

Dragon Heat (Book 1) by Ella J. Phoenix



# Dragon Heat

**Book One of the Dragon Heat series**

**By Ella J Phoenix**

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## Glossary

**Apa Dobrý** – group of five gods, creators of life on Earth and the universe

**Apa Sâmbetei** – the land of the souls; the afterlife

**Calathor** – someone who can cross to Apa Sâmbetei and return unharmed

**Draco** – a dragon in human form

**Hiad** – the Underworld

**Inmã** – the soul

**Razbians** – lizard people known for their lack of intelligence

**Soartas** – Goddesses of Destiny

**Sujha** – a non-pure being; offspring of the union between two different races

**Terhem Viahta** – the land of the living; Earth

**Ucidhere** – God of Death, Lord of Apa Sâmbetei

**Zmyzel** – Goddess of Life

## Prologue

### Romania, 1800

Tardieh realized he must have passed out because he could feel that the sun was in a different position now. It was almost sundown already.

Without opening his eyes, he unlocked his senses to his surroundings. It wasn't easy—he was weak, but he forced himself to stay calm. He first focused on the sounds around him—water dripping somewhere above him, someone breathing and a heart beating a few feet away. Just one heartbeat.

They had left only one razbian to guard him; they must have thought he was very weak. Not that they were wrong. He had lost a lot of blood, and his body ached all over.

*Breathe, breathe*, he thought, and decided to open his eyes just a fraction. He didn't want the guard to know he had awakened. The first thing he noticed was the dancing shadows on the walls, casted by the dim light of a single candle placed on the ceiling.

*On the ceiling?*

No, Tardieh realized, the candle was on the floor. *He* was the one on the ceiling—hung upside down. The dripping sound wasn't water either; it was his own blood dribbling onto the floor. He was suspended by his ankles with thick silver chains; his hands bound behind him in the same fashion. His head throbbed from being upside down for so long.

*Inhale, exhale.*

The smell of piss, excrement and something else, something worse, assaulted his olfactory receptors. *Fear*. He could smell the fear of previous prisoners who had suffered in that room before him. Their terror had been so tangible it had tainted the air, the walls, the floor.

“So yer awake, then.”

The razbian guard stood up and placed himself in front of Tardieh. He could see the guard's sharp blackened teeth and smell his putrid breath.

“We thought yeh was gone. But yer a mulish one, ain't ya?”

The razbian was of average height, much smaller than a draco or a vampire, but one would consider him bulky. The green leathery skin and bulging wide-set yellow eyes—characteristic of his kind—were the only things preventing them from walking among humans like vampires and dracos did. Thank Apa Dobrý for that, otherwise the pricks would have turned the world upside down by now.

Tardieh felt the air shift around his face before the blow hit him. He was so weak he didn't even try to duck or defy the guard. All he could do was close his eyes and welcome the pain. The bastard's high-pitched laugh struck him like déjà vu. How long had he been in this piss-smelling prison?

Another blow. This one hit his stomach with such force that Tardieh's body swung back and forth, like meat in a slaughterhouse.

“Hey, I'm talkin' ter ye!”

More of the high-pitched laughter.

Tardieh tried to speak, but couldn't make the words come out. He tried again. “Water.”

This time the guard, taken by curiosity, made the mistake of stepping closer to hear what Tardieh was saying, probably with the intent to use the new information to torture him later.

The warrior inside Tardieh took over. His fangs extended, ripping open his sore gums, and with the last ounce of energy he had, Tardieh bit the motherfucker's ear.

His brain registered the razbian's screams as if from afar, but fresh blood had already hit Tardieh's lips. The delectable warm liquid oozed into his mouth, making him forget where he was and what had happened to him. There was only the metallic taste and the life energy spreading inside him, rushing through his aching muscles. Razbian blood was a far cry from a

human's; it was leaden and cold, since razbians were distant descendants of the lizard people from the east. But at that moment, Tardieh couldn't care less about how strange and heavy the razbian's blood felt on his tongue, it was the best elixir he had ever tasted.

“Yer sonofabitch! Yer ripped off my ear!”

If Tardieh had the energy, he would have laughed, but his ecstasy was cut short by another series of punches to his face.

The door opened and another guard stepped in the room. He was taller and leaner than the razbian; while the latter had obvious evidence of his race, the former could have easily passed for a human. Tardieh recognized who it was by the strong odor of decaying meat this person always carried with them. Vrajitor was his name, the so-called “draconian magician.” He had politely introduced himself when Tardieh had been brought to the cell weeks before—or maybe it had been months already; he had lost track of time long ago. “Not that I have more magic than other dragons,” Vrajitor had explained on their first encounter. “It's just that I'm known for magically making my guests talk.”

Tardieh hadn't been surprised by the remark. Despite human folklore, dragons could unleash their magic when in human form, although it was never as powerful as when they were in their true form.

“Has he awakened?” the draco asked the razbian guard, his glare on Tardieh unwavering.

That was not a good sign.

“Da, sire, the leech bit my ear!” the guard said, still holding what remained of his left ear. His long scaled hands shook with anger.

A faint twitch that could have been mistaken for a smile appeared on Vrajitor's face. “May that serve you well for underestimating your enemy.”

As he took a few more steps into the room, Tardieh noticed the bastard's eyes scrutinizing his naked body. Tardieh held his gaze, trying to show no fear of what was coming.

“You are either stronger than I have anticipated or more stupid, bloodsucker. But you will tell me what I want to know sooner or later.” And there it was again, the face twitch. But this time it came with a slight show of his shark-like teeth. “Bring me the *scula*,” Vrajitor barked to the razbian.

The guard hurried out of the room and came back with a trolley covered by a long, stained cloth.

Tardieh was now well acquainted with what they called the *scula*. The instruments were made of pure silver, of course, so as to enhance the prisoners’ pain.

He tried to suck in a gulp of air, but his lungs ached too much. He must have had a few ribs broken in the never-ending punching sessions. He didn’t mind the punches, though. They had always kept him awake.

Throughout his years of training to become the leader of his people, he endured endless sessions of ruthless practice. His father, the vampire king, had made it clear that just because he was his heir, he was not to receive any special treatment. More so, Tardieh’s training had been even more callous than the other warriors. He was the prince and therefore needed to be stronger than the others, more prepared to deal with any battles that the Soartas imposed on him—such as this one.

Vrajitor lifted the sheet to reveal his most-loved torture apparatus. “Which one should we use today, prince? Would you like another session with my *gheara*?” he asked, raising a blood-stained silver device that looked like a claw with four sharp fingers attached to a short handle.

Tardieh swallowed dry, unable to stop the dread brought upon by the memories of that claw ripping his flesh open. Vrajitor had used it on his abdomen, his legs and his back. In the beginning, he had healed immediately, but in the last couple of visits from the magician,

Tardieh had noticed that his healing abilities had been slower. The wounds from their previous session were still bleeding.

“Or maybe you would like to meet my newest invention, the *para*.” With the now familiar twitch on his face, Vrajitor lifted a strange, long device, as if displaying it to a potential buyer.

It had the shape of an oversized pear with an extensive handle on its narrowest end and a pointed prong at the other, where the bottom part of the pear would have been. Vrajitor’s grin broadened as he twisted the device’s handle. The bottom part opened into three sections, revealing a lengthy, thick screw. The more he twisted the handle, the more the sections opened up and the broad rivet was drawn out in the middle.

“You see, prince, my first *para* was developed to punish the ones who dared lie to me. These wedges can do quite the damage when inserted down someone’s throat.”

Tardieh could imagine the pain such a thing would cause. Expanded by the force of the screw, the maximum aperture of the segments would mutilate the victim’s esophagus while the elongated middle section would continue ripping through the gullet’s channel.

“But since you have not exactly lied to me—you refused to utter a word and that’s not technically lying—I think I will choose another cavity to apply my *para*. Maybe in a lower part of your beautiful body?”

