

Chapter One

A sense of anticipation hummed through Adrian du Lac as he stepped into the enchanter's house. He hadn't visited Dimitri's residence in many years. While curious about his loyal servant's home, only tonight had he found a compelling enough reason.

Dimitri's daughter.

The small villa was well lit, and from appearances, the party had been underway for several hours. The rooms echoed with music and the laughter of the guests, some of them clearly soused. The air, heavy with the metallic aroma of wine, the pungent spicy foods on the buffet table, neared overpowering. Adrian stared with disdain as two small boys ran by, screaming like banshees. Someone jostled him from behind. What was he doing here? The place was too crowded and these witches multiplied like rabbits. Just as he decided to make a hasty exit, Dimitri spotted him from across the room.

"Adrian, come in." The tall, dark enchanter's booming voice carried through the noise. "Welcome to my home." Dimitri wore the traditional dress of his clan. This evening's turquoise and gold vest and loose-fitting shirt were clearly celebratory. A broad smile crossed Dimitri's swarthy face as he cut through the crowd.

Adrian waited impatiently for the other man to reach him. Why had Dimitri insisted on dressing in his peasant costume? Adrian was used to seeing the enchanter in modern business attire, much like he wore this evening.

Guests stopped Dimitri more than once as he approached, increasing Adrian's frustration. The sooner the niceties were spoken, the sooner he could

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leave. A sharp laugh pierced his hearing, and he winced. He needed to hunt, and longed for the cool night air instead of this overheated, noisy cottage.

"Good evening, Dimitri. Thank you for inviting me."

"Without you, du Lac, there would be nothing to celebrate. My beautiful Katerina is home from the United States, and she will be a successful businessman, ah, woman." The man laughed, pride in his daughter evident in his dark eyes.

Ah yes, the reason why he was here in the first place. Adrian remembered the girl and the first night he had seen her. The night he'd been so wounded he'd needed the enchanter's help to survive. She'd been barely twelve, too young to be left on her own. She watched him, dark eyes filled with apprehension, but kept herself hidden behind a book the whole time Dimitri and his wife had tended him. Adrian recalled feeling her curious gaze. Even now the sensation seemed strangely intense. There had been an awareness in her eyes. She'd understood his pain that night, though he quickly forgot the notion during the agonizing healing methods the enchanter and his wife had used. Dimitri had bragged of how smart his daughter was, and how he needed money to send her away to school.

"Yes, and if you hadn't saved me from that...vampire hunter, I would not be here to enjoy your hospitality." He recalled the deal he'd proposed that fateful night. The long-awaited payoff was at hand.

"It was good fortune I found you when I did."

"Yes." Adrian nodded and met the man's gaze steadily. "For all of us. In many ways."

"You gave my daughter an education. For that alone, I am eternally in your debt."

"Yes, never forget, Dimitri." He smiled. "My associates kept me apprised of her remarkable achievements. Dean's list every semester, internships at the most prestigious companies, graduating second in her class at Harvard."

Dimitri grinned. "I told you she was intelligent."

"First would have been better." Adrian took a moment's pleasure in seeing some light fade from Dimitri's eyes before continuing. "Nevertheless, I am impressed. She will go far in the business world. I only regret she has declined my offer of a position at du Lac Enterprises."

"I am sorry. I tried..."

He held up his hand. "Do not worry. It is her choice. She has chosen a fine company. KNT Communications is poised for an exciting future. Perhaps someday."

Someday sooner than she thought. He smiled. The foolish girl had accepted a position at Kuraskia's largest communications company,

unaware he'd been setting up a takeover of the corporation for quite some time. In a matter of weeks, the conglomerate would beg him to buy them out. And Katerina would be his employee, regardless of her choice.

The girl would prove useful with her intelligence and education, a worthy asset to du Lac Enterprises. With her powerful untapped magic also at his disposal, he would be unstoppable. Knowing she'd be here was the only reason he had agreed to come to this gathering.

Dimitri chattered on. Adrian glanced absently at his watch, and scanned the crowd. His wandering gaze stopped when he spotted the woman directly across the room, watching him with bold, dark eyes. She dressed differently than the other women, not in the long pleated skirts and puffy sleeved blouses they wore. She had on a simple maroon sheath, and matching long jacket. And though he had only the recollection of her as a child, he knew with sudden clarity this was Katerina.

For the first time in centuries, he was awed. The fire in her dark eyes called to him, almost as strongly as did her blood. His gaze caught hers, held it for several moments. With a slow, purposeful stride, she made her way toward him, and he couldn't hold back his smile.

