

AWAKEN THE  
DARKNESS

*NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**DIANNE  
DUVALL**

AWAKEN THE DARKNESS  
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## Awaken the Darkness

*Return to the "utterly addictive" (RT Book Reviews), "fast-paced and humorous" (Publishers Weekly) world of New York Times bestselling author Dianne Duvall's Immortal Guardians.*

*He awakens encapsulated in dirt with no knowledge of how he came to be there. Riddled with injuries, he can remember neither his past nor who he is. Nor can he remember what he is. But surely no mortal man could survive being buried deep beneath the earth. All he knows with certainty is that the soothing voice and presence of the woman moving around above enables him to endure the agony of his wounds. And he will do whatever it takes to be with her.*

*When Susan first sees the old two-story house for sale, such warmth and longing fill her that – against all reason – she makes an offer. It will take years of hard work and money she frankly doesn't have to fix up the place. So she can't explain why she bought it. She also can't explain what compels her to spend hours one night, digging in the basement until she unearths a man. A man who still lives and breathes despite having been buried alive. A man whose intense brown eyes glow amber with pain, declaring him far more than ordinary. Susan knows she should keep her distance. He has no memory and possesses gifts that would make most fear him. But as the two work together to unravel the mystery of his past, she finds herself drawn in by his teasing nature and tender touch. So much so that she loses her heart to him even as they find themselves hunted by unknown enemies who are ruthless in their quest to capture them.*

*"Fans of terrific paranormal romance have hit the jackpot with Duvall and her electrifying series."*

– RT Book Reviews

*"Full of fascinating characters, a unique and wonderfully imaginative premise, and scorching hot relationships."*

– The Romance Reviews

*"Fans of paranormal romance who haven't discovered this series yet are really missing out on something extraordinary."*

– Long and Short Reviews

*"Paranormal romance fans who enjoy series like J.R. Ward's Black Dagger Brotherhood will definitely want to invest time in the Immortal Guardians series."*

– All Things Urban Fantasy

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ON THE HUNT  
(includes *Phantom Embrace*)

# AWAKEN THE DARKNESS

*An Immortal Guardians Novel*

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
Dianne Duvall

[www.DianneDuvall.com](http://www.DianneDuvall.com)

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## Author's Note for Immortal Guardians Fans

Dear Reader,

The initial events in the Prologue will seem familiar to those of you who have read all the books and novellas in the Immortal Guardians series. I considered beginning the story with Chapter One and letting you discover who the hero was when the heroine did. But that would've required a lengthy tale of how he had come to be there near the end of the story. I much preferred showing you instead. So if your inclination is to skip the Prologue, I highly recommend that you do not. It will show you exactly what so many of you have been speculating about: what happened to Stanislav.

I would also like to thank all of you who have asked me for Stan's story and who have fervently hoped his role in my Immortal Guardians family has not come to an end. I've wanted to tell his tale ever since I wrote *Night Unbound* but had to wait for the right time. When I released *Blade of Darkness*, Stanislav leapt forward and informed me that the time had come.

Like Richart's and Yuri's stories, Stanislav's began as a novella. But since I've gone indie, I didn't have to adhere to a strict word count this time and was able to give it full rein. I hope you will enjoy reading or listening to his tale as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Thank you always for your support. If you'd like to chat with me and other readers who enjoy this series and/or The Gifted Ones series, I invite you to join my new *Dianne Duvall Books Group* on Facebook. We've been having so much fun in it. I hope I'll see you there.

—Dianne Duvall

## Prologue

“Hoooooooooly shit!” Ethan exclaimed.

Stanislav glanced at Ethan, an American immortal who was around three hundred years younger than his own four hundred and thirty-seven years. Ethan’s eyes were wide as he took in the men and machines in front of them.

A new vampire army had arisen. One more skilled and armed with the only sedative known to affect immortals and vampires. An army aided by an immortal betrayer they had yet to identify. But the Immortal Guardians *had* finally located the new vampire army’s base and discovered – much to their astonishment – that the betrayer had given the vampiric virus and the sedative to a huge mercenary group that had already begun infecting their own men.