Taking his time, Vrajitor strolled around the room, coming to a stop behind Tardieh. With a sickening dread, Tardieh noticed the bastard was aroused.

“No one has ever resisted the *enlightenment* my *para* offers. No one has ever managed to survive it either. I must confess that seeing you succumb to my finest invention will bring me much joy, but today I’m willing to forgo my personal pleasure.” Vrajitor bent down and whispered in Tardieh’s ear. “If you tell me where your coward king hides, I will spare you.”

As much as the offer sounded like paradise, Tardieh knew it was a lie. The draconian prick enjoyed his torture too much to deprive himself of a good session.

Tardieh felt the deceptively smooth touch of the silver device against the back of his left thigh. It burned his skin like boiling oil, no doubt opening new wounds in its wake. The strong smell of burned flesh invaded his nostrils and he had to fight the bile rising in his throat.

Vrajitor lazily trailed the *para* further down, along Tardieh's buttocks, and he trembled in panic but swallowed the pain, biting his own tongue to stop the cry from leaving his lips.

He would not fail his people. He would endure trials, torture and suffering, until the Soartas, the goddesses of destiny, decided it was time for him to cross the Rivers of Apa Sâmbetei, but he would not betray his father's location.

"Tell me where your armies hide, bloodsucker!" Vrajitor bellowed, tracing another painful path down Tardieh's lower body, dangerously close to his anal orifice.

This time, Tardieh couldn't contain the yelp from escaping his lips; it came out like a bark. Struggling to keep his sanity, he gathered some strength. "Fuck you," he said in a dark, low voice. It was all he could muster.

He saw Vrajitor's eyes narrow and become even more yellow. The fanatic look on his torturer's face was so intense Tardieh thought it would expel fire at any time and burn him to death right then and there. Death would have been most welcomed.

Vrajitor leveled the device to its intended destiny. "Let's see who is going to fuck whom tonight, prince."

Tardieh closed his eyes and braced himself for the pain.

"Excuse me, sire?" A female voice came from the open door.

Time stood still.

"I have an urgent message from the dragon lord," the female carried on.

After what felt like decades, but must have been just a couple of seconds, Vrajitor roared, “How dare you interrupt my session?”

“I-I have an urgent message from the lord for you, sire.” Tardieh could sense the uneasiness in the woman’s voice. “He requests your presence at once.”

Vrajitor’s anger was palpable in the air. He would probably make the poor girl pay for interfering in his work.

“Stay here,” he barked at the guard, who looked as frustrated as Vrajitor, then left the room mumbling obscenities.

Tardieh exhaled in relief, allowing himself to enjoy the respite, no matter how short it would be.

After a moment of silence, he heard the girl say to the guard, “Would you like some water?” Her voice sounded much stronger now. “You look thirsty. Here, I brought some water.”

She stepped into the room holding a clay jug and a cup, seemingly unfazed by the guard’s hungry gaze upon her body. Tardieh could even *smell* the razbian’s arousal.

“Dunno if I want water, lass. But I sure gonna have some of what other yer offerin’.” The guard took a few menacing steps toward her.

With a ghost of a smile lifting her lips, she poured the water in the cup and handed it over to him.

The guard brought the cup to his lips without taking his eyes off the lady then, once finished, threw it on the floor. “Now, let’s have a bit more of what yer have, hmm?” He grabbed her by the hips, pulling her toward him.

The girl yelped in surprise and turned her head wrinkling her nose, probably to avoid the razbian’s foul breath. As she did so, her gaze locked on Tardieh’s for the first time.

Despite the throbbing in his head and the pain in his limbs from being hung upside down for so long, Tardieh was struck by the intensity of her honey-colored eyes. It was clear she loathed the guard's filthy hands on her, but she didn't fight him off for some reason. Tardieh felt a twinge of pity for the female. This was probably not the first time a male had used his rank or gender to take advantage of her.

Snapping out of it, Tardieh decided to exploit the guard's momentary distraction and free himself. *This may be his only chance.* White pain shot down his arms and reverberated throughout his body, making him groan. He cursed when he realized his efforts had only managed to increase the cut on his ankles and wrists, but nothing else.

The sudden sound of someone choking stole his attention away from his feeble plans of escape. As his gaze landed on the razbian and the lady a few feet away, Tardieh's jaw dropped in disbelief.

The guard, who was minutes from having his way with the female, was now crouched on the floor, holding his throat, eyes wide and face turning blue. But he wasn't simply choking, Tardieh realized when brown foam started to pour out of his putrid mouth. Shaking, the razbian looked up at the girl with inquisitive eyes, probably trying to understand what had just happened, but she was already moving toward Tardieh.

Tardieh opened his mouth to ask what in Hiad she was doing, but she shushed him.

"Don't say a word," she said with impressive confidence. "We have to get you out of here before Vrajitor realizes he was set up." With the strength and agility of a full-grown soldier, the lady released Tardieh from the silver chains and held him down, slowly placing him on the stone floor, careful not to drop him. Then, without hesitation, she took off the dead guard's trousers and threw them on Tardieh's naked lap. "Put these on quickly. Can you walk?"

Confusion and shock clouded his thoughts, but Tardieh nodded and did as she commanded. He pulled the trousers up his legs and winced when the rough fabric rasped on his open wounds. When he tried to stand up, his legs buckled beneath him, refusing to bear his weight.

Lean arms wrapped around his waist and helped him up, and once again Tardieh found himself lost in the golden sea that was the female's eyes. *Who was she?*

Before he could ask her anything, she dragged him out of the torture chamber, leaving the guard's lifeless body behind.

The door led to a dim corridor, with one only exit at the end. With the help of her surprisingly strong grip, he half-ran, half-stumbled toward his freedom.

"Why are you helping me?" Tardieh's voice was so hoarse he could barely hear his own words.

"Don't waste your energy with questions. We need to move faster."

The door at the end of the passage led to a long, descending stairway. Tardieh could feel his body giving in to his exhaustion. Blackness was enveloping his eyesight, but he found enough energy to take each step without falling down. They finally reached the bottom of the staircase, which led to yet another dark hallway with a number of doors running the length of it. They were below the fortress, Tardieh realized, because the air was thicker and damper here.

"Come, we're not far now," she whispered, pulling him toward the far end of the hall.

Just as they were at the end, Tardieh heard a door open behind them, and the dreadful smell of rotting meat permeated the stale air in the chamber.

*Oh, no.*

"Well, what have we here? A little kitten stealing my feast?" Vrajitor was a few feet behind them, slowly advancing like a predator sure of his dinner.

Tardieh felt the woman beside him tense, but she quickly recovered, moving to stand between himself and the magician.

Despite being barely able to hold himself up, Tardieh didn't like seeing a female protect him; it wasn't just pride, it was his thirst for revenge that blindsided his better judgement. If someone was going to face Vrajitor, it would be him.

He hissed, barring his fangs at his torturer, and tried to stand up straight but the damned female stopped him with unexpected strength.

"Please forgive me, sire," she begged with such a weak voice which was quite contradictory to the strength in her hand holding Tardieh in place. "The prisoner looked so weak. I pitied him. Please don't hurt me, sire." She bowed low, the way a plaintive would.

Vrajitor didn't seem convinced and closed the gap between them with four long strides. "What of the guard? Where is that imbecile?"

"He's met his fate," she growled in reply, then rose up with a speed and grace only known to the best warriors. Her silver dagger shone against the dim light before making its way into Vrajitor's right eye.

The bastard cried out in pain, growling profanities, but before he could recover and retaliate she stabbed him again, this time in the jugular—a draco's most vulnerable spot.

Vrajitor fell to the floor with his hands clutching his neck, trying to stop the gush of blood from flowing out.

Without wasting a second, Tardieh's savior grabbed him by the hand and ran out the door.

The new chamber was pitch dark and Tardieh instinctively slowed down.