She radiated confidence, intelligence. Her gaze left his to casually peruse him, then returned to his face. A hint of a smile played on her full lips. Her ebony hair hung in thick curls around her shoulders, framing her face, giving her a wild, exotic look.

Finally, she stood before him, her ebony eyes boring into his. "Mr. du Lac, I suppose I should say thank you."

"Katerina, how you've...changed. Please, call me Adrian." He let his gaze wander over her once more, surprised by the sudden thickness in his throat.

Her smile broadened. "Very well, Adrian. I'm surprised to see you here. But I'm glad for the chance to thank you personally for all you've done."

She was indebted to him, though he hadn't needed the reminder. Perhaps he could use her obligation to his advantage. In the space of a single heartbeat, his plans changed. All he knew was he needed to keep this woman by his side, no matter what it took. What he previously considered a necessary task had become a tantalizing challenge. He could persuade her to his will easily enough, he supposed. Surely she knew what he was. He had to tread with care, as she was not a woman easily taken advantage of. At least, not by mortal men. That realization excited him.

He heard her heart pounding in her chest. She was nervous. He reached out and clasped one of her hands. She was warm, and the pulse in her wrist

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jumped erratically.

"Katerina, you've done remarkably well. Your intelligence and creativity is what brought you this far."

"Yes, but you paid the bills."

"Katerina!" Dimitri sharply interjected.

"Papa, please."

"Dimitri, don't fret." Adrian never took his gaze from Katerina. "It was the least I could do for your father. Consider it a debt repaid."

Her eyes narrowed slightly, their inky depths hardening to coal, but her smile remained. "I'm afraid I can't. You will be reimbursed. I will not have my family indebted any further. Consider this a down payment."

She thrust a paper into his hand. Startled, he perused the check briefly, then looked at her again. He searched her eyes, and found a resistance which surprised him. He hadn't expected this. It certainly required him to re-think his tactics. The lure of the challenge she presented fired his blood.

"What is this?"

"The first payment on the loan you made my family. You'll have the rest by the end of the year."

"Loan? I made no loan. There is nothing to pay."

Dimitri stared at the check in shock and sputtered, "Katerina, what are you doing? This is not your place, and you show Monsieur du Lac no respect, after all he's done for you!"

She waved her father's protests away. "Papa, my education cost a lot of money. Since I'm the one who benefits, it's my place to take care of this."

Adrian held up his hand. "Dimitri, I admire your daughter's determination. It is refreshing to see someone so young take such responsibility. However, Katerina, there is nothing to take care of."

He took her hand and lifted it, slowly opening her curled fingers. He laid the check in her palm, holding it there with the slightest pressure. Her heat burned him through the paper.

She made a noise of protest, and he smiled reassuringly as he gazed into her eyes. He was not above using a little persuasion to put an end to this ridiculous discussion. He held her gaze, and felt her will slowly turn toward him. "Katerina, we will not speak of this further. This is a celebration, and I would like to enjoy it with you."

Her gaze warmed, and a smile tugged at her lips. "You're right. We can talk about it another time. Come, have a drink." She took his arm. He allowed her to pull him along with her. Perhaps this party would not be so bad after all.



Adrian responded to the buzz of the intercom. "What is it now?"

"Katerina Romanov is here to see you. She doesn't have an appointment."

Adrian tossed the file onto the desk. "Send her in." He smiled. Just the distraction he needed from the morning's work. He glanced down at his tie and straightened it. Just because he had no reflection didn't mean he would settle for his appearance as less than perfect.

The double doors of his office opened. She stepped into the room. Amazed at how easily she could leave him speechless, he rose. Her sheer beauty was like nothing he had ever seen before, even dressed in the severe gray suit which hid her charms. Her dark eyes hinted at a limitless fire. He wanted to taste those full lips. At that moment, he knew the longing he'd felt the other night was more than a fleeting notion, and he had to have her. Not as a vampire, but as a man. He wanted her in his bed.

"Katerina, what a pleasant surprise."

She tore her gaze from his for a moment, a heartbeat, but enough to reveal her nervousness. "We have some business to discuss."

Adrian shrugged. "We do? I was not aware..."

"I owe you for my education. And I intend to see the money returned, with interest."

Adrian waved toward a chair. "Please, I thought we'd settled this." Once she had taken her seat, he sat.

She shook her head. He wished her hair was unbound, as it had been the other night. What had gotten into him? He was not comfortable with the way these strange thoughts came upon him so suddenly, and at any time. The lack of control was unfamiliar. And unwelcome.

"We settled nothing, du Lac. I will not have my family used by you any longer."

He shrugged. Anticipating what was coming, he played along. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

"I know what you are."