No wonder the damned vampires he and his brethren had been encountering recently were so skilled in battle. An army of men with superspeed, superstrength, perfect night vision, and accelerated healing abilities that left them nearly unstoppable on the battlefield would bring the mercenary group billions of dollars. And all evidence suggested this group didn’t care who hired their vampire army. They would make it available to the highest bidder worldwide.

Vampire mercenaries. Stanislav shook his head. After hunting and slaying psychotic vampires every night for centuries, anything new – particularly if it offered a challenge – he usually embraced with eagerness, happy to escape the same-old, same-old. But this would irrevocably change the world in dangerous ways. It had to be stopped. *They* had to be stopped.

Stanislav followed Ethan’s gaze.

And it sure as hell looked as though he and his brethren would stop them today.

Chris Reordon, head of the East Coast division of the human network that aided Immortal Guardians, had chosen the rendezvous point for immortals, their Seconds, and the humans he commanded: a dense forest several miles distant from the mercenary compound, well beyond the sight of the compound’s surveillance equipment and far from any isolated country homes that might produce curiosity seekers. It also bore a heavy enough canopy to protect the immortal warriors from the sunlight that gleamed above them.

Since half the mercenaries they would be fighting were vampire, the immortals had decided to attack in force that afternoon. Vampires couldn’t withstand any sun exposure at all. Immortals could. Youngsters like Ethan, not so much. At full strength, Ethan could

probably only withstand a few minutes of direct afternoon sunlight before his skin would begin to pinken with a burn, then blister and worse. But the older the immortal was, the more daylight he or she could tolerate. Yuri, a hundred years older than Stanislav, could tolerate half an hour. Stanislav could withstand fifteen minutes or so. More if the sky bore a few clouds. David, who had seen thousands of years, could stand in the sun for hours. And Seth, the eldest amongst them and leader of the Immortal Guardians...

As far as Stanislav knew, Seth could stand in the sun all day without suffering any ill effects.

How they all envied him.

"What?" Chris asked belatedly as he spread a large map on the hood of one of many Humvees outfitted with a variety of mean-looking weapons.

"You think you have enough men?" Ethan asked, motioning to the multitude of rough-hewn Network special-ops soldiers garbed in camouflage.

"This is just half of them," Chris responded absently. "The other half are already in place, observing the compound's perimeter."

Stanislav shared a concerned look with Yuri. If even one Network soldier's presence had been detected, the mercenaries would know they were coming.

"None have been discovered," Seth said as though Stanislav had spoken the thought aloud. "I monitored their approach myself."

"What the hell is that?" Sheldon—Richard's Second—asked as he pointed at something atop the Humvee.

Stanislav was a bit curious about that himself.

Chris followed his gaze. "A TOW missile."

Yuri caught Stanislav's eye and raised his brows with a smile, his expression saying *Cool!*

Stanislav grinned. It *was* cool. Neither of them had seen such up close before, since immortals tended to use blades to hunt and slay vampires.

"And that?" The French immortal Lisette pointed to a weapon atop another Humvee.

"Flamethrower," Chris answered.

Bastien, the British black sheep of the Immortal Guardians family, stared up at it. "What's its range?"

"It can light up vampires two hundred and fifty feet away," Chris said. "But since it'll also light up immortals, we plan to use them primarily on the gate and on the grounds away from the main structures."

The other military vehicles all boasted high-caliber automatic weapons. Stanislav would have thought it overkill if the compound they intended to destroy didn't encompass four thousand acres.

"Now," Chris said, pointing to an area on the map, "these are the training fields that will be active. Live ammo is used on the target ranges, so you'll face a lot of firepower there. The gates will be heavily guarded. Patrols walk the fence. There will be a changing of the guard in half an hour, so the soldiers on duty now will be tired and likely not as vigilant. Surveillance cameras are mounted on the fences here, here, and here, near the main structures and training fields. But they're sparse on the rest of the grounds. These red circles indicate where you'll find them.

