



YSOBELLA BLACK

VIKTORIA'S
SHADOW

— J A E L —

VAMPIRES & STRYGOI WITCHES 2

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CHAPTER ONE



Viktoria hesitated outside the door, hand on the knob. When she went in, she would have to make a life or death decision.

She shook herself out of that way of thinking. Even after living among humans for so long, it was hard not to slip back into the persona of a Pohjola Maiden sometimes. Especially when she missed her sisters, and she'd been missing all twelve of them more than usual lately.

If everything went according to plan, she'd be able to see them all again soon. Well, she would see them all soon if things didn't go according to plan too, but that way ended with all of them as prisoners, and she hadn't spent the last thousand years living as a human only to lose their freedom now.

Taking a deep breath, Viktoria threw the door open. The gallery show started in a couple of hours, and she lamented there'd been no time for shopping. An unexpected, but always welcome, house guest had shown up and filled all Viktoria's time with last-minute training and pep talks.

There would be no inspirational speech for this decision. Viktoria was on her own.

She looked over the selection of clothing all around her. A girl could always use another dress. Where a girl could *put* another dress was a different problem. Her closet comprised most of the upper floor she'd remodeled into one large space for her clothes and resembled a boutique. It lacked a fitting room, but one corner held a vanity and enough mirrors to catch every angle of her appearance. Maybe her clothes needed their own place to live.

One wall, lined with rows of drawers, contained casual clothing, but tonight called for formal. Floor length gowns, sexy cocktail dresses, a multitude of 'little black' options, barely there ensembles, and summery frocks — in the latest styles and elaborate corseted, hoop-skirted fashions from prior centuries — arranged in a monochrome rainbow of shades from black to gray, to silver — beckoned from hanging racks and mannequins.

She didn't have a thing to wear.

Closing her eyes, Viktoria walked into the room and ran her hand along a row of hangers, stopping at random. She unhooked the chosen hanger from the rod, held up her choice, and smiled. This little black dress, an intricate tangle of strings on top, leading to a tight, ankle-length skirt with slits up the sides, was perfect for the playful mood coming over her. If she had to wear the same thing twice, it may as well be something scandalous.

In front of her mirrors, Viktoria stepped into the skirt and arranged the myriad of strings over her stomach, ribs, and breasts, leaving her back bare. Some strings she let dangle where they fell from the collar. Others she arranged with more care, holding them in place with body glue. Scandalous didn't have to mean indecent, after all. It took forever to put this dress on, to ensure no possibility of a dreaded wardrobe malfunction, but was worth it.

Smoky eyeshadow to accentuate her light blue eyes, a quick brush through her long, platinum blonde hair, left straight down her back, a pair of stiletto heels to make her even taller, a tiny clutch purse for perfume, phone and lipstick, and she pronounced herself ready.

Mind on the details she needed to take care of at the gallery before the guests arrived, Viktoria left her boudoir and headed downstairs, footsteps quiet on the thick carpet of snow that blanketed her home year-round.

Painted portraits of twelve platinum-haired, blue-eyed women regarded her with varying degrees of expectation and judgement from their places on the wall as she strode down the hall and staircase.

Not about her choice of clothing, though. *I won't let you down*, Viktoria thought to them as she touched each of the frames. *You'll be free soon*.

"Yer Pohjola is showing, skinny malinky long legs." The unexpected house guest leaned a shoulder against the doorjamb of the kitchen at the bottom of the stairs, saturating Viktoria's monochrome world with color.

The Amazon's sienna eyes, rimmed in green liner, studied Viktoria. Dark blue, skin-tight leather pants and vest displayed six feet of tawny skin and lean muscles. Bright red toenails flashed from her bare feet. Streaks of purple shot through her bangs and a blonde-brown ponytail hanging to her waist. The woman changed her hair color more often than Viktoria changed her clothes. "I ken yer everything is showing. That... are we calling that a dress? Looks like it lost a fight with my sword."

Said sword, sheathed on the Amazon's back, was two-and-a-half-feet of bronze with a simple crosspiece.

Viktoria had lost more than one to that blade. "Everything loses a fight with your sword, darling." She returned the smirk that curved the Amazon's lips. "Are you sure you don't want to come with me? Free food and drinks."