That knowledge would make her seduction more difficult, but he was up for the extra challenge. "Really? And what would that be, Kat?"

He felt a twinge of satisfaction at the way she flinched. She leaned forward.

"No one calls me Kat. My name is Katerina."

He decided then and there he wouldn't call her anything else. "You were saying...Kat?" A sense of triumph swept over him when she didn't respond to the deliberate taunt. Her eyes flashed with annoyance before she once again composed herself. Subduing her fiery nature was clearly a struggle. Perhaps

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here was a way to get to her. He forced himself to focus on her words.

“Mr. du Lac, I’m determined to see every penny you spent on me is repaid. Then you will release my father from your service. Though he receives a substantial salary from du Lac Enterprises, I know his actual duties are not managing your Financial Advisory department.”

“You believe so? Your father has contributed to much of du Lac Enterprises’ profits in the last fifteen years. His particular...skills are greatly needed, and appreciated, by the company.”

“Skills? Don’t you mean his magic, his ability to cast good fortune your way?”

“Your father is a valuable asset. I assure you, should he choose to...depart his position, I would not oppose him.” He knew Dimitri would never retire, would always remain loyal, despite whatever arrangements Adrian might make with Katerina.

She arched an eyebrow, her lips pursed in annoyance. “Really? Then you deny you use him for...unethical dealings.”

He smiled, but let no emotion show. She was smart. He wouldn’t be able to outwit her as easily as he’d anticipated, not without taking her blood. How much did she know about her father’s responsibilities? “Kat, I am shocked you would accuse me of such things. Your father chooses to work for me. If you object, I’m afraid you’re talking to the wrong man. You should speak with him.”

“I already have.” She opened her briefcase and took out a large envelope. Disappointed, he realized he’d half-hoped she would pull out a stake or a bottle of holy water. Such a confrontation would have been exhilarating. Instead, she placed the envelope in front of him.

“Since you wouldn’t accept my check the other night, consider this a down payment on my father’s freedom.”

He opened the envelope and peered inside. Three folders. He removed them and glanced at the names of several major international corporations before tossing them to the desk.

“Really, Kat, what am I supposed to do with these?”

She stiffened at his continued use of the nickname, but again did not protest. “I scrimped and saved any extra money not used on living expenses the past few years. What I saved, I invested. And made some wise choices, as you’ll see. I’d say it’s enough to cover boarding school through the high school years.”

He arched an eyebrow and nodded. “I’m impressed. But really, you should share this with your family.”

“No, it’s for you. You’ll have the rest by the end of the year. You can

suggest to my father he take an early retirement. Then, I want your word you'll leave my family alone."

He stood and walked around the desk, stopping beside her chair. He leaned over her. "You are very brave to make such demands. Now, I have a demand of my own."

Katerina stared at him, hoping she still maintained her outward bravado. Truth be told, she was terrified. She had no magic like her parents to protect her. He could destroy her in an instant for her boldness, but it was a risk she had to take.

At the same time, the man was devilishly handsome, and she couldn't deny his sensual appeal. Even long ago, when she'd barely been past her twelfth birthday, she'd noticed. The memories were clear, etched in her mind as if it had happened yesterday. He'd come to her parents' home, and soon afterward, she'd been sent off to school.

Now, after years of adolescent recollections and imaginings about what it would be like to face him, she was in his office, and he leaned over her, his mouth beside her ear. The spice in his cologne intoxicated her. How could she act like a cold-hearted businesswoman when he was so near? No man had ever affected her like this before. But he was no ordinary man. What was he going to ask of her?

"You will have dinner with me tonight."

No, she couldn't! Even as she shook her head, her mind screamed to accept. His fingers slid along her jaw and turned her to face him. His touch was cool, but ignited sparks of fire within her. She met his crystal blue gaze, willing her heart to stop pounding so hard.

"Yes, Kat. We will dine together at my castle."

She couldn't resist. His hypnotic voice echoed in her mind, his words laced with a hint of some strange accent, and an almost medieval manner of speaking. How old was he, anyway? Even as the thought fluttered through, she found herself nodding in response. All rational thought had fled. The only thing she wanted was to hear him speak again in his silky voice, which caused delightful vibrations in her belly.

"I'll send a car for you. Be ready at seven."

She nodded again and stood, her gaze still locked with his. "I'll be ready."

He turned away, and she felt as though she'd been suddenly released from some sort of restraint. With his hand at the small of her back, he guided her to the door. Her legs felt strangely unsteady. She prayed she wouldn't trip in front of him as they made their way to the door. She paused and turned back to him, her mind jumbled with confusion. What had just happened?