"Once more, you'll find an assload of vampires in this building. The human mercenaries who work the night shift will be sleeping here in the building next to it. This over here is the armory. Anyone you let go in there will come out packing major weaponry. There's only the one door, and a hell of a lot of them are going to want to use it, so I suggest you park a couple of immortals in front of it."

"I'll do it," Yuri volunteered.

"Me, too," Stanislav swiftly added.

Seth nodded his approval.

The eagerness with which Yuri approached this battle filled Stanislav with unease. Yuri was like a brother to him. When vampires had transformed Stanislav against his will four centuries ago, Seth had plunked him down on Yuri's doorstep and assigned Yuri the task of training and mentoring him. The two Russian immortals had been best friends ever since. As close as brothers by blood. Hell, even closer than Stanislav had been to his own brothers while they had lived. Stanislav and Yuri bore such similar personalities. The same quiet temperament. The same likes and dislikes and sense of humor.

Seth had always stationed the two together in the same cities over the centuries. So they'd hunted together nightly. Enjoyed quiet hours reading together before dawn. And had kept at bay the loneliness this life could breed.

But lately things had changed. *Yuri* had changed... in ways that alarmed Stanislav. Yuri had begun taking unnecessary risks. He was an exceptional swordsman and, in the past, had escaped most hunts relatively unscathed. Usually if either of them was injured, it was Stanislav. In recent weeks, however, his friend had racked up one wound after another on a nightly basis. Not superficial wounds. Not paltry scratches that healed or faded to scars before the two of them even made it home. But gashes so deep Stanislav saw bone when he inspected them. A throat nearly slit. Fractured limbs. Broken ribs that punctured lungs. Stab wounds deep enough to damage internal organs.

It scared the hell out of Stanislav, because he knew the only way Yuri would incur such injuries was if he *let* the vampires wound him.

“Try not to blow up the building, guys,” Chris implored. “We could use the stuff that’s in there.”

Stanislav faked a long-suffering sigh. “You’re forever spoiling our fun, Reordon.”

Yuri laughed and clapped him on the back as several of the other immortals chuckled.

But Stanislav’s worry remained. When he had confronted Yuri about the multitude of wounds that had led him to fear his friend had grown weary of this existence, Yuri had stunned him by admitting he had fallen in love with a woman who couldn’t safely be transformed.

A woman who must not be a *gifted one*.

*Gifted ones* like himself and his fellow immortals were men and women who had been born with advanced DNA that lent them special gifts. Yuri could see spirits. Stanislav could read others’ emotions and manipulate those emotions if he so desired. Lisette and her brother Étienne were telepathic. Roland could heal with his hands. David could do all of the above and shape-shift, too. Seth could do the same *and* teleport. The older the immortal, the more gifts he or she bore. And the DNA that lent them those gifts also protected them from the more corrosive aspects of the vampiric virus that infected them, transforming them into immortals.

Humans were not so lucky. Ordinary humans infected with the virus suffered progressive brain damage that drove them insane and compelled them to prey upon innocents. Ordinary humans turned vampire.

Which meant the woman Yuri loved could not spend the rest of eternity with him. If he transformed her, she would turn vampire and have to be destroyed in just a few short years.

Was the knowledge that Yuri would either have to watch the woman he loved die from old age or lose her to bitterness when she inevitably aged and he remained youthful simply too much for him to bear? Yuri had denied he had a death wish when asked directly. But the sparkle of excitement Stanislav saw in his friend’s eyes now, the eagerness with which Yuri anticipated this battle, unnerved him.

He would have to keep a close eye on him.

With Seth’s aid and approval, Chris assigned each immortal an area of the compound to tackle. “Seconds,” Chris ordered, “park your asses behind the nearest bulletproof structure and guard your immortals. Shoot anyone with a tranquilizer gun.”

Stanislav glanced at Alexei in time to see him nod.

Alexei met his gaze. Narrowing his eyes with exaggerated intensity, the Second pointed the index and middle fingers of his right hand at his own eyes, then swung them around and jabbed them toward Stanislav in an aggressive *I'll be watching you* gesture.