"Don't stop!" she yelled, yanking him forward.

His feet tripped against metal, some sort of ledge, making him lose his already flimsy balance and stumble down. He closed his eyes, dreading the pain the impact of colliding against the stone floor would cause his face, but it never did.

His body kept on falling, and falling. In utter shock he realized the ledge hadn't been an iron bar forgotten in the middle of the dark path, it had been a gate on the ground, and they were instead free-falling.

His body hit the icy water with a loud splash. The coldness shook off his exhaustion, and Tardieh kicked his legs, swimming toward the surface but to his surprise the lady grabbed his ankle, stopping him. He glared at her then creased his eyebrows in confusion when he saw her pointing toward the bottom of the lake. *She wanted him to swim down, not up? Who in Hiad is this girl?* Vampires didn't need air to survive, but he didn't know that dracos shared that same talent.

Well, whoever the mysterious lady was, she had managed to get him out of that dreadful prison, so if she wanted them to swim down, down he would go, even if it did sound like a senseless plan.

After a few minutes, he saw what she was heading toward. There was an opening at the base of the lake that looked like an underwater passageway. She led them through it, and they emerged on the other side of a cave. Tardieh's strength failed him again when he tried to get out, but the prospect of finally reaching his freedom fueled his aching limbs and he managed to lift himself out of the water before collapsing on the cave floor. They both remained there for a few moments, catching their breaths.

"Who are you? Why are you helping me?" he asked between shallow intakes of air. His mind was working overtime. He had to find out who she was, where they were, and how to get out of there. The dragon lord was not the only enemy he had in this war. If she was working for another draconian sect trying to capture him for their side, he would be in deeper trouble than before.

“Not yet,” the lady replied. “We can’t stop now. There’s still a long way to go before we’re safely out of their reach.” She stood up and marched deeper into the cave.

Tardieh took a deep breath before following suit.

After what felt like hours of walking they reached an opening that led to a very familiar forest. *He was still on vampire soil*, Tardieh realized with mixed feelings of relief and shock. His captors hadn’t taken him out of Romania. *Such arrogance.*

The sight of his land gave him extra strength to carry on, but the newly found energy deserted him after a while. Unable to continue any longer, he stumbled and fell by a large tree.

“We can’t stop now. We have to keep on going,” the lady insisted. “They’ll reach us in no time.”

“I can’t. I have to stop to regain some energy.” He closed his eyes and opened his senses to his surroundings. He had to find an animal, preferably a big one, to drink from. But he couldn’t sense anything close by. *Damn the Soartas!*

Vampires could survive off animal blood but not for a long period of time. Animal blood was not as fortifying as human or dragon blood, but it would have given him enough strength to teleport out of there.

He opened his eyes to find her frowning at him.

“You’re still bleeding. How come?” she asked. “You’re a vampire. You should have healed a long time ago.” She crouched in front of him, studying him. Her voice had been sharp, but her golden gaze showed more worry than annoyance.

“I’ve lost a lot of blood.” He took a deep breath and closed his eyes again.

*Inhale, exhale.*

The delicious smell of blue-mist flowers hit his nostrils—blue-mist and blood. *Her* blood. He could hear her heartbeat and the blood flowing through her veins. Strong, plenty.

Curbing the hunger that threatened to take hold of him, he lifted his eyelids and locked her into a firm gaze. “Who are you?”

She opened her mouth, closed it, then opened it again but closed it once more, as if undecided of what to do.

That’s it; he’d had enough. He had to know what she was up to before it was too late. “I will not take another step until you tell me who you are and why you are helping me.”

“It doesn’t matter who I am. What matters is that you need to go back to your people and end this bloody war,” she retorted, leaning back on her heels.

Tardieh could see her properly now. She was wearing a dark brown woolen kirtle over a loose-fitting shirt with long bell sleeves. The kirtle was topped by a dark green apron that complemented her eyes. It was the typical attire from this region and it suited her. Her long, black wavy hair, which had been pulled back by a plain headscarf, now cascaded down her shoulders in front of her full breasts. The combination of her striking almond-shaped, hazel-honey eyes with her thick lips gave her an exotic, mesmerizing appearance.

“End the war? I thought you dracos wanted this bloody war,” Tardieh countered, trying to wake up from the trance of having her so near.

“We? No, not *we*. The draconian people never wanted a war against your kind. That dragon lord and his bunch of ignorant followers did. Who do you think has suffered the most from this war? We never cared to invade Romania. We were happy with our crops and our own land in the eastern mountains. *We* didn’t need more land. And now it’s all gone, devastated, burned to the ground.” Her voice cracked with emotion before she stood up and turned her back to him.

Tardieh could taste the saltiness of her tears in the air. There was nothing more powerful than tears of anger.

“What do you want me to do?” he asked in reply. “Go back to my people and tell them to stop because the draconians have asked me to?” That was ludicrous. How could he, the vampire prince, go against his father’s commands? Yes, he would be king one day, but not now, not soon enough to make a difference in the near future.

“Yes. That’s exactly what I want you to do. I’ve risked my life to show you that not every draco agrees with this war. Actually, only the aristocratic minority supports that stupid dragon lord. The others who opposed him were hunted down and their fate was worse than yours. You have to go back and stop the attacks.”

Tardieh exhaled, frustration gnawing at him. “Even if I could convince my father to stop the attacks, your dragon lord would continue. He would keep on trying to take not only Wallachia but the whole of Romania.” She was insane! She truly believed he had the power to stop this war.

She stared back at him for a couple of seconds. “The dragon lord won’t be around for much longer.”

A cold chill ran up Tardieh’s spine. “What exactly are you talking about?”

She lifted an eyebrow at him.

Mighty Soartas, she and whomever was working with her were going to assassinate the dragon lord. Or at least they were going to try. And if she could get him to commit to stopping the attacks from the vampire’s side, the war could actually come to a halt.

Well, at least until the next dragon lord decided he wanted a bigger backyard.

She took a step closer and crouched in front of him again. “I know what you’re thinking. You think you’re just the prince, just another pawn in this game, but you’re mistaken, Tardieh. You have more power than you realize. You have forged close relationships with many sovereigns in the region, vampires as well as other races. They all adore you.”

That was true. Despite him being a free spirit, which was often frowned upon—especially by his father—Tardieh was quite popular in the supernatural community.

“Promise me you will end the attacks on my people upon your return,” she pressed again. Her voice carried a confidence that clashed with her fragile-looking figure.

Tardieh gazed up at the woman in front of him and marveled at her unique beauty and strength of character, but it was for just a moment. All he wanted was to grant whatever wishes she requested, but he couldn't.

“I can't promise you that. It would be a lie if I did. I'm sorry,” Tardieh replied, true sadness clutching his heart. Promising a future he had no control of would be a form of betrayal. She had saved his life, and for that he owed her his honesty, to say the least. “My father is the king, and he was betrayed. He won't stop until he gets his revenge.”

But Tardieh saw her point now, saw a perspective he hadn't seen afore. Before meeting her, Tardieh had believed that only his beloved Romania had suffered from that war. Never had he thought that the dracos were suffering from the consequences as much as the vampires.

*I guess the gods of war don't pick sides when it comes to averting collateral damage, he thought.*

The lady pushed off the floor and paced around. “What if the circumstances were different? What if your father were...if he somehow let you make the choice, what would you do?”

“I would stop the attacks and try to end the war for good,” Tardieh replied without hesitation.

At his answer, she stopped pacing and faced him once more. Her gaze was full of hope—a hope Tardieh couldn't dare let grow further, so he continued. “But he won't. My father believes I am not ready to rule. He says I'm naive to think all races can coexist in harmony.”

And maybe his father was right. After all, it had been Tardieh's gullibility and arrogance that had led him to the trap that allowed the draconians to capture him.

"So, if you had the chance, you'd end the war?"

"Yes. If my father gave me the chance, but he won't."