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"I..."

He placed a finger on her lips. The touch made her knees weaken.

"I'll see you tonight. We'll discuss my other terms then."

Then she stood outside his office, aware his assistant watched her with curiosity. She cleared her throat and strode to the elevator, conscious of the fact she had not gotten him to agree to anything.

Chapter Two

As she drove down the narrow cobbled streets of Reimherburg, Katerina mentally berated herself. Her meeting with du Lac had not gone at all like she intended.

How could she have agreed to dinner with him? At his castle, no less. When she stopped for a red light, she let her gaze wander to the mountain at the edge of town. Sitting atop it was a tall stone fortress, its enormous turrets reaching to the sky. She would be there tonight. *With du Lac. Alone.*

The shiver passing through her wasn't caused entirely by fear. But she refused to let her thoughts travel that path.

The short, angry toot of a car horn alerted her the light had changed. She turned, and headed away from the mountain, toward the highway running along the town's southern border.

She found an American music station on the radio, but barely paid attention to the songs. All she could think about was du Lac, how he leaned over her in a way which had been slightly menacing, yet made her stomach flutter with excitement.

She knew what he was, had known ever since her father brought him home so long ago. Her mother explained vampires to her, but at age twelve, Katerina had found it hard to reconcile the fair, handsome man with the monsters she saw in the cinema. Until then, she'd never seen a vampire up close, and he looked as human as she and her parents. She never told anyone, but when she made eye contact with him, she felt his pain, as if she had been the one wounded. Even now, she recalled the trace of vulnerability in his gaze.

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There had been no hint of vulnerability in the man she met today. No, he was powerful, intimidating...and too damned sexy. She could still feel his touch on her face, and realized how much she longed to feel his cool caress once again. Her heart pounded.

She shook her head and parked the car in front of her parents' home. For several moments, she stared at the house where she'd spent the first twelve years of her life. How different the house seemed. In the flurry of relocating and starting her new job, she hadn't visited, except for the night of her party. That night, so many people wanted her attention, then she met du Lac. This afternoon, she took some time to study her childhood home.

The cottage had been added on to, enlarged to resemble a small villa. Obviously, her father had done well working for du Lac. Once again, that man was at the forefront of her thoughts. She sighed and stepped out of the car. She had a lot of questions for her mother.

As she approached, the door opened. Olga emerged to stand on the steps. Her long, dark hair was liberally streaked with gray and tied in a thick braid, its length emphasizing her height. Katerina knew she shouldn't be surprised her mother had known when she'd be here. She hadn't called ahead, so this visit was completely unexpected. She remembered how Olga had always known when, as a child, Katerina was about to do something forbidden or dangerous. Being away for so long had made her forget much of the life she once had here.

A bright smile lit Olga's slender face and she enclosed Katerina in a hug.

"I am so glad you are here. But tell me why. Shouldn't you be working?"

Katerina followed her mother inside and shut the door. "I finished early." For some reason, she didn't want to tell her mother why she left work, or where she'd been not long ago. She was thankful her mother didn't already know that as well.

"So tell me all about your new job." Olga led her into the kitchen, where she set about making tea.

"It's fine. I'm really enjoying it. Actually, Mama, I'm here because I wanted to ask you a few things."

"Like what?" Olga's back remained to Katerina as she measured out the tea leaves.

"What hold does du Lac have over Papa?"

She didn't miss the way her mother's shoulders tensed. When Olga finally faced her, her expression was serene.

"What do you mean?"

"He paid for my education. But I can pay him back now, so what else

keeps Papa working for him?"

"Your father is very grateful to du Lac for sponsoring you. He feels it is his duty to..."

"His duty. To serve a vampire? Mama, I'm sure du Lac is not using Papa for his financial advisory skills." Katerina slid into a chair at the table.

Olga remained silent for a few moments. "Your father is very happy working for du Lac."

The tea kettle whistled and, with relief in her eyes, Olga turned back to pour the hot water into the two prepared cups. Katerina took the cup her mother offered. "It's more, though, isn't it? Why else would du Lac pay for my education?"

"Du Lac is a very generous man." Olga seated herself across the table.

Katerina shook her head. "That's not exactly how I see it, Mama. There's something else."

Olga didn't respond for several moments. Finally, she raised dark eyes and pierced Katerina with a stare.

"What your father does for du Lac, I don't know. I stay out of it. Your father does what he sees fit, and I go about my business."

Katerina took a deep breath. "Is Papa a vampire?"

For several tense moments, Olga simply stared at her. Her face was carefully composed, not an iota of emotion revealed.