"There's free food and drinks here." The Amazon pushed away from the door and held up a bottle of beer. "I won't wait up. Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Like that narrowed Viktoria's options at all.

CHAPTER TWO



Jael

Humans were the only species idiotic enough to wear a convenient means for throttling them as everyday attire. Jael tore at the knot, ripped the tie over his head, and threw it on the floor of the armory.

Weapons from slingshots to spears, to blades, to guns — revolvers to assault rifles — lined the walls, and each vampire had a section for his personal tactical gear and favorite tools of trade. He should add the necktie to the wall with the rest of the armaments.

“It’s not that bad.” Zeke laughed as he cinched his voluntary noose tight against his collar and slipped his arms into suit jacket sleeves. The material stretched tight over his massive frame. He added some daggers — one up his sleeve, another on the back of his belt. A gun went into an ankle holster over a shiny dress shoe, and he ran a hand through his cropped blond hair. The Knight would have to leave the bloodthirsty sword he usually wore on his hip behind tonight.

“Speak for yourself.” Jael had strangled too many targets to believe that.

Jael skipped the jacket — no room for the weapons he never went anywhere without — and picked up the harness holding his curved swords. A sense of completeness slid into place along with the blades when they settled on his back. His scimitars were as bloodthirsty as the Knight’s weapon, but unlike that one, Jael’s could hide themselves from sight.

Stryx, the Esag of their Ildum, had decreed three vampires could accompany him to the gallery show tonight. Their orders said they had to dress up, but they would not go unarmed — not with the possibility of mages in attendance.

Their could-be king had been taken unaware when he found his Dragă — a witch who could make his heart beat. They’d all thought the massacre in Dacia a thousand years ago had wiped out every bloodline, eliminating any chance to find the one woman a vampire could love with a heart and soul he wasn’t supposed to have.

Until Ember.

While the vampires were reeling, trying to adjust to the impossible becoming reality after a millennium, she further unbalanced their world. In rare cases, a Dragă could channel silver lightning magic and turn strygoi — the most powerful kind of witch, and the bane of a mage’s existence.

Ember had escaped from the mages twice, leaving mayhem, dead minions, and a missing mage in her wake.

Jael admired her brand of chaos.

Mages would want her back just for those reasons. But should her strygoi magic ever be revealed, they'd stop at nothing to take her again. Or kill her, and everyone close to her, in order to exterminate the new blood line.

Jael wouldn't let the massacre start again.

So far, Stryx had made a spectacular disaster of his relationship with his Dragă, and she'd avoided him for days. But their Esag was a relentless tactician and hunter when he wanted something. Jael had taught Stryx to be that way from the time he was a boy. His Dragă would be at the gallery show tonight for an exhibition of her photos. A public place where she couldn't hide from him, and where mages knew she would be.

While Jael would never ask Ember to be bait in a trap, there was no containing her. If she intended to put herself where mages could get to her anyway, he planned to take advantage of the situation and be there to make more of them disappear.

"I don't like this." Melchior's dark suit contrasted against his pale skin and long white hair. He wore a tie. An extra long one, since at seven feet tall he was giant-sized, even for a vampire.

"I can go alone." Stryx entered the armory and stopped at his section to pull throwing knives from a drawer and sheathe them around his body.

Stryx had done crazier things since he'd met Ember.

"You shouldn't be going at all. And neither should she." Melchior tucked bolas into his pockets. "The mages will want her back."

Stryx's blue eyes flashed black. A sign he was close to letting his vampire side out. "They will *never* touch her again." He wore a red tie, yanked on a black suit jacket and strode for the exit.

"That doesn't mean they won't try." Jael turned to keep pace with Stryx as he left the armory. "You can't go alone. It's that simple."

"She'll think it's an invasion."

Zeke smirked. "She won't throw us into a wall, though."

"I wouldn't bet on that." Stryx scoffed.

Jael wouldn't either, but if mages might be there, he and his swords were better equipped to deal with them.

"How is Musette?" Melchior asked as they headed for the garage.

"Ember won't tell me anything about her sister." Stryx heaved a sigh. "I can feel her worry, though. Musette hasn't awakened. Her body is in some sort of stasis. Her mind is trapped elsewhere."