A ghost of a smile lifted her lips.

Tardieh was about to tell her that his heart went out to her people, that he would have wanted nothing else than to repay her for freeing him, but stopped mid-thought when he saw her drop to her knees and crawl between his legs.

"What are you doing?" he asked, wide-eyed.

"We can discuss what we'll do about this war later, now we have more pressing problems to address." She started untying her blouse.

Tardieh gaped at her in confusion. "What are you *doing*?"

"I don't want you to stain my blouse."

After untying the front lace, she lowered the blouse down her shoulders and stopped just above her nipples. Tardieh couldn't stop himself from gawking at her delicate torso and full breasts. By Apa Dobry, he knew it had been a while since he'd been with a woman and was therefore more susceptible to the female lure, but sexual drought or not, this woman was stunning.

His fangs began to elongate of their own accord before apprehension claimed his mind as he finally understood her intentions. "No. I will not feed from you," he growled, trying to look away but failing miserably.

"You need to feed, Tardieh."

"It's too dangerous," he retorted, his jaw tight. He was too weak and didn't trust himself to take only what he needed. In his current state, the bloodlust would easily overpower him and he would kill her in no time.

“By now, the razbian guards have probably realized what happened and may be on our tracks already.”

“I will not take from you.”

He turned his face to the side and took a deep breath. Big mistake; her blue-mist scent was unbelievably inviting.

Leaning on her hands, she crawled forward, closer still, between his legs. “You have to feed from me, Tardieh,” she whispered.

Maybe it was his weakened state, or the combination of her husky voice, floral scent and sexual energy—whatever it was, it was too much for him to resist. His gaze fell once again upon her luscious breasts barely hidden by the thin fabric, and finally landed on her throat. Her veins. Pulsing blood.

She leaned even closer, the smooth skin of her cheek brushed against his. “You know you have no other choice, Tardieh. The scent of your blood will lead the razbians straight to us, and your wounds won’t stop bleeding until you feed.”

“No,” he replied stubbornly, but swallowed hard, trying to curb the hunger threatening to consume him from inside out.

She raised her chin, positioning her gorgeous neck inches from his lips. Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Drink from me. Take my vein.”

*Damn her!*

“Tardieh...”

Later, he would try to justify his actions by telling himself it hadn’t been his fault. It had been all too much and overwhelmed him; she had been too alluring for his debilitated mind and flesh. But at that very moment when her lush lips called his name, when her warm blood called for his fangs, any concerns of taking too much and killing his savior vanished, forgotten in the mist of lust and hunger.

Tardieh felt his eyes go red, before he grabbed the nape of her neck with both hands and held her in place. Her pulse quickened, the familiar tanginess of fear enveloped his nostrils. “Too late now, lass. You will have what you asked for,” he rasped, then opened his mouth, allowing his fangs to extend fully.

Then, without hesitation, he bit her.

Her yelp of surprise was the last thing his mind registered. With her blood spilling inside his mouth, every coherent thought escaped him. All he could think of was *more, more blood*. Sweet, delicious blood.

His muscles cramped slightly before swelling from the strength of her nourishment. His senses became sharper and he could feel his limbs regenerate by the second.

*More, more.*

Before she could try to run away, he pulled her down on the ground, swapping positions. He was now on top, in full control, his long body touching every part of hers. After a moment, he felt his beautiful savior relax in his arms.

She wouldn't turn into a vampire, contrary to popular folk stories, but she wouldn't be able to stop the effects of his bite from taking over. Vampire's fangs released a poison that neutralized his victim's neural senses, opening them up for the physical enjoyment of the exchange. That was the scientific explanation but, in reality, no one could resist the erotic ecstasy spilled by a vampire's bite.

Tardieh continued to drink from her, as he felt his strength return at a faster rate than he had anticipated. He enveloped his arms around her waist linking her lower body to his. The Soartas should damn him—what he was doing wasn't right—but he simply couldn't stop himself. She felt much too perfect in his arms. His hips lazily rocked against her and found bliss in her softness. To his surprise, she didn't resist. On the contrary, his savior let out a low moan before her nails rasped along his back, encouraging him to keep going.

So he did. He squirmed on top of her, their bodies separated only by the thin material of his stolen trousers and her kirtle.

*Stop! Enough!* The voice of reason yelled inside his mind. He had to stop—he had already taken in excess—but her warm blood flowing in his veins and her soft body rocking against his was too much to resist.

Her legs wrapped around his hips and his shaft grew even harder, aching to meet her core, no doubt moist by now and ready for him. A new groan echoed in the quiet night, louder than before, and this time he couldn't discern if it was his or hers.

But another sound also invaded his ears. Footsteps on grass. Not close, but not far from where they were.

*Damn the Soartas!* His captors were coming.

Struggling to ignore his lower head that was eager to take her right there, Tardieh pulled his lips from his savior's delicate neck. "We have to go." He could barely hear himself, so he tried again. "We have to go."

She lazily opened her eyes and met his, then her gaze set upon his lips, watching his fangs recede, seemingly unfazed by the fact that he was still lying on top of her. *Mighty Soartas.*

"They're coming for us," Tardieh repeated, but his voice was lower than usual, his gaze fixed on her delicious lips. Gods, what he wouldn't do to kiss her right now, but they had to get moving. "Can you hear footsteps?"

His question did the trick, successfully waking her up from the trance. Blinking quickly, as if confused, she placed a hand on his chest and pushed slightly—the international sign for 'give me some space'. Tardieh complied, sliding sideways and unwrapping her from his embrace. He watched her sit up and fumble with her skirts, before lifting herself up.

But as soon as she got up, her knees buckled and back down she went.

“Whoa, easy there, lass,” Tardieh chuckled, catching her in the air before she fell on her arse. “It’ll take you a few moments to regain your balance.”

She took a long, deep breath and was about to say something, but the sound of a massive explosion made them both stop and turn toward the mountains. *What in Hiad?*

Tardieh’s jaw dropped as he watched in disbelief the draconian prison be consumed by fire. “Merciful Soartas!”

“Time to go,” his savior said, her confident tone resounding in the forest once again. “They’re coming.” She straightened her blouse, as well as her spine, and pointed in the opposite direction as the footsteps. “There’s a village not far from here. If we hurry, we can reach it before the razbians reach us.” And with that she darted away along the narrow dirt path.

It was so easy to keep up with her this time around. His wounds were completely healed, his limbs didn’t ache anymore and his skin tingled from the powerful energy rushing through his body. Never had he felt so invigorated so quickly after a feed. *Amazing.*

His body had starved for how long? Normally, it would have taken him at least a good day’s rest to fully recover, but not tonight, and it was all due to her nourishment. Who was this woman? Or more to the point, *what* was she? Dragon blood was powerful but not that powerful.

After easily catching up with her, Tardieh grabbed both of her arms, forcing her to stop.

She looked at him with a mix of annoyance and confusion. “What are you doing? There is an army of razbian soldiers coming straight at us. We need to go now.”

“Yes, we do, but not by foot.” He enveloped one arm around her slim waist, bringing her close to him. Her warm body pressed against his and his shaft immediately responded. The damn thing had no sense of impropriety whatsoever.

Gathering his strength, he focused on the image of his home village and let the darkness surround them. From the corner of his eye, he saw the guards emerge between the trees. But they were too late; the translocation was already happening.

His savior's startled gaze locked on his. "Are you sure you're strong enough to do this?"

He couldn't talk but hoped he could give her some reassurance through his stance. Before long, the forest gave way to total darkness and Tardieh welcomed the familiar feeling of free-falling that always came with teleportation.

As soon as it happened, it was gone.

Opening his eyes again, he realized he had managed to teleport them to the exact street corner he'd wanted. Despite the whole ordeal, he felt almost one hundred percent again.

*Amazing.*

He gave her a small grin. "Yes, I'm sure."