"No, he is not."

Katerina wasn't sure if her mother's words were true, but she desperately wanted to believe them. Still, there was more, she was positive. But she didn't press further. Clearly, Olga was not going to reveal her secret now.

With her mother still gazing evenly at her, Katerina sighed and glanced about the room. Once more, she was struck by the home she'd left behind, and how it had changed almost as drastically as she had. What had once been a comfortable cottage was now a small mansion. It was a glaring reminder of how well her father's job paid. And how her parents now depended on the income her father brought in.

"I see you've managed to benefit from du Lac's benevolence, as well. You've done a nice job with the place."

Her sarcasm earned her a sharp glare from her mother, and Katerina shifted in her seat, feeling as small as a child once again.

"Watch your tongue."

"I'm sorry, Mama."

Olga smiled and squeezed her hand. "Is it so bad to enjoy the fine things your father's salary can bring?"

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Katerina shook her head. "No, I understand, and I'm glad you can. But there's so much I don't know, I can't help feeling there's more. You sent me away on a moment's notice, and all I had were phone calls and letters for years. You never told me why. You can afford all this, but you couldn't afford for me to come home and visit?"

"It was an opportunity for you your father and I could not pass up. We would never have been able to give you an education, not for a very long time. You are a very smart woman, and you will need all of your intelligence to guide you down your path. Traveling would have taken you from your studies, when you needed to focus on them. I could not allow the distractions to keep you from achieving everything you have. And what is to come."

"What does that mean?"

"You will know soon enough. Your power will guide you."

Katerina wanted to shake her mother, force out whatever she wasn't telling her. She restrained herself with great difficulty. What power did Olga refer to? She felt more adrift than ever. In all her time in America, she'd never shown one hint that she possessed any of the powers her parents did. Fortune telling was a disaster, levitation of any kind was even worse, as was reading minds. She'd tried it all, from summoning a book to calling forth a demon. Nothing. Being away had made her wonder if what she'd been taught as a child was even real.

"I've been away too long, I don't understand."

"We all have our paths we must travel. I wanted you to have the best advantages. You are the first child in our family to go to college, and you surpassed everyone's expectations. I would do it again if I had the choice to make now. Your education has given you power, and you will use it well."

Her mother's pride warmed Katerina and she smiled. "I'm glad you did it, Mama. But I missed you and Papa so much."

Olga looked away. "Sending you off was the hardest thing I ever had to do. But it was best for you."

"And now I have this wonderful education, and I'm going to use it to clear whatever debt or obligation Papa has to du Lac."

"Katerina, you mustn't involve yourself in things which don't concern you." Olga's brow furrowed, her eyes filled with worry.

"This does concern me. I have the best education, and Papa is still working for a vampire. Surely any responsibility Papa has is over now."

"Du Lac treats your father well."

"It has to stop. And I'm going to do it. I'm seeing him tonight and I'm

going to find some way."

"You are seeing him? Tonight?" Olga pressed her lips together, revealing her consternation.

Katerina nodded. "And I'm going to make him accept a way to end this. I want Papa free. All of us."

Olga shook her head. "But you mustn't. You must stay away from him."

She frowned and narrowed her eyes. "Mama, I know you're worried, but I'll bring protection. Unless there's something else you need to tell me?"

Again, her mother shook her head. "No, there's nothing else. But you mustn't go."

So far, her mother had not given her sufficient reason, beyond what Katerina already knew. "Why? Do you really think he'll attack me?"

Olga sighed. "You know what he is. He's dangerous. Don't let his charm make you forget."

"Don't worry. I can handle myself." *I have to. If I don't, I'll be as trapped as my father is.*

Maintaining her determined front before her mother, she rose. This was almost harder than standing up to du Lac. "I have to go. I have a lot to do before tonight. I've been trying to find out more about du Lac, but there's not much. I guess I shouldn't be surprised. Imagine starting your corporate biography with the information you're a blood-sucking killer. Not good for business."

"You must be careful." Olga followed Katerina to the door, where she hugged her daughter goodbye. Ever since she had returned from America, Olga had been charting her daughter's path. While not everything was clear, one path Katerina might take spelled doom. Olga had to make sure things progressed as she'd planned.



Katerina was ready when the Mercedes limousine arrived. The glassy-eyed driver said nothing, just held the door. The sun dipped behind the mountains, the sky almost purple, in stark contrast with the whitewashed stone castle atop the hill. Illuminated with lights, its towers were eerily menacing. Katerina's heart pounded and she absently fingered the small gold crucifix at her neck. She was sure du Lac wouldn't be pleased she'd worn it, but she needed some sort of defense against him, no matter how small. Would it be enough?