CHAPTER THREE



The Spider Mage leaned forward on his throne, elbows braced on knees, and watched his children in the flickering light of the torches mounted on the clay walls of the earthen cavern. The trio of arachnids fed, each crouched atop a witch, fangs embedded deep. Their black-furred bodies, swollen from the magic they'd already glutted themselves on, were nearly large enough to obscure the witches.

One spider raised his head, all eight eyes focusing on Asim. He lifted a single finger and gestured right, where four more naked witches lay on the dirt floor, paralyzed so they couldn't harm his latest creations. The other two spiders pulled away from drained witches and moved across the floor toward fresh prey.

The witches screamed. Noise didn't matter. The warren, a series of tunnels and caverns excavated deep beneath Port Storm, wouldn't let anything escape — not even a witch's scream. These four were newly caught in his web and about to be siphoned for the first time.

After witnessing the procedure, terror spiked their magic. It brushed over his skin, making his empty sigils ache. The Spider Mage inhaled, their horror so palpable it scented the air and coated his tongue.

Excellent. He hadn't recovered from his experimental project a few days ago and needed all the magic he could get. Pouring so much toxin into the gold witch Dmitri had brought had drained Asim's glyphs to dangerous levels. He lifted a hand and eyed the symbols of white magic gliding over his fingertips. Some of them gnawed at him even now.

Another spider scuttled into the cave, leading Thomaex, who wore a t-shirt and ripped jeans. The acolyte had come to Asim at an older age than the others, late teens rather than as a child, which made him better able to fit in with humans with his brown eyes and blond hair. The white hues from where the magic fed on him weren't obvious yet.

The fourth spider, already huge from prior feedings, hurried to the last witch and sank his fangs into its thigh. Another scream tore through the air.

Revulsion flashed across Thomaex's face and he paled, shifting from foot to foot as he averted his gaze.

The Spider Mage drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair. Thomaex never enjoyed watching the little ones feed, but his reactions had tempered. There may be hope for the boy, but this flaw didn't bode well for him becoming a mage. Fortunately, Asim had other uses for an acolyte still able to blend with humans. "You understand your instructions for tonight?"

Thomaex met Asim's eyes and gave a sharp nod. "Yes, Mage Asim. I'll go to the gallery and see what I can find out about your missing witch."

The acolyte fidgeted. Asim sighed. This would cost magic he couldn't afford, but he held out his hands to the spiders. The arachnids abandoned the witches and came to him. He drew a finger across the fangs of each one and brought drops of poison to his mouth.

Asim shuddered in delight as the pleasant buzz of magic burned down his throat and filled his sigils. "Remove your shirt."

Thomaex swallowed hard. "I —"

Asim stared at Thomaex.

"Yes, Mage Asim." He pulled his t-shirt over his head, turned his back to Asim, and knelt.

Rising from his throne, Asim chose one spider and mentally directed his pet to climb onto Thomaex.

The arachnid swarmed up Thomaex and settled on his back. Two long front legs slid along each arm, two pairs of rear legs locked into place around Thomaex's hips.

Asim summoned glyphs to his palm and set his hand against the spider's body. White magic flared, traveled through the arachnid's claws, and opened bloody slices into Thomaex's body. The minion groaned as the red lines expanded to join and form a spider.

A light push sent two front legs into the cuts, skin stretching over appendages where they moved beneath. Thomaex's body shook as two more legs entered his body. Keeping the pressure gentle, Asim had no desire to hurt his child, he urged the spider to settle deeper.

Taking his time, the Spider Mage coaxed the creature to lie flat against Thomaex's back. White magic flashed again, and Thomaex screamed. When the burst of light faded, the spider resembled a tattoo on Thomaex's body rather than a sentient being.

Asim removed his hand, letting Thomaex pant and fall forward, catching himself on his palms.

Satisfied the spider was safe, Asim walked in front of his acolyte and pressed fingertips to the man's face. Two small white spiders darted onto Thomaex.

He blinked and made a low, agonized sound in his throat as one spider blended in with the white of his eye and a second skittered across his cheek to burrow into his ear.

A part of Asim's mind saw himself looking down at Thomaex, the sounds of ragged breathing, blood rushing filled his head, and anxiety tingled over his skin.

Perfect.

His spider would make sure Thomaex did what he was told.