She looked dizzy but rewarded him with a small chuckle before stepping out of his embrace. His body responded in protest and he unconsciously held on to her hand. She didn't object.

"Where are we?"

"At the base of my castle. We're safe here."

"You mean, *you* are safe here. I'm still a draco in vampire territory." She walked down the dark alleyway, analyzing the surroundings. The moon had fully risen by then, and Tardieh could see her slender hips swaying down the path.

"I can give you protection. Come with me and you'll be safe," he said. For some insane reason he didn't want her to go.

She turned back to him. "This is *your* home. It's time for you to go and keep your end of our bargain, prince." She stepped closer and stopped a few feet from him, her honey gaze intent on his. "Promise me you will. Promise me you will stop the attacks."

“I can’t promise you that. I’m truly sorry.” His chest ached, but he couldn’t lie to her. Not after everything she’d done for him.

Her eyes filled up with sadness and disappointment. Before she turned around to leave, Tardieh grabbed her wrist. “But I can promise you this—I will do everything in my power to convince my father to stop the attacks.”

She pursed her lips, as if considering his words, so he carried on without hesitation.

“And you can be certain that from this night onward, you will always have an ally in my kingdom.”

She exhaled, then a ghost of a smile lifted her cheeks. “That’s enough for me,” she said, watching him under long lashes. “Thank you, Tardieh. May the Soartas guide you in this new cycle of your life.” She turned away again and started down the narrow street once more.

“Wait! At least tell me your name.”

She stopped, but kept her back to him. Tardieh could see only her profile and her wavy dark hair cascading down her back. “Zoricah. My name is Zoricah,” she replied, before disappearing into the shadows.

Tardieh’s breath got caught in his throat as his mind went blank. He could not believe his ears. He had just been saved by none other than Zoricah, the draconian demigoddess.

## Chapter One

### New York, Present Day

The techno music pumped at full blast, driving the horde of dancers into a new high, their semi naked bodies moving eagerly to the hypnotic rhythm. There was no doubt, Cascade was the hottest nightclub in New York City. The name derived from its main feature: an enormous waterfall that filled the whole southern wall and descended upon an amorphous swimming pool, which was impossibly lit from inside out. The dance floor was on the opposite side of the spring and the main bar on the western wall.

The club's mystical-sexual vibe was further enhanced by its enormous glass dome ceiling which displayed the summer stars above. The VIP areas were located on the second floor—a large upper circle that ran along all four walls like an indoor balcony. But the real VIP area was one level up. Only a very selective group of patrons had entry to the third floor, where private lounge rooms and suites were carefully secured.

Yara had her eyes on a specific booth on the upper circle. It had taken her less than thirty minutes to locate her target.

“Hey, babe, how are you?”

*May Apa Dobrý help her, not another one!*

This must have been the tenth guy to come on to her in the last twenty minutes. True, she was glad that her carefully chosen outfit proved to be serving its purpose. She was wearing a crimson halter top tied up just below her firm breasts with a low-rise miniskirt that left nothing to the imagination. She had topped it all off with a pair of red lace-up seven-inch sandals, large golden hoop earrings, and marble bangle bracelets. Yep, she was very pleased with herself, but she had had enough of those sad excuses of the male gender disturbing her

evening. This one must have been either blind or suicidal, for he ignored her ‘piss off’ look and ran his hand on her naked, flat stomach.

“So, does this belly button have a name?” the guy drawled. From a few feet away, a small audience cheered and punched the air.

Great, his buddies were watching.

Yara took an inquisitive look at the happy hand that had found its home on her well-defined stomach and slowly raised her eyes to scrutinize its owner. It seemed that the sad bastard was under the illusion he had a chance to score tonight.

Yara didn’t say a word. She didn’t have to.

She slowly reached for the misguided hand, which had already migrated a few inches south, and without taking her eyes off the male slime-bucket in front of her, she twisted it.

Too bad it was to the wrong direction.

With curious amazement, she saw the guy’s eyes flicker from cockiness to disbelief to denial and finally pain. When he was about to spoil her fun by screaming like a girl, she sealed his lips with her other hand. “Now, now, *babe*, you’re not going to make a fool of yourself by crying like a baby in front of your buddies, are you?”

He swallowed and tried to retrieve his hand in vain. Yara held on to the twisted wrist, making the experience even more painful. The more he tried to pull away, the harder she held onto it, the further his wrist bent. His face went white before a little squeak escaped his mouth, reminding Yara of a squealing piglet.

“I suggest you leave her alone before she decides to have your hand for dinner,” her friend Samantha said, finally arriving with their drinks.

The guy’s wide eyes darted from Yara to Sam then back to Yara, as if trying to kick his brain into second gear. Yara felt a twinge of pity for him. He was obviously having a hard time grasping how such a fragile looking lady could be so impossibly strong. Unfortunately

for him, the twinge vanished as soon as it came and she let out a low purr, just to add one more unexpected piece to his nightmare.

“Let him go, Yara. Play time is after we do our homework.”

“Oh, but this is so much fun.” Yara gave her friend a little shrug and let go of Mr. Happy Hands.

He stepped away so fast it almost threw a couple of people into the swimming pool and then staggered desperately toward the exit, ignoring his group of friends who were now almost rolling on the floor laughing.

Yara let out a husky chuckle and turned to get her drink from her friend’s outstretched hand. “Oh, come on. He had it coming,” she said, after seeing the disapproving look on Samantha’s face.

“We have to focus,” Sam scowled her. “We don’t know how long they’re going to stay at their VIP area. Do you have the ring?”

Yara raised her right hand showing a large ring adorned by a huge ruby-colored rock. For the naked eye, it was just another overrated ruby ring; but at close range, a trained eye may have just been able to notice a tiny latch on its frame, which once opened released a very rare and powerful poison known for knocking out crocodiles in the Amazon.

“Don’t worry. I got it covered.” Yara looked at her friend and sensed something amiss.

Sam was her opposite. They were both beautiful in their own way. One was the typical Amazon splendor: tall with dark hair, slim, toned voluptuous body, and sun-kissed skin; the other was the perfect example of the Celtic angelic beauty: blue eyes, blonde wavy hair and narrow hips that accentuated her full breasts.

“What’s wrong with you tonight?” Yara asked, trying not to sound too rude.

Sam looked back at her with haunted eyes. “I...it’s nothing. I just want to finish this mission and get out of here.”

Yara didn't buy that. Sam was usually the quiet one, but today her quietness had an edge Yara didn't like. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I am, just... I don't know. My energies are a bit off, that's all." Sam replied, referring to her special ability to draw electricity into her body, like a human-conduit. She took another sip from her frozen margarita and glanced toward the VIP area on the second floor. "Which one, do you reckon?"

Yara turned her attention to the open balcony, from where three vampires enjoyed their evening, watching the unsuspecting humans on the dance floor below.

The three amigos-with-fangs, as Yara had nicknamed them, were an interesting bunch. A Japanese samurai descendant from one of the oldest vampire families in the world; a Native American who was said to be the son of a shaman, and a blond male who could have made a fortune in Hollywood. They were all sexy as hell and exuded power—a combo as deadly as their fangs.

During the course of the evening, Yara had watched a few bimbos—female and male—throw themselves at them, sometimes quite literally. The other supernatural creatures present at the nightclub kept their distance, as if they knew they were no match to the three vamps on the second floor. Either that or they also knew who the three amigos really were—the vampire king's personal guards and closest advisors. Yeah, no one messed with this bunch.

Well, no one except Yara and Samantha.

"So, who's your pick?" Sam asked Yara again.

"The blond one," Yara replied, eyeing the gorgeous vamp who was leaning casually on the balcony railing while his two friends went inside and sat around a chess table. *They're playing chess at a night club? Really?*

She had chosen the blond vamp for two simple reasons. He was ridiculously handsome—over six feet tall, short golden hair, muscular body, broad shoulders and an amazing pair of

grey eyes—and because every time she'd seen him in the scene before he'd never been alone. He had always been entangled with one or two, sometimes three, women. That combination made him the perfect candidate for their mission. Tonight she was going to show him what entanglement really meant.