Despite her assurances to her mother, she was terrified he would attack her. Certainly, she would need protection, for once she reiterated her demand he release her father, he would be angry. Recalling how her father had declared

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his allegiance to du Lac and insisted he wanted to continue in his service had only convinced her more strongly she needed to settle this debt.

She considered du Lac and the hold he had over Dimitri. At the very least, he was extremely persuasive, though she suspected he used some sort of mind control. He was certainly capable of such a deed. The task she'd set for herself seemed impossible.

Especially since the man was too damned attractive.

The car stopped at the entrance, and the driver ambled awkwardly around to open the door. As she walked up to the massive, carved wooden doors, he stood mute. Before she could knock, they opened, and a servant, dull-eyed as the chauffeur, motioned her to follow him into the hall. She eyed him curiously as he shuffled ahead of her down the hallway. Suspicion formed in her mind. What had du Lac done to him?

She paused inside a massive double doorway, at the top of an elaborate two-level stone staircase. Adrian stood in the cavernous room below with his back to her, staring into the mammoth hearth. For a moment, her heart raced. She steadied herself. Though there was definitely a darkness surrounding him, he didn't look evil.

He spoke without turning. "Please, come in, Kat."

She pressed her lips together and stepped down to the first landing. Why did he persist in using that nickname? Why did she let him?

The semi-dark room was lit by candlelight and the hearth, bare but for a few ancient as well as modern objects. Some chairs and tables were set about, but she couldn't see them clearly through the gloom hovering in the room. Two chairs faced the hearth, covered in inviting, thick cushioned, red velvet. Finally he turned, but made no move toward her. His gaze beckoned. Propelled by some unseen force, she descended the stairs and walked across the room. She stopped several feet away. Adrian looked oddly annoyed. His gaze fell upon the crucifix at the hollow of her neck.

"I'd prefer you didn't wear that tonight."

"But..."

He shook his head. "It won't protect you, and I prefer not to see it. Its presence makes me uncomfortable. As a guest in my home, you are safe from me. You have my word."

Katerina didn't know if she should trust him, but found herself doing as he asked and placed the tiny cross inside her purse. Adrian heaved a sigh, clearly relieved. She held back a smile, knowing she was still guarded against him. Underneath each ear, hidden by her hair, were temporary tattoos in the shape of crosses. Should he attempt anything, she could easily

reveal them, at least long enough to escape his clutches.

Why did the thought dismay her?

Damn, why did he have to be so handsome? Dressed in a tuxedo, he was a formidable and enticing sight. His golden hair shimmered in the firelight, his sharp features illuminated by the glow. He stepped closer, and she fought the urge to turn and run. She remained where she was and lifted her chin. His smile widened.

"I'm pleased you came."

"I have a feeling I didn't have a choice." That was true. Somehow she'd been compelled to be here, and suspected he used his vampiric powers. She knew she couldn't trust him. But something in his gaze left her feeling breathless and giddy. She was helpless to resist.

"You always have a choice, Kat. Some wine?"

She nodded. She needed to soothe her nerves. He chuckled, as if he'd read her thoughts. She narrowed her eyes.

"Why did you want me to come?"

He handed her a glass of red wine. *How appropriate*, she thought, and eyed the glass warily.

"Relax, it's just wine. I assure you, you have nothing to fear."

Just losing my sanity, she thought. Aloud, she said, "How do I know I can trust you?" She took a long drink of wine.

He chuckled again. "You don't. You are right to be cautious."

"Maybe this was a mistake." She put her glass down, but he grabbed her wrist.

"You won't get far." He immediately softened the compressed line of his lips. "Why not just relax and enjoy the evening?"

"All right. But at the first sign of..."

He rolled his eyes and frowned in exasperation. "I can control myself, Kat."

What was the matter with her? She was beginning to like the way the nickname sounded on his lips. If she couldn't resist him as a man, she was doomed. She had to free her family, nothing more. So why did she wish tonight was simply two people being together? She lowered her head.

"I'm sorry. It's just..."

He reached out and lifted her chin. "You're afraid of me."

"Can you blame me? I mean, you're a...you...kill people. Your servants, they're...zombies, aren't they?"

He smiled. "Someone of my...nature requires servants who do not ask questions, who do not speak of what they see."

She pressed her lips nervously. "Do all of your victims end up like him?"

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She nodded in the direction of one of his servants, who was bringing more wood for the fire.

He shook his head. "Is that why you are afraid? Do you think I will turn you into one of them?"

She remained silent, worried her answer would anger him.