CHAPTER FOUR



Viktoria stood in the middle of the gallery — a cavernous, windowless, rectangular space illuminated mostly by lighting focused on the combination of her paintings and Ember’s photographs, hung in matched sets, on the light grey walls. Next to each two-foot by three-foot picture Ember had taken was an identically sized painting Viktoria had created of the same image. While Ember’s photography made light the primary attraction, Viktoria’s art emphasized shadows.

Michel, the gallery owner, was going through a ‘bigger is better’ phase and opened the length of the space rather than planning the cozy atmosphere Viktoria and Ember typically had for their showings. Now she knew why he had demanded more of their work. If they’d stayed with their usual ten to fifteen sets, the place would have looked empty.

“Where do you want us to set up, Viktoria?” Nicole, a short woman with a chestnut-colored pixie cut and a warm smile, catered all of their showings. Although with as pregnant as she was now, she looked like she was the one who should be catered to.

Viktoria leaned down to kiss Nicole on both cheeks. “I want to set you up with a chair, darling.”

Nicole smirked and cradled her belly. “The baby isn’t due for another week. Don’t worry. He won’t fall out on one of your patrons.” She waved over a tall, burgundy-haired woman wearing a tank top that showed a sleeve of black tribal tattoos on one arm and an octopus on the other. “This is Leilani. She normally runs a food truck for baked treats, but she’s going to do the heavy lifting for me tonight.”

Viktoria extended her hands to take Leilani’s. “It’s nice to meet you. Thank you for helping with the showing.”

“It’s no problem.” Leilani smiled shyly. “Nicole has been kind enough to let me use her kitchen. This is the least I can do.”

“For tonight, let’s set up all the tables in the middle. There are outlets on the floor if you need to plug something in. Let me know if you need anything else. My partner just arrived.” Viktoria signed off on the finalized invoices, handed them back to Nicole, and left them to their work.

Ember walked in, set a garment bag down, and went from photo to photo to make sure everything was perfect. Of course, everything was. This wasn’t their first show together, or at this gallery. Michel knew what they liked and expected. With the percentage he took of the prices their work commanded, he was happy to

accommodate them. Viktoria smiled. Ember still checked everything every time, like some sort of good luck ritual.

“Ember.” Viktoria held her arms out as her friend approached. Ember’s red hair was in a messy ponytail. That was to be expected, but a tightness around her green eyes, and her skin a shade paler than it should be, suggested she was stressed about something.

Ember accepted the hug. “Viktoria.”

A jolt ran through Viktoria when Ember touched her, and the word ‘*Sorǎ!*’ sang in her mind. It was in Ember’s voice, but the inflection and accent were different. The word itself was familiar and unfamiliar at the same time — somehow she knew it meant sister, but the word also evoked a sense of uneasiness.

Ember stiffened and pulled back. When her gaze met Viktoria’s, her eyes were full of questions, and maybe hope.

Keeping her smile in place, Viktoria gave no indication she’d heard or felt anything. When Ember had called to make sure Viktoria received the final photo for their showing — late — her friend sounded distracted and distraught. Ember was always sure of herself, and never late with her photographs, aware Viktoria needed time to paint. And now Ember could touch her with magic and project thoughts into her head?

As a daughter of Louhi, Goddess of Witchcraft and Death, Viktoria was no stranger to magic, and able to fend for herself, but this was the worst possible time her friend could spring a magic surprise on her. It rarely meant anything good when someone who had no magic before suddenly did.

What had Ember gotten herself mixed up in? Viktoria never had the feeling Ember was even the slightest bit interested in the Other World. If anyone, it would be Ember’s twin, Musette, with her ‘feelings’ who might be drawn to it.

“You look marvelously monochromatic,” Ember said.

“Thank you, darling.” Viktoria spun in a circle to show off the intricate array of strings and the slits in the sides of her dress. “You are looking...” She stopped and peered at her friend. “Horrendously haggard.”

Ember gave her a wan smile. “You always know just the right thing to say to make me feel better.”

“What’s wrong? Where’s Musette?” A twinge of anxiety surged through her. Ember’s sister had never missed an event before, and Viktoria would bet the sudden influx of magic and Ember’s twin’s disappearance were connected.

Her friend’s already pale face turned ashen. “Musette... had an accident. She can’t be here tonight. I may have to leave if there’s a change in her condition.”