She glanced at Sam and said quietly, “Look, if you want to head off, it's fine with me. I can take care of this by myself.”

“No, I'm fine, really. I'm here to watch your back, aren't I?” Sam could be very convincing most of the times, but tonight her twitchiness was so visible Yara would bet her left arm there was a light bulb exploding somewhere in the vicinity.

Yara's overly sharp sense of smell made her turn her attention back to the vampires' VIP area on the second floor. *Damn it.* A redhead with big tits was walking up the stairs toward the blond vamp, who was obviously enjoying the view of her cleavage. The sweet smell of the woman's cheap perfume was so strong Yara's stomach lurched in protest. Being a panther-shifter with a heightened sense of smell had its benefits, but sometimes it was a curse.

“That bitch!” Yara scowled. “Now I'll have to wait till he's done with her before I can get an opening again, and by the way he's drawling all over her, it's definitely a sure thing.”

*Shit, shit, shit!* She hated when things didn't go according to plans. Well, no point on crying over the spilled milk now. She'd just have to wait.

Yara was about to make another acid remark chiding the redhead but stopped mid-sentence when she saw her friend's expression. Sam was paralyzed, staring at something across the swimming pool, as if she'd been hypnotized or something. Yara immediately searched for the source of what had entranced her friend and gasped.

“Holy shit.”

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Sam was having a hard time remembering how to breathe as the vampire locked his gaze on her.

When Yara started bitching about the redhead who was currently being swallowed by the blond vampire, one of his friends who had been playing chess in the VIP booth stood up all of a sudden, as if looking for something. Sam was about to tell Yara to tone it down, thinking that the vamp must have heard her somehow, but the words never left her lips. The vamp's gaze roamed around the club once then came to a dead halt when it found Sam.

*Oh, dear.*

His gaze was so intense, so *fixed* on her, that it made Sam forget where she was. Or maybe it was the fact that the vampire was the most handsome man Sam had ever seen—that is, she had seen him before, of course. He was one of the vampire king's personal advisors, but the photos in her mission's briefing file hadn't given him justice.

He was tall with pitch black hair that cascaded down to his neck like a thick waterfall. He wore black jeans with a tight charcoal V-neck sweater that highlighted his lean but strong arms and very well-defined abs.

Sam blinked and tried to force herself to break the eye contact—his hypnotic staring was getting a bit uncomfortable—and was about to look away when the vamp stepped away from the balcony railing and started walking down the stairs.

All that, without taking his eyes off her.

*Oh, dear. Oh, dear.*

Was he doing it on purpose? Maybe he was onto them and was trying to hypnotize her before he pounced at her and ripped her neck open. *Shit!*

Sam knew some vampires had the power of hypnosis, but it didn't feel like she was being put under. She remembered her name and where she was; she just seemed completely unable to avert her gaze from his.

He wasn't smiling, but he wasn't angry, either.

After reaching the bottom of the stairs, he crossed the dancefloor without breaking his stride. People opened up the way for him, probably sensing the power he exuded. His long strides were definite, like those of someone confident about what he wants, of someone on a mission. The thought that such a gorgeous man had noticed her would be flattering if it weren't for the fact that *he* was *her* mission, not the other way around.

When he crossed the pool's threshold, Sam gaped, vaguely thinking she should get Yara and run out of there, but her feet didn't move—maybe they didn't *want* to. Dear gods, the way the vamp walked—no, the way he marched, the swing of his hips keeping with the slight sway of his broad shoulders, was just so hot!

Sam heard Yara say something, but her mind was too busy drooling over the vamp that it didn't register her friend's words.

Finally the tall vampire came to a stop a few feet from her, his brilliant dark eyes intent on hers. She waited, now a bit apprehensive about what he'd do next. Did he know who they were? Did he hear them talking about targeting his blond friend?

But then, the most unexpected thing happened.

He took a breath as if he were about to say something, then gave up, moistened his lips and exhaled.

He *exhaled*, as though unsure.

Sam bit her lower lip, not knowing what to say either. She wanted to leave, to run out of there but, once again, she simply couldn't. His intent gaze went from determined to slightly frowning, to confused, like a child trying to decipher a hard equation.

From the corner of her eye she saw Yara shift the weight of her stance—the universal sign of impatience. Yeah, this was getting a bit too creepy. Sam was really flattered by the attention but now she was getting worried. What did he want with her? Kill her? Question her? Woo her?

She opened her mouth to tell him to—

Without any warning, the vampire closed the gap between them, pulled her by the nape of her neck and crushed his lips to hers.

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Hikuro was lost.

As soon as his lips touched the blonde's, he felt an electrical charge pump through his body. *Incredible*. He pulled away, startled, but less than a second later his mouth was on hers again, craving more.

It wasn't just the softness of her lush lips or the way she tasted like fresh peach, but that electrical tickle travelling along his skin was mind-boggling. And all three things combined made him forget his manners and the discipline gained over three hundred years of training. He was happily drowning in this stranger, and wasn't planning on coming up for air anytime soon.

He had first sensed her when he was sitting on the couch at the back of their VIP area. He had been focusing on not losing another chess game to his friend Dyam when an electrical surge suddenly charged the air and awoke his vampire senses. It was slow yet powerfully alluring at the same time, like a mermaid's song that draws the unknowing sailor to the bottom of the sea.

Hikuro had never experienced anything like that before. It puzzled him, and he didn't like puzzles. He looked around the large VIP booth, expecting to find an exposed electric wire somewhere, but found none. The electrical lure was coming from outside; his mermaid was somewhere beyond the dance floor.

Not giving up, he had stood up and gone to the balcony in search of the source. And there she was, a demure blonde with haunting blue eyes standing by the far end of the bar.

His mermaid was wearing a 1960s style light blue mini-dress that complemented her feminine figure. Her light blonde locks framed her heart-shaped face, which had barely any makeup. But it wasn't the quietness of her beauty that amazed him; it was the strange glow that seemed to *dance* around her aura.

Hikuro hated those vampires who attacked their victims, not giving them the choice to refuse, but this time around, *he* had had no choice. Once in front of her, he simply couldn't think of anything to say in spite of the million questions blasting inside his mind. How could she glow like that? Who was she? What was her name? Was she a real mermaid?

When he sensed she was about to bail out probably freaked out by his strange behavior, he simply ignored his rational mind, the one million questions, and did what his body was craving for. He gave in to her allure and dived toward the bottom of her sea.

Now, with her mouth on his, he realized it had been the best decision of the night.

Her lips parted in invitation and he held the back of her neck, deepening the kiss. The initial electrical tingle was now a familiar buzz that went straight to his core. His tongue snaked around hers, eager for more.

Too soon, she pulled away, blinking fast, looking up at him with those stunningly haunted eyes.

"I'm sorry," he blurted out, still shaken by the madness of his actions. "I don't know what came over me. I don't usually attack women like that."

She frowned, then lifted an eyebrow at him. “Oh? So how do you usually attack women?”

The question took him by surprise. “I...I meant I *don't* attack women, I...” He paused when he saw her mouth quirk up in a lopsided smile. Hikuro let out an embarrassed chuckle. “Look, how about we start over. Hi, I’m Hikuro,” he said, offering his hand to her.

She scrutinized him, then his hand. “I’m Sam,” she replied in a most delightful accent, finally shaking his hand. His mermaid was British. *How fitting.*

“Nice to meet you, Sam.”

She gave him a small chuckle, as if amused by his sudden change in approach.

Smiling back, he joked. “What? I would appreciate a little support. It’s not easy to work up the courage to approach such a gorgeous woman like you.”

“Ooh, smooth,” Sam replied, half-teasing half-appraising him. “Can’t wait to hear the next line.”