"I would never. The only thing you have to fear from me, sweet Kat, is this."

He leaned in, still holding her gaze. His lips, oddly cool, yet amazingly sensual, brushed lightly against hers before he drew away. Then Adrian grabbed her and crushed her against him, his mouth claiming hers in a fierce kiss, his tongue plundering her mouth. And all she could do was cling to him helplessly, as she gave herself over to the tumult assailing her senses, the heat he drew from deep within her.

Adrian's hands roamed her back, his mouth still fused to hers. Her knees weakened, and her arms tightened around his neck, her fingers tangling in his hair. She couldn't get enough of him, his heady taste, and she pressed herself more tightly against him. This was madness, but she couldn't help herself, the sensations flowing through her were too wonderful. Maybe insanity wasn't such a terrible thing after all.

Abruptly, he released her and turned away.

"It would seem my control is not as strong as I would prefer." His voice was hoarse and ragged, his shoulders and neck stiffened ever so slightly.

She stared at his back in confusion. Her knees trembled, and she fell into the closest chair. She picked up her wine glass and drained it, trying to steady her jangled nerves.

When he turned back, he was composed and calm, his gaze assessing her coolly.

"You are sweeter than I imagined," he said, his voice now steady and clear. He eased himself into the chair beside hers. He moved like a cat, his motions smooth and fluid, his long fingers curling around the arms.

Unable to find her voice, she simply stared into his heated gaze. What had gotten into her? She had to remain cool, aloof, and keep her emotional distance. Then why did she so long for him to kiss her again? No, this was not a social encounter, or anything of the sort. She was only here to protect her clan. Wasn't she? She took a deep breath.

"I...Monsieur du Lac..."

His gaze bored into her, robbing her of her next words.

"Adrian, please." He picked up the wine bottle and refilled her glass. The hint of annoyance in his voice stiffened her spine. His gaze still locked hard on hers, and though she sensed his powerful will, she felt no threat. In fact,

the heat she found in his eyes warmed her. She had to look away, the intensity making her fingers shake.

Since her wits needed to be sharp, she merely sipped at the wine this time. All he had to do was agree to her repayment plan and she could be finished. But even as the thought arose, she knew she would never be finished with him. She was indebted to him, much more so than her father ever would be. If she could only find out why, perhaps then she could free her father. If it meant placing herself in Adrian's path, she would.

"Adrian, can we please discuss the terms of my repayment?"

"There is no need, and I prefer we not speak of it." His eyes hardened and she swallowed past the lump which had formed in her throat.

"But..."

He held up a hand. "No. I will not hear of it."

A surge of annoyance coursed through her. "What do you hope to gain by keeping my father and family in servitude to you? Why won't you let me free him from this debt?"

He smiled, and his eyes warmed once again. He leaned forward until his face was mere inches away.

"Did you ever think perhaps your father enjoys working for me? He is well compensated."

A fact Katerina knew well, but the idea her family could be in service to a vampire for generations angered her. He could control the Romanov clan, make them bend to his will, do whatever bidding he asked. She could not bear for her family, descendants of a long line of proud witches and enchanters, to be little more than slaves. She wanted their freedom, to live the lives of their own choosing, not as little more than pawns in an evil man's plans.

"You think me evil?"

She stared. Had he read her thoughts?

He nodded. "It is difficult to ignore when you are shouting."

"Shouting? But I said nothing."

"Your thoughts are quite loud. Why are you so upset?"

"If you can read my mind, then you know."

He nodded, one fair eyebrow arched. "You are clever, Kat. I like that."

She straightened her back. "Don't."

"What? Don't like you? I'm afraid I cannot help myself."

In a heartbeat, he was seated on the arm of her chair and leaning over her. His very nearness caused her heart to race, her stomach to clench with excitement. What was the matter with her? She needed to get out of here. Now.

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His hand was on her wrist, not tight, but firm enough so she knew he had no intention of releasing her. And he'd convinced her to remove the crucifix. She tilted her head, ready to reveal her secret defense. Otherwise, if he chose to attack, she would be helpless.

"Kat, please. But I don't want you to leave. You see, I do like you. Very much."

Adrian knew that was true. The last few days hadn't been easy, with her forever in his thoughts. When she arrived at his office today, he had struggled to keep from revealing just how much she affected him. He succeeded, but failed this evening when he kissed her, and his vampire self had started to emerge. The need had taken him by surprise. How could he have lost control? Desire had overtaken him so completely, he had almost failed to stop. Even now, the lure of her blood was still not nearly as strong as his yearning for her, which could prove more dangerous.