An accident? Magic *accidentally* gone awry, maybe? No wonder Ember looked stressed. “Is there anything I can do to help?” Viktoria took Ember’s hands, prepared to feel another jolt, but none came. Just a sense of elation that was Ember, but somehow not Ember at the same time. “I can handle things here tonight if you want to go.”

“No. Musette would want me to have a good time. She’s in excellent hands, but I may have to leave if there’s a change in her condition. It’s a matter of waiting right now, and I could use the distraction.”

They walked the rest of the show together, their tour ending in front of the photo of the sunrise Ember had been late getting to Viktoria.

“Viktoria, you’ve outdone yourself, my friend,” Ember said as she looked at the painting.

The light in the photo had been just right, creating deep, rich shadows for her to work with. Viktoria had to agree, it was one of their best combinations. “Thank you. Now, let’s see what I can do about you. Musette would kill me if I let our guests see you looking like this. What did you bring to wear?”

It was Musette’s job to make Ember presentable, since she cared little about how she looked, but in Musette’s absence, Viktoria would have to take over.

Ember waved a hand at the garment bag she’d draped over a chair.

Scooping up the bag, Viktoria took Ember’s hand and led her into the room Michel always set aside for them — a small space he used for extra storage, but always cleared out for them. A small table held a bottle of wine and several glasses in a triangle of three dangerously overstuffed comfortable chairs. Michel knew to always include Musette.

Her friend stumbled at seeing three of everything, and Viktoria took Ember’s arm. “Strip and put your dress on, including the heels. None of your boots tonight. I need to see your dress before I decide what to do with the rest of you.”

“For the record, this was not my choice. This is all Musette’s fault.” Grumbling about the things Musette made her do, Ember surrendered her t-shirt, jeans and boots to put on a slinky strapless, asymmetrical gown in shades of sapphire blue to black.

Viktoria raised an eyebrow. The soft, velvety material clung to Ember’s body, skirt ghosting across the floor on one side, black at the bottom, rising along a steep hem to end high on Ember’s thigh in a dark blue.

It was nothing like the boring, matronly black dresses Ember normally wore to these events.

“Darling, tell me what’s happened.” Viktoria swept Ember’s flame-colored hair into an updo and started on eye makeup. “There’s a man at the root of all this. I know it.”

Ember smiled. “His name is Stryx. He’s…”

“Let me guess.” Viktoria laughed. “Complicated?”

Ember snorted. “If only it was so simple as complicated. He’s paradoxical and cryptic and bewildering and such an alpha male. I’m *told* he can learn, but he frustrates me to the point I feel like throwing him through a wall. At the same time, he’s the only man I want. But we’re such opposites. How would it ever work?”

Viktoria waved a lipstick, indicating the gallery. “Look around. People pay us obscene amounts of money because we show them opposites go together. Light needs shadow as much as shadow needs light.”

Servers wearing uniforms of black pants, vests and jackets, along with white long-sleeved shirts, brought out platters of food and trays of drinks. One table groaned under its weight of chocolate confections, something Ember always insisted on for Musette, then teased her about when she ate them.

In addition to chocolate cookies, muffins, fudge and pieces of cake, the offerings included slices of apples, oranges, bananas, and strawberries awaiting dipping in fountains of white, milk, or pink chocolate. Bite-sized squares of dark, milk or white candy, arranged in swirls on a silver platter, sat in front of dishes of peanut butter, caramel, butterscotch, and honey. Serving bowls offered miniature scoops of ice cream for sundaes.

Tonight, Ember refused to look at the treats.

Viktoria extended a hand to stop Leilani. A shock, softer than the one she had experienced with Ember, ran through her. She didn't want to stifle this new magic, but neither would she let it use her to spread. Unsure of what Ember had done, or what this new energy was, she caught and sent the majority of the strange magic into shadow, but the barest scrap of it wiggled free and rushed toward Leilani, leaping from Viktoria's fingers.

Leilani jerked away. She and Viktoria scrambled to keep the stack of plates she carried in her arms from crashing to the floor.

Not funny, Viktoria chided the magic.

Soră. The voice wasn't singing this time. It sounded annoyed and had a growl in it.

Viktoria glanced around for Ember, but she was on the far side of the room, speaking with one of their guests about a photograph. *Ember has some explaining to do.*

I'm not Ember. I am Soră.

I already have twelve sisters. Viktoria did not need another one.

I want to have twelve sisters too!

We'll have to talk about this later, Soră.

Soră sighed.

Leilani rubbed at her arm. "I'm so sorry. It must be this cold, dry air and me dragging my feet on the carpet. Can I help you with something?"

Viktoria nodded. "Will you see that some of every kind of chocolate dessert is set aside and saved? I'll take them with me when I leave tonight."

"Of course. I'll do it right now." Leilani set the stack of plates on the table, took one, and piled it high with treats.

As their guests arrived, Viktoria kept an eye on Ember, who was still not acting like herself, and noticed the second she tensed. A man with shoulder-length black hair and dark blue eyes had entered the gallery. Well, that explained the dress. He wore a black suit, offset with a tie the exact shade of Ember's hair.

This must be the paradoxical alpha male Ember wanted to throw through a wall, no doubt. An entourage of three men followed him in and took positions around the room, scanning the crowd. All four were tall and broad-shouldered. The tallest, pale-skinned and white-haired, put his back against a wall. A blond man offered polite smiles and half bows that flustered the ladies. The third, tall, dark and deadly, moved with the same grace as the Amazon — aware and ready. There was something about him...

Before she had time to think about it, Stryx crossed the room and seized Ember's arm in a proprietary grip. She yanked away from him, but Stryx took hold of her elbow again.

"Pardon me, darlings. I must speak with Ember." Viktoria excused herself from the group of their usual monied patrons, sauntered to Ember, and narrowed her eyes at Stryx. She readied her magic, just in case. Ember might be tempted to shove her complicated alpha male into a wall, but Viktoria could shove him where he'd never see the light of day again.

Sorã giggled. *Good, Sorã!*

So this new magic knew Ember's complicated alpha. *When tonight is over, you and I are going to have a long talk.*

Sorã went quiet at that.

Viktoria stopped inches from Ember and Stryx. "Get your hands off her."

Stryx growled, and his eyes darkened from blue to almost black.

Really, Ember, a vampire? Do you have any idea what you've gotten yourself into?

Sorã laughed. *He doesn't know what he got into.*

Stryx acted as though Viktoria wasn't there. "I just need a minute of your time," he said to Ember.

"Then you'll leave?" Ember's tone sounded resigned.

"I would like to stay."

Viktoria stepped closer, forcing Stryx to pay attention to her. "Who is she to you?"

He only hesitated a moment. "She is my queen."

Viktoria laughed. She'd seen this macho behavior with any number of heroes who tried to kidnap her and her sisters. "And who would that make you to her? Let's see, if she's the queen, that would make you the overbearing emperor, I suppose."

Stryx locked eyes with Ember and went to his knees before her. "I am her servant." His voice, already deep, deepened even more, to a tone meant for naughty bedroom promises in the dark.

Every woman within a dozen feet sighed, and Michel, on his way over to them, went dreamy-eyed and diverted his course, fanning himself as he simpered away. Viktoria shook off the magic, but had to admit, the words and actions surprised her. Judging by the startled flush on Ember's face, she hadn't expected that response either, or to have him at her feet.

Viktoria eyed Stryx up and down, trying to decide if he meant it. Deciding he did, she raised an eyebrow at Ember. “Maybe he *can* learn.”

Stryx let Ember pull him to his feet amid applause, and reached for her, but this time, he extended his hand instead of grabbing her arm. “I have something I want to talk to you about.”

Ember glared at him. “Talk to me about or order me around?”

“I think you will be interested in what I have to say, but I want to talk to you alone.” He stepped closer to Ember and lowered his head to her ear. “Please.” He murmured the last word in a cross between a growl and a purr, sending the ladies sighing again.

Ember smirked and slid her hand into Stryx’s. “I didn’t know you knew that word.”

Stryx’s posture relaxed as soon as Ember touched him, the alpha vibes he projected reducing in aggression as he shifted to protective rather than dominant. He drew an unprotesting Ember to him and slid his arm around her waist. “Show me around?”

“Do you need a bodyguard?” Viktoria asked.

Ember smiled. “No. I’ll be all right.”

“I meant him, darling.”

Ember laughed and led her vampire away.

So, there were vampires in Port Storm, and Ember’s new complication was one of them. Feeling someone watching her, Viktoria turned and made her way back to the group of people she’d just left. She ran her gaze over everyone in the room, nodding or giving flirty winks to those she knew, until her eyes came to rest on Tall, Dark, and Deadly lounging against a wall. No one around him seemed to notice he was there, though they kept their distance from him, like a reverse black hole.

But Viktoria noticed him. Mystery Man had a swarthy complexion and piercing black eyes. His black hair was long enough to wear tousled, and either he had the tips of wings jutting up on either side of his neck, not likely for a vampire, or he was armed with two swords on his back. Who came to a gallery showing armed with swords? Most Other Worlders used modern weapons to fit in. This vampire seemed stuck in the past.

That one was dangerous and not because of his swords. Or, not only because of them. Viktoria had a thing for mysterious black-eyed men with swords.

He studied the crowd, appraising each patron and moving on to the next. If Viktoria hadn’t been watching him as closely as he was watching the others, she would have missed the slight widening of eyes and the surprised expression that flitted across his face when his gaze met hers.

Amused at his surprise, Viktoria maintained the staring contest. At least, she did until something else appeared in his eyes — something that looked a lot like interest. That would not do.

Viktoria let herself be diverted by a man who touched her arm. The vampire snarled as she turned to give this new man her full attention. No, that would

not do at all. She would involve herself with Ember's magic if that was a problem, but possessive vampires were not on her to do list.

CHAPTER FIVE



J A E L

Senses hyper-aware, Jael stood with his back to a wall and scanned the crowd, pleased the gallery was open so the three of them could surveil the same space at the same time. Plenty of room to fight if they needed to, although the tables of food in the middle of everything might take a few hits.

Melchior lounged and Zeke circulated, each at ease. Their assessment matched his. No threats. No one watched too carefully. Well, other than him. Hearts beat in excitement and happiness — none too fast in anticipation or too slow in predatory behavior.

Jael couldn't relax. Even the most powerful strygoi, especially the most powerful strygoi, had fallen during the massacre. He'd failed a thousand years ago. No mage would take a witch on Jael's watch again.

He enjoyed teaching mages to fear him. They called him the Scourge because he'd killed thousands of them and their minions, becoming the monster the monsters feared. The last few centuries had been quiet, but with mages showing themselves again, his swords sang with a quiet eagerness to hunt in the back of his mind.

Their song would grow louder, more insistent, turn into a war chant. They often settled for blood, but the only thing that calmed them was mage magic as they sliced glyphs from skin.

Shaking his head to clear bleak thoughts, he took a moment to admire some of the photographs and paintings. Ember's photos of sunrises and sunsets, even with the colors as pale as they were to him at night, evoked something he'd long thought buried. What spoke to him even more than Ember's work was the other artist's. Her paintings were all shades of shadow, something he understood. He'd walked into the shadows over thirty-five hundred years ago and never looked back.

The song in his mind grew by the slightest increment of volume and tempo at the same time his eyes fell on a lone, blond man with a medium build who had entered the gallery. His heart beat a little too fast as his eyes skimmed over the crowd and stopped on Ember.

From his place at Ember's side, Stryx's head snapped up and around, gaze zeroing in on the man, who averted his eyes. Vampires might not have taught Stryx about love, but they'd done an excellent job with the lessons about recognizing a threat. The man wasn't a mage, but one had touched him. Jael's swords hummed a little faster.

He scanned the room again, eyes landing on Ember's partner, the tall woman with the striking platinum hair. Viktoria wore nothing but some strings on the

upper half of her body, and the floor-length skirt did little to hide her legs when she walked, pale, bare skin flashing ankle to thigh.

She must not have a man, because she was unaccompanied and no man in his right mind would let his woman out of the house looking like that. The thought of no man in her life pleased him. If she were his, he would rip those strings right off her and use them to tie her down to something waist high so he could —

Jael ripped his thoughts away from the image of her naked and ready for him. He'd never lived like a monk, but he hadn't had those kinds of thoughts about a woman since just after he'd turned vampire. He was no hormonal teenager. What the fuck was wrong with him?

That one was dangerous. He'd have to be careful around her. Jael had a thing for platinum blondes in bondage.

She laughed at something one woman in her group said, a low, sultry chuckle that seemed to float across the room to him and stroke his cock. His swords changed the tempo of their song to something trilling as he shifted his stance, trying to find