the opposite window.

"Aim at the tires," he commanded, leaning out the window and steadying his hip against the door. He paused, sighted, pulled the trigger, and took out the front tire with one shot. On the other side of the car Shay sprayed a line of bullets, at last puncturing the other tire. The pursuing car pulled hard to the right and Viper managed a shot through the side window, hitting the driver although it was impossible to tell if it was a killing blow.

The car plunged off the road and Viper sent his thoughts to Pierre who was already slowing the limo. He wanted those men. He wanted them in his clutches to drain them of every last thread of information they might possess.

And then he intended to just drain them.

Whoever, or whatever, wanted his Shalott was proving to be more than merely a pest.

He needed to know precisely what he was up against.

The thought had barely crossed his mind when the skidding car rammed into a light pole. He muttered a curse, and then another as the car promptly exploded into a ball of flames.

Well, devil's balls.

Didn't that only happen in the movies?

Folding himself back into the car he gave a rap on the divider. On cue the limo sped easily into the darkness.

Viper watched as Shay lowered herself back in her seat. Closing the windows he held out his hand for the gun. There was only the faintest hesitation before she placed it in his hand and Viper bent down to place both guns in the hidden cabinet.

Settling more comfortably against the leather he flashed her a faint smile. "Not bad."

"It pulls right."

His smile widened. "Yes, I know."

Her eyes slowly narrowed. "You thought I might turn it on you?"

"Was it not a temptation?" he demanded.

"A gun can't kill you."

"The bullets are silver and would have at least caused me damage."

Her eyes glittered with then unspoken warning that she wanted to do tads more than cause me damage.

"You said that you trusted me."

"I have not survived so many centuries without realizing that I can occasionally be wrong. I full embrace the motto 'better safe than sorry.'"

She tossed herself into the corner of her seat, yanking at the long raven braid that was draped over her shoulder. She had been angry when he had demanded her pledge not to offer him harm, annoyed that he had easily read her noble spirit. Now she was angry that he remained cautious.

Part demon or not, she was as contrary as any woman.

"If I wanted to hurt you, I wouldn't need a gun" she muttered in low tones.

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