Stanislav grinned, amusement taking the edge off his anxiety. Alexei had served as his Second, or human guard, for almost three decades now and had never let him down. Not once. Stanislav would keep an eye on him, too. Alexei was tough. Brave as hell. But he was mortal. Stanislav didn't want to lose him to a stray bullet.

"If your immortal is tranqed," Chris instructed the Seconds, "use your walkie to call it in and cover them until we can get them out of harm's way."

"Should that happen," Richart said, "I can teleport the immortal to David's place."

"Good. The rest of the injured, mortal and immortal, should be taken to Network headquarters. Our emergency medical team is standing by." Chris raked them all with a glance. "Any questions?"

Silence.

He nodded. "Seth, let me know when you and the other immortals are in place, ready to strike, and I'll make the call." He turned to his men. "Helmets on."

The Network soldiers all donned helmets with chinstraps.

Seth eyed the immortals and arched a brow. "Well?"

Every movement broadcasting either reluctance or belligerence, the immortals around Stanislav dutifully donned a head covering that resembled a ski mask and shielded everything but their eyes. Even their mouths were covered except for small breathing holes. Like Stanislav, they had already squeezed their bodies into specially designed rubbery suits that resembled a diving suit and would protect them from the sunlight that would soon bathe them.

"Go ahead," Chris said. "Get it out of your system."

Grumbles and complaints erupted from several as Stanislav shared a long-suffering look with Yuri, then pulled the damned mask down over his head.

"I hate this thing," Yuri grumbled.

"Feels like I'm suffocating," Stanislav agreed.

"Is this damned thing thicker than it was before?" one of the Brits grouched.

"Yes, it is," Chris said as he rolled up his map. "Now suck it up and get moving."

Only Chris Reordon could get away with talking to immortals like that.

Stanislav and his fellow Immortal Guardians made their silent way through the forest until they clustered together in the evergreens across the street from the mercenary

compound's front gate. Thick trees and a bounty of chest-high weeds hid them from the guards' view and stymied the sunlight each time it tried to penetrate the dense foliage and hint at their presence.

A few immortals had not yet donned their masks, waiting until the last minute. Those that had, however, were difficult to tell apart. Seth, David, and Zach were all so old that they didn't need to wear suits or masks. The rest of the men, however, were all of a similar height—in the six-feet to six-feet-four-inches range—and muscular build. The only way to distinguish one from another was the unique weapons each bore and, in the case of the married males, the size of the females they stuck to like glue.

Stanislav had no difficulty identifying Yuri. He had given Yuri the weapons his friend bore and even in battle would be able to identify him simply by his fighting methods.

Eyeing his friend, he bit back a curse.

Yuri shifted his weight from one foot to the other, practically dancing in place he was so damned eager for the coming violence.

*Okay, everyone, Seth told them mentally, Chris is making the call.*

On Chris's mark, all cell phone reception would be disrupted and the landlines cut. Satellite phones would still function though, so Stanislav and the other immortals had been instructed to keep their ears open and prevent any calls from going out. The electricity would also be cut. Seth would take out the backup generators with several grenades.

Seth vanished.

Stanislav slid two katanas from their sheaths.

*Wonk! Wonk! Wonk!*

The soldiers at the gate jumped when an alarm began to blare and gripped their weapons tighter as they tried to look in every direction at once.

*Boom!*

Flames and debris appeared to fly from four different locations as Seth teleported from generator to generator with lightning speed and tossed the grenades. Chaos erupted as the alarm ceased blaring. Mercenaries ran about the compound, trying to figure out what the hell was happening.

Two grenades skipped across the ground toward the gate that blocked the only entrance and exit.

One of the guards caught the movement and looked down as the objects came to rest at his feet. "Ah, shi—"

An explosion cut off the man's words. Stanislav winced as the thunder pierced his sensitive ears like needles and left them ringing for several seconds. Bodies and body parts flew. The gate blew open and broke apart, flinging shrapnel across the two-lane street.

Stanislav and the others ducked as pieces of metal flew past and embedded themselves in the trees around them. Then they raced forward, David in the lead, to confront their enemies.

From the corner of his eye, Stanislav saw Chris's Network battalion surge forward in their armored vehicles.

Shouts rang out.

Mercenaries opened fire.

Sticking close to Yuri's side, Stanislav sped toward the armory, taking out every mercenary he could along the way. The front of the main building on the right exploded into chunks of granite and glass as they passed it.

David crashed through it all – Lisette, Zach, and Marcus on his heels.

Stanislav swung his katanas, cutting down mercenaries as he raced past the training fields. Screams erupted. Bullets flew through the air like swarms of bees. But the suit he hated so much stopped a hell of a lot of them.

Beside Stanislav, Yuri sheathed one of his katanas and yanked an automatic weapon from the hands of one of the mercenaries. As he continued toward the armory, his pace never slowing, Yuri sprayed the enemy with bullets.

Stanislav laughed. Sheathing his own weapons, he did the same.

The armory rose before them. Two stories high. Large enough to store a hell of a lot of weapons and ammunition. As expected, many of the human mercenaries scampered toward it like rats scenting cheese.

He and Yuri took out dozens before they ran out of ammo.

Yuri tossed his weapon down, grabbed another, and started for the door.

Stanislav beat him to it. "I'll clear it out," he called. Because of Yuri's recent self-destructive behavior, he didn't think it wise to let him loose in a building full of explosives while he carried an automatic rifle. Dropping his own rifle, he drew both swords and dove inside.

Shouts erupted as men frantically grabbed weapons and ammo and swung around.

Damn, they'd moved fast. There were more crammed inside than he had expected, but it didn't slow him down. Stanislav cut a swath through them, inspiring such terror that some decided to risk firing their weapons.

Swearing, he hoped like hell those bullets wouldn't hit any grenades or other explosives as he slew one after another until only he remained standing. He swept through the building – upstairs and downstairs – one last time before he headed outside.

The mercenary compound had transformed into a war zone. Stanislav didn't know how in hell Chris Reordon was going to keep this from appearing on the news but didn't doubt the human would do it.

Yuri stood with his back against the wall, spraying mercenaries with bullets.

"Clear," Stanislav called and backed up to the wall on the opposite side of the doorway.

The number of humans charging toward them, though substantial, had dwindled a little. Immortals Bastien and Melanie swept through the mercenaries, inflicting fatal wounds and sparking terror. Network soldiers, all clad in black, swarmed in their midst too, picking off any mercenaries the immortals missed and guarding the immortals' backs.

This was not their first clash with mercenaries, but all were determined to make it their last. Not one man would be left alive to resurrect the outfit in the future.

From the corner of his eye, Stanislav saw Yuri drop his rifle and go to work with his swords. Alexei and Dmitry – Stanislav's and Yuri's Seconds – approached in a crouch, barely recognizable beneath their helmets and body armor. Alexei took up a position at the corner of the building on Stanislav's side, his automatic rifle spitting fire and bullets that kept mercenaries from sneaking up behind Stanislav. Dmitry did the same, parking himself at the opposite corner and protecting Yuri.

A tank rumbled forth from one of the hangars that Immortal Guardians Étienne, Krysta, and Sean were clearing out.

*Shit.* The mercenaries must have –

Two missiles struck the tank, launched by Chris's men. Flames reached high into the air.

Dmitry whooped.

Alexei laughed.

Stanislav grinned. He might be concerned about Yuri and Alexei's safety, but he nevertheless enjoyed a good fight.

Yuri grunted.

Stanislav did, too, when a bullet penetrated his suit where the material thinned along his neck. Fortunately, it missed his carotid artery. "How many of these bastards are there?" he grumbled. He had slain dozens on the way to the armory and inside it. But

more kept coming, each one determined to get his hands on the weapons the two immortal warriors guarded.

Explosions overshadowed the gunfire in occasional bursts.

In the distance, flames spewed forth from the flamethrower atop Chris's Humvee as vampires darted out of the building that housed their sleeping quarters, deciding sun exposure posed less of a threat than the powerful immortals inside.

Another bullet struck Stanislav in the side. The uncomfortable suit he wore stopped several where it was thickest. But some areas were thinner so it wouldn't restrict his movements. And every once in a while a bullet would find a weak point and penetrate it like a blade.

Centuries of fighting enabled Stanislav to compartmentalize the pain and continue swinging his swords. Some vampires who had miraculously evaded the flamethrower's reach joined the mercenaries he and Yuri faced, surging forward. Their skin blistered in the sunlight as they ducked Bastien's swords.

Dmitry's weapon quieted as he hastily reloaded.

Stanislav kept an eye on the vampires zigzagging through the combat as his sword spilled another human mercenary's blood.

Alexei suddenly swore and fired a frenzy of bullets toward the back of the building. Eager to take advantage of the opening, three mercenaries altered their paths and lunged toward him.

Stanislav leapt over to guard his friend's back, killing those who meant to slay Alexei while his Second dispatched the mercenaries creeping toward them from the rear.

"Behind you!" Dmitry suddenly shouted.

Stanislav spun around.

Mercenaries had taken advantage of his brief inattention and surged toward the doorway. One of the men aimed a tranq gun at Yuri and fired.

The dart hit Yuri in the neck as he turned at Dmitry's warning.

Inside his mask, Yuri's eyes rolled back in his head. His knees buckled. His swords fell from hands that went limp as Yuri collapsed, hitting the ground hard.

Stanislav grunted when a blade bit deep into his side.

The vampire wielding it shouted in triumph. His skin charring, he yanked the blade out and raised it high.

Dmitry's gun resumed fire. "Shit!" he shouted. "Yuri's down! Yuri's down!"

Stanislav blocked the vampire's next swing and struck a blow of his own. Then another and another, putting on a burst of preternatural speed despite the blood loss that drained his energy. He heard Alexei move away behind him, still firing his weapon furiously.

More mercenaries must be coming around the back corner.

Stanislav swept the vampire's head from his shoulders, then swiveled to aid Yuri.

He couldn't remember the last time he had felt true fear, but—in that moment—it struck him with the force of a quarrel from a crossbow.

Yuri lay on the ground, unmoving, the tranquilizer dart sticking out of his neck where the suit was thinnest while Dmitry fought off a wave of mercenaries.

Another blistering vampire darted forward and grabbed one of Yuri's fallen swords.

Stanislav lunged forward. "Nooooo!" he bellowed, swinging his blades wildly as he fought past four more blistering and burning vampire mercenaries.

Too late.

The vampire struck fast, cleaving Yuri's head from his shoulders.

All the air left Stanislav's lungs, sucked away in an instant by grief and horror and disbelief. It couldn't be.

It couldn't *be*.

Yuri couldn't be dead. He *couldn't* be dead.

But he was.

A suffering greater than that spawned by all of his wounds combined crashed through Stanislav. They'd killed him. They'd killed Yuri. They'd taken his fucking head!

"*Yuri!*" he roared, rage igniting his insides as tears blurred his vision.

He pushed forward, cutting and knocking bodies out of his way, feeling as though he were wading against a swift current in chest-deep water. Bullets struck him. Blades bit deep. But he paid them no heed.

Something round flew at him. Stanislav knocked it aside, his only desire to get to his friend—his brother—before the symbiotic virus inside him devoured Yuri from the inside out and left nothing behind for Stanislav to hold and bid farewell.

Yuri was dead. His brother was dead.

A sob caught in his throat.

The object he batted aside flew through the armory's doorway and skittered across the floor with a clatter he barely heard over the pulsing heartbeat in his ears and the gunfire and bullets that peppered him.

Just a few more feet...

Thunder shattered his eardrums. Flames and shrapnel slammed into him, knocking him off his feet.

Agony engulfed him.

Blessed darkness.



A hand clamped around the raw flesh of his wrist, rousing Stanislav.

Torturous pain battered him.

Difficult to breathe.

Razor blades in his lungs. Smoke in his nostrils.

Something abraded him from his ass to his boots. Rough. Almost rhythmic in its repetition. The hand manacled his arm stretched it above his head. A thousand knives seemed to stab him in the shoulder.

Thunder rumbled. Distant gunfire split the day. Flames seemed to sear his skin.

He struggled to open his eyes.

"Hurry," a voice hissed.

Something kept hitting his legs... or what was left of them. It felt as though little flesh remained on his shattered bones.

What was it? Where was he?

He drew in a wheezy breath and nearly passed out from the pain it generated. Liquid rattled in his lungs. His right eye wouldn't open. The left he cracked enough to see daylight flickering behind a dense canopy of leaves.

The ground swept past in a blur.

His head lolled backward, giving him an upside-down view of a man dragging him across the ground, a second man at his side.

They moved swiftly. Too swiftly for humans.

Vampires?

A large, hazy object abruptly loomed before them.

His captors stopped. A thunk sounded. Hands gripped him, magnifying the pain. Then Stanislav went weightless, rising into the air before he hit a hard surface with a thud that produced such agony the darkness returned.



Movement shook Stanislav awake, then rocked him in a manner that might have been soothing if he didn't feel as though his body had been put through a meat grinder.

A rhythmic rumble penetrated the pools of blood in his ears.

A car?

Again he cracked an eyelid open and tried to make sense of his surroundings.

He was in the trunk of a car?

How had he gotten there? Who had put him there?

The car jumped as it hit a bump, tossing him up an inch or two, then slamming him back down.

He moaned. His head swam. Nausea rose.

Darkness.



*Shick. Thud. Shick. Thud. Shick. Thud.*

Something settled upon Stanislav's legs, fanning the burning flames that seemed determined to devour them. He gritted his teeth, knowing only pain for several moments as consciousness beckoned.

Moaning, he tried to open his eyes. One was swollen shut. The lid blanketing the other lifted just a bit.

What...? What had happened?

*Shick. Thud. Shick. Thud.*

Where was he?

"Stop pacing and dig, damn it," a male ordered. "He's starting to wake up."

Curses filled the air.

More of those pats on his legs, like David's cats leaping down on him and settling in for a nice nap. Every touch sent new agony coursing through him.

He tried to focus, tried to clear his vision, his mind. He wiggled his toes, alarmed by how difficult the task was. Managed to make the fingers of both hands twitch, too.

He hadn't lost any limbs. His whole body hurt so much that the knowledge came as a surprise.

Something hit him in the face. Dust invaded his nose.

He coughed, then damn near passed out again at the suffering that seized his body.

"Shit!" someone swore.

The *shick-thuds* sped up.

More weight pounced on his raw, burning legs. His stomach. His chest. His broken arm. His face.

Again he coughed.

Dirt. Someone was burying him.

*Two* someones.

"Are you sure he won't be able to get out of this?"

"Yeah. Look at him. He looks like barbecued ground beef that's been chewed up and spit out. With that much damage and no blood supply, no way in hell is he going to claw his way out of this."

More dirt. More torturous coughs.

"Won't he suffocate if we bury him?"

"Nah. I heard the higher-ups say nothing short of beheading will kill an immortal. They're like fucking water bears."

"What the hell is a water bear?"

"Forget it. Just keep digging."

Why were they burying him? Why weren't they beheading him? Why not just take his sword and...

Ice clawed its way through the pain.

*Yuri*. Something had happened to Yuri. Someone had decapitated him.

Grief tore through him.

He had to get to Yuri. Had to get to what was left of him before he lost him forever.

He rolled onto his side. Moaned.

"Fuck the shovels! Just push it in!" an anxious voice barked.

Stanislav dragged an arm up. A bone protruded from the skin.

He growled in agony as he curled the arm over his face and head.

A mountain of dirt showered down upon him like a never-ending tidal wave, the weight of it growing and digging into his battered form. The light dimmed. Then darkness blanketed him, this time not triggered by unconsciousness.

The landslide ended. Quiet fell.

Stanislav tried to move.

Dirt trickled down into the pocket of air his arm had trapped around his face.

He stilled.

The voice was right. His wounds had left him too weak to burrow his way out and kill... whoever the hell had put him here.

A rumble of voices overhead told him what his beleaguered senses couldn't. The two vampires remained on the ground above him.

Fighting the pain, he called upon his gift and scrutinized their emotions. Both felt fear. But as minutes passed and Stanislav didn't burst from the ground and attack them, relief crept in, followed by triumph.

Well, fuck that. For all he knew, one of the men above him had slain Yuri.

*Both* would pay for it.

He seized their triumph and warped it, morphing it into distrust, suspicion, and anger.

Their voices rose, the words they spoke running together as they argued.

Weakness teemed within him while he fed their fury, their need to commit violence, fueling it with every ounce of energy that remained in him.

Thuds and crashes sounded above. Scuffling feet. More shouts.

A heavier thud sounded. Dirt shifted as a body hit the ground above him.

Two shuffling footsteps. Then a second body hit the ground.

Silence.

No voices. No emotions. No heartbeats save Stanislav's, which slowed to one beat per minute. Then one beat every five minutes. Then less.

*Yuri.*

*Forgive me, my brother.*

His breath stopped as darkness claimed him.



## **Praise *Awaken the Darkness***

*"Awaken the Darkness is the latest mesmerizing installment in Dianne Duvall's fabulous Immortal Guardians series. This series is earth-shattering awesome and Dianne has quickly become one of my favorite authors. Each of the stories - and I'm still catching up - has been heart-stopping, intense, humorous and powerfully romantic."* – Reading Between the Wines Book Club

*"This is a book that HAS to go on my keeper shelf, along with all the others. This is an amazing series and it keeps getting better and better."* – Long and Short Reviews

*"Dianne Duvall's Immortal Guardians is my favorite series hands down. Every character is beloved. Every story is intense, funny, romantic and exciting. If you haven't read the Immortal Guardians, you are truly missing out!"* – eBookObsessed

*"Awaken the Darkness is the latest installment in the Immortal Guardians series. And just like all of the other ones that I have read, I loved it... I loved Susan and Stan together. I can't wait to see more of them in the next book. It can't come fast enough....who is it going to feature? I'm dying to know! I love this series and highly recommend it!"* – From the TBR Pile

### ***Praise for New York Times Bestselling Author Dianne Duvall's Immortal Guardians series***

*"These dark, kick-ass guardians can protect me any day!"* – Alexandra Ivy, New York Times Bestselling Author

*"Crackles with energy, originality, and a memorable take-no-prisoners heroine."* – Publishers Weekly on Night Reigns

*"Fans of terrific paranormal romance have hit the jackpot with Duvall and her electrifying series."* – RT Book Reviews

*"Full of fascinating characters, a unique and wonderfully imaginative premise, and scorching hot relationships."* – The Romance Reviews

*"Fans of paranormal romance who haven't discovered this series yet are really missing out on something extraordinary."* – Long and Short Reviews

*"If you love J.R. Ward's Black Dagger Brotherhood and Kresley Cole's Immortals After Dark, then you need to put Dianne Duvall and her Immortal Guardians books in your reading wheelhouse."* – Literati Literature Lovers

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*"This whole series is amazingly creative . . . If you haven't tried it yet, I highly recommend this series!" – Yummy Men and Kick Ass Chicks*

*"If you are a paranormal romance fan, I recommend this series!" – Smexy Books*

*"Duvall's storytelling is simply spellbinding." – Tome Tender*

***Praise for New York Times and USA Today Bestselling Author Dianne Duvall***

*"Book after book, Duvall brings her readers complex, fascinating tales of romance, danger and loyalty." – RT Book Reviews*

*"Dianne Duvall does an amazing job of blending paranormal with humor, romance, action, and violence to give you a story you won't want to put down." – The SubClub Books*

*"Duvall's storytelling is simply spellbinding." – Tome Tender*

*"I strongly urge all of you reading this to get swept away in Duvall's world and words. In her Immortal Guardians series, she delivers first class paranormal stories with a different spin on vampires that will keep you on the edge of your seat. And the Gifted Ones series is nothing short of perfection itself. I can't wait to see where she takes us next!" – Scandalicious Book Reviews*