“Well, I have a few,” Hikuro replied with a crooked smile.

Her eyes widened in alarm. “Oh, please don’t tell me you’re one of those who practice in front of the mirror.”

“No! No, no, no...”

Even though his panicked response made her chuckle, he knew he needed a recovery plan and fast. His earlier boldness was dwindling as quickly as this encounter was going south. For Hiad’s sake, he was a three-hundred-year-old vampire, a samurai warrior, the vampire king’s second-in-command! He had decimated a battlefield of enemies, but apparently killing was much easier than charming this woman.

He searched his mind, trying to find a pleasant yet interesting remark to say, but the only thing that came out was, “It’s amazing how you glow like that.”

She gaped at him in disbelief, midway through taking a sip from her green drink.

*Yeah, way to go, Hikuro, great recovery.*

She took a few steps back and opened her mouth to no doubt give him a ‘See ya, you freak’.

“Wait, it came out wrong. I meant that there’s this glow around you that’s not normal.”

Her jaw dropped and she let out an uncomfortable chortle. It was obvious she was planning her escape route.

*What the fuck was happening with him tonight?*

“Look, Hikuro, it was lovely to meet you, but I wanted to introduce you to my friend. She’s...”

Before she finished her “see ya” excuse, and before he could put his foot in his mouth again, he grabbed her hand and commanded, “Come with me.”

For the second time in the evening, Hikuro did what other vampires he loathed did—he gave her no choice, didn’t wait for her answer, didn’t give her the chance to refuse him. He simply took her through the dance floor, away from the crowd and up the main stairway where a vampire bouncer gave him a short nod and let them through to the elevators toward the third floor.

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Yara could not believe her eyes. What in Hiad was Sam thinking? And how did that vamp get lucky so fast with her usually timid friend?

Yara saw him come down the stairs and walk through the dance floor like he was king, where no one dared get in his way. She had desperately tried to get Sam’s attention without moving too much—after all, the vamp’s friends had probably been watching them as well—but to no avail. Sam had been completely entranced by the vampire god coming her way.

Okay, Yara could almost sympathize with her friend's predicament. The vamp was stunning with his dark eyes, chiseled chin and longish hair, but Sam was the one who had reminded Yara just a few moments ago that play time was *after* they finished the job.

With an exhale that reflected her disbelief, Yara pondered the situation. Even if Sam had decided to take over and see their mission through, she didn't have the poison with her or the note, so how was Sam going to do what needed to be done?

Now the vamp seemed to be dragging Sam to the private lounge rooms on the third floor. Man, those vamps didn't waste any time, did they?

Yara could go after them, but she didn't have free access, and the huge mean-looking vampire bouncer didn't give the impression he was in the mood for charity.

Yara had to do something though; she would not leave Sam without a backup, even if her friend had planned on enjoying a few hours with their target. It was the core motto of their friendship: whatever happened, they would have each other's back.

*Damn it!* Yara really, *really* hated when things didn't go according to plan.

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On the third floor, Hikuro turned left and opened a secure door with his digital key. He entered the room first and checked if the coast was clear. His sharp eyesight didn't need light to see if danger was lurking in the shadows. Once satisfied, he turned back around and held the door open for Sam.

She hesitated for a second but went in. Hikuro closed the door quietly and meant to turn the light on, but the sight of her stopped him in his tracks. She did glow. Her profile was strangely surrounded by a soft radiance that seemed to float around her.

In a surprising move, she looked up at him, took a deep breath and slowly closed the gap between them.

Her lips were soft on his. She shyly ran her hands along his chest and he immediately felt the tingling again wherever she touched: his pecks, his shoulders, his neck.

Unable to deny her, he encircled his arms around her waist while parting her lips with his tongue. Their kiss became more urgent, more passionate. Hikuro couldn't have enough of her. He reached down, cupped her lean ass and pulled her fully against him. She rewarded him with a little groan. Let Apa Dobrý punish him later, but he had to have her right now.

He lowered his lips, tasting her neck while his left hand made its way up her stomach and caressed one of her full breasts. She arched in response, giving him more access to her lean, gorgeous body. Another groan, but this time Hikuro realized it was coming from him. He had to have her *now*!

"I'm sorry," she whispered faintly against his ear.

"Wha—?" Hikuro never finished the question. He felt a lightning bolt shoot down his spine. His muscles spasmed in response, and then there was only darkness.

## Chapter Two

Dyam was tired of this nightclub. After Hikuro had strangely deserted him and carried the blonde woman up to his private quarters, Dyam had returned to his whiskey-infused blood drink and finished the chess game by himself. He got their waitress' attention and gave her the international signal for one more with his index finger. She promptly obliged, bringing him another triple dose of Springbank diluted in the same amount of fresh blood. Dyam took a nice sip of the dark golden liquid and sat back on the couch.

He didn't understand why his friends enjoyed this place. It was full of desperate humans looking for a cheap escape from their miserable, empty lives, and vampires looking for easy targets.

Contrary to popular belief, vampires couldn't turn humans; one was either born a vampire or not, just like any other being. There had been some cases among *sujha*—half-humans, half-supernatural—families where the vampire gene lay dormant and skipped a generation or two, scaring the hell out of the unsuspecting non-vampire parents. But this was the closest one could get to the bullshit of “turning” someone. And his kind didn't have to kill a human to get their nourishment, either, but there were a lot of them who lost themselves to bloodlust and that's when things got complicated. Places like the Cascade offered the perfect conditions for complications.

Killing humans was strictly prohibited because it attracted too much attention to the vampires' existence. Dyam had once asked Hikuro—who was much older than him—why the vampires hadn't conquered the human race and lived freely on *Terhem Viahta*, Earth. It's not like they depended on humans; vampires could survive off any kind of blood, fresh or bottled. Hikuro had then explained that thousands of years ago when all the races roamed

freely on Terhem Viahta, the life scale tipped when vampires and dragons started battling for world dominance. There were no restraints when it came to feeding the vampire and draconian armies. Large animals, like aurochs, giant deer and sea cows were the first choice on the menu, mainly because only one of them could feed an entire brigade. When those beasts were hunted down to extinction, the other supernatural communities started to pressure for a truce of the two battling races. After realizing that if they didn't stop, they would probably extinguish all life on Earth—or maybe it was because their mighty armies couldn't fight for long off small animal or human blood—the dragon lords and vampire kings agreed on a peace treaty and returned to their lands.

By then, humans had evolved and defied their natural inferiority with cleverness and ingenious inventions. They had built entire cities made of stone and lived off plantations, a feat never seen before, for even the magical creatures survived on what the environment provided them. Dragons and vampires, blinded by their arrogance, realized what was happening a little too late—humans had discovered an incredible weapon: steel. And so the supernatural races, like the vampires, the dragons, and the fae, wisely decided to draw back to their nests and observe the strange race that dared defy the natural laws of life.

They were all dumbfounded by the humans' clever ways of changing the environment to suit their own needs: building cobblestone streets for better access and multi-story edifices to maximize space; creating amazing inventions like the steam train, electricity, and the telephone. So instead of fighting the humans, the magical races slowly started to live inconspicuously among them and enjoy the benefits of human inventions.

Dyam took another sip and closed his eyes to enjoy the delicious amber liquid burning down his throat. He could feel the music vibrating in his body cells, hear bodies rubbing against each other, and smell the scent of sweat, a jungle animal, and lust in the air.

*Jungle animal?*

Opening his eyes, Dyam sat up straight and inspected his surroundings. *What in Hiad?*

He tried to shake it off and reminded himself that there was no way a jungle animal could have been in a nightclub in the middle of Soho, and it was probably just the whiskey talking, but no, he wasn't mistaken. His Cherokee *inmā*, his soul, could sense it, smell it faintly in the air. He took another deep breath and stood up.

Going to the balcony, he scanned the dance floor below, then the bar, the fake waterfall and the swimming pool. Nothing. He couldn't see any jungle animal, or any animal for that matter, not even a bird.

But when he turned his attention back to the second floor, he saw her.

A tall, olive-skinned woman with short spiky hair wearing a crimson top and matching miniskirt was talking to the vampire bouncer by the elevator. She was just inches away from the guy and a dim light green radiance seemed to be glimmering off her eyes. The vampire bouncer with all his mass of muscles did nothing to stop her when she whisked by him and got into the elevator.

*Sonofabitch.*

Turning on his heels toward the back of the booth, Dyam spotted Joel, who was now enjoying the redhead's mouth on his cock. His friend wasn't going to like him very much, but they had to find out what the fuck was happening.

"Joel, we gotta go." His friend didn't even flinch so Dyam tried again. "Joel, something's not right. We gotta go."

This time, his friend opened one eye. "Dy, buddy, this is not a good time."

"I know, but I think there's a jungle animal inside this nightclub." Okay, even he could see the insanity of his remark.

"What?" Joel sat up straight but didn't motion the girl off his shaft. "What do you mean there's a jungle animal in the club?"

“She was getting inside one of the elevators. I think she’s going to the third floor.”

“She?” Joel asked, with an impish smile on his face. “Dy, my man, it’s probably the remains of your Cherokee *inmã* begging for some release.” With a dismissive chuckle, Joel leaned back on the couch and placed his hand on the girl’s head, encouraging her to go deeper.

He was probably right, but Dyam could not shake off the certainty of what he had sensed. Deciding he couldn’t just sit around and forget about it, he started toward the elevator. The bouncer was still on the same spot.

“Did you see who she was?” Dyam asked while checking which floor the elevator had stopped on.

The bouncer looked at Dyam, blinking fast. “Who?”

“The woman, the tall woman, wearing a red top and mini. She’s just passed by you.”

The bouncer looked up to the nothingness and smiled broadly—he actually smiled—and Dyam was overwhelmed by a smell of fresh rain on autumn leaves.

“Oh, that woman. Yeah, she...yeah,” the bouncer with foggy eyes said.

What a waste of space he was.

Taking a deep breath, Dyam walked past him and took the stairs, following the strange scent. When he reached the door to the third floor, he stopped and unlocked his senses again. Yes, she had been there.

Opening the door slowly, he put his head out into the hallway and checked the surroundings. The coast was clear. Closing the door soundlessly behind him, he scanned the long corridor. There were only four apartments in that section—a true testament of how exclusive that part of the nightclub was. A small pathway at the far end led to the south wing. The area was dimly lit by long amber lights. The black carpets and crimson walls added a “what happens here, stays here” feel to the decor.

Dyam took a few steps to the right with the intention of checking the doors for suspicious sounds, but the soft *thud* coming from the south wing stopped him midway. As quietly as possible, he started toward the sound, but when he got to that section of the building, it was empty. The smell of rainforest was stronger there, though. Following it, he realized the scent drew a direct line between the fire exit, located at the end of the corridor, and one of the four exclusive apartments on that wing. Looking up to see which door it was, Dyam's heart went straight to his mouth.

It was Hikuro's private quarters.

Without a second thought, Dyam burst inside the room, knife steady in his hand, ready for battle.

He found his friend sprawled on the floor by the couch, motionless. *What in Hiad?*

He scanned the room for potential attackers hiding in the shadows, then went to check on his friend. Hikuro's head was still attached to his body.

*Thank the Soartas.*

Dyam released the breath he hadn't realized he was holding and tried to wake his friend up. Nothing. Hikuro was out cold. That was when Dyam saw a small envelope on his lap. Pulling his phone out of his back pocket, he punched the numbers. Joel had better take this.

After a few more tries, his blond friend decided to pick it up. "There better be a whole fucking jungle invading the club, buddy."

"Hikuro is down, unconscious in his private quarters."

"I'll be right up."

The phone disconnected, and in record time, Dyam heard footsteps in the corridor. A second later, Joel was by the door, his Heckler & Koch 9mm positioned to put a nice hole in the middle of any motherfucker who dared cross his path. "What happened?"

“I don’t know. She was gone when I got here.” Dyam rolled his unconscious friend to the side to check for any injuries.

“Are you sure it was the woman you saw?”

“She wasn’t human. I’m telling you, she was a jungle animal. Well, at least a shifter. I’m not sure which one because I never got to look into her eyes. But I followed her distinct scent here.”

“How the fuck did that happen? A female knocking Hikuro out? That’s impossible.” Joel helped Dyam lift their unconscious friend up.

“I know. It is a disturbing thought. The other piece of this puzzle is *why*.” Together they put Hikuro on the chaise lounge. “I think we should go to the king. Look what I found.” Dyam took out the small envelope and handed it to Joel, who opened it.

“What in Hiad?” Joel exclaimed after reading the note inside. “What’s this supposed to mean?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t think we’re the ones who are supposed to know.” Dyam held Hikuro’s hand, then went to the balcony and dematerialized out of there.

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By the time Dyam and Joel arrived at the headquarters, Hikuro was coming around. They had to dematerialize to a secure location about thirty minutes out of town, then took the Porsche Cayenne, which was one of the several all-wheel drives always at the ready, and blasted up the hill. Twenty minutes later, they reached the main entrance.

At first glance, one would think it was the beginning of just another wild forest with its high balsam firs, red spruces and thick oaks. Only a trained eye would notice the small boxes imperceptibly attached against each tree trunk.

Hikuro saw Dyam stop the Porsche Cayenne and swipe his digital key against the camouflaged brown box clipped to a large oak tree. A second later, a bright red light flickered between the two trunks in front of the car. The flickering intensified and expanded to encompass every single tree in the vicinity. In a few moments, a vast laser fence was displayed before their eyes. Red beams crisscrossed between trees forming a crimson security net. With a second swipe of the digital key, the laser beams directly in front of the car disappeared, shaping a narrow pathway for secure passage.

Dyam put the car in first gear and started forward. As soon as the car passed the first row of trees, the laser beams automatically turned on again, reforming the security net mile by mile. After a few minutes on the dirt road, they reached the main gate and parked the Porsche along the outside walls, side by side with a black Jaguar, a dark blue Ferrari, and a charcoal BMW X6.

Hikuro was still a bit shaken—his legs weren't yet fully responding to his neural commands—but he didn't accept Joel's offer to help him out of the car. A retinal scan and voice recognition test later, the gates were open and the three friends walked to the mansion.

Hidden from preying eyes by the woodlands and the tall fence, the mansion looked like a great medieval fortress. Completely built of stone, it stood at the top of a hill that overlooked New York City.

Before they had reached the entrance, the door opened and an elderly man appeared in front of them. "His majesty is expecting you in the library."

"Thanks, Arthur," Hikuro managed to say with a nod. His head was still thumping from whatever had happened to him.

What in Hiad had happened anyway? He remembered kissing the girl, Sam, in his private quarters at the Cascade; then she said something and bam! His muscles started spasming, his heart stopped beating for a second and the feeling of being fried from the inside out overtook

him. He hadn't seen any weapons, any devices on her that may have caused such a massive electrical shock. And there was no doubt it had been massive because just a handful of things in this world had the power to knock out a three-hundred-year-old vampire like him.

He crossed the ample foyer and turned left toward an open door. Even though it was ajar, he knocked before entering. Joel and Dyam were right behind him.

The room was large with a tall ceiling. Bookshelves covered two walls from top to bottom; the third wall housed a fireplace made of light-brown sandstone. Two sets of black sofas were placed in front of it. The beautiful view could be seen through the fourth wall, made of thick bulletproof glass.

The king was sitting behind the large mahogany desk located between the fireplace and the glass wall. He was staring at the view of the city night below.

The three friends bowed deeply. Hikuro rose and met his king's eyes. "Good evening, King Tardieh."