What was it about this woman that affected him so deeply? He stood, determined not to let her unsettle him any further.

"Come, dinner is ready."

He offered his arm. For several moments, she stared at him before she stood and placed her hand in the crook of his elbow. How could such innocent contact leave him hungering for more? He escorted her to the dining room and seated her beside him.

"I had my chef prepare an assortment of dishes. I'm sure you will find one to your liking."

"Won't you be joining me?"

"No. I've already...eaten."

Her eyes widened and she swallowed visibly. Quickly she lowered her gaze.

"Kat? Is everything all right?"

She nodded, but didn't look up from her plate. He reached over and placed a finger beneath her chin, tilting her face to the light.

"What troubles you, Kat?"

"You." She seemed as surprised as he at her words. He smiled, liking the vulnerability she displayed as she nervously blinked twice, looked away and then back again. She only endeared herself to him further.

"Why?"

She shook her head and eyed him quizzically. "As if you didn't know." She lifted her chin a notch. "Why did you do this for me? I mean the school, the money. What did you hope to gain?"

Many things, he thought. "I'm not sure I know what you mean."

She tossed her napkin on the table and stood. "I don't have the patience or inclination to play these games. You're a vampire, you kill people. You

bought my father's loyalty by sending me to school. A man like you doesn't do that without expecting something in return. And don't give me the bull about repaying a debt. The debt you owed my father was not worth this."

"I consider my life well worth any price. And I would have paid more, should your education have required it." He was beside her in a moment. He had to admit, he liked it when she came at him like this. No pretense, no subterfuge, just simple honesty. How refreshing.

"Your life?" She seemed genuinely surprised.

"Yes, dear Kat, my life. My very survival. If not for your father's intervention, I could very well be no more. I agreed to pay for your schooling. I offered your father a job, which he accepted. It was the least I could do. He's been valuable to me over the years."

"And when he's no longer valuable? What will you do then? Kill him?"

Although he'd always figured he would do exactly as she suspected, suddenly he no longer wanted to destroy the old enchanter when his usefulness expired.

"No, Kat. Your father will not come to any harm from me. Should he choose to leave, he will not be harmed."

She eyed him skeptically but said nothing. Finally, she nodded. "All right, then what did you hope to gain from me?"

Now it was his turn to be surprised, yet he was impressed with her instinct. She correctly surmised she was his target. With her quick intelligence, she would make a fine addition to his staff, among other things. But she would not be easily swayed by his usual manner of courting a woman. He would have to play the game a little differently with her, but somehow, he knew his eventual triumph would be even sweeter.

"And what makes you think I want something from you?"

She shook her head. "I'm not stupid. Why would you put a girl from a poor family through American high school and college, if not to gain something for yourself?"

He smiled. "You're very astute. But I would prefer to think of it as continuing your education." She had much more to learn, though he was sure she wasn't aware. Her mother had assured him her powers could not yet be used. If Adrian had his way, Katerina would use those powers very soon.

"I'm not sure I know what you mean."

"If you work for me, we can build du Lac Enterprises to an incredible future."

She stared at him a moment. He couldn't resist dipping into her mind. While he couldn't do this with mere mortals, her inborn supernatural

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abilities enabled him access to the innermost reaches of her mind, as long as he maintained eye contact.

Work for him? Be near him all day long? And then owe him even more of my life? No, I can't. I won't.

He was disappointed, and decided to let the matter drop. For now. He wanted her to come to him willingly, in all ways. He waited for her spoken answer.

"I'm sorry, but I can't. You've done more than enough already."

He nodded. *"Very well. Should you change your mind..."*

"I won't."

He arched an eyebrow at her, and she shifted uncomfortably, but didn't pull her gaze away. She was brave, and it only made her more appealing. Did she not realize how easily he could bend her to his will? He wouldn't. Not yet. Her intelligence, her mind, her determination were part of what made her such an appetizing morsel.

He would have to tread carefully. Angering her would only serve to alienate her. He needed her magic, the powerful magic of her family. According to her mother, Kat would someday be one of the strongest, should she be trained properly. She would be. Adrian intended to ensure it.

With Katerina's strong will, he would not have an easy time exerting his control. It was a challenge he looked forward to facing. He had to show her what was in her soul, what she could be with her powers in full force. She had to experience the wondrous delights to be shared in black magic. He'd waited long years for this, and it was turning out even better than he had anticipated.

Despite her insistence she wanted nothing more than to clear her debt, she was enamored of him, he was sure of it. Her response to his kiss had proven it. And this was his way to her. If he wooed her carefully, she would not want to be free of him. Ever. She would belong to him, body and soul, before he brought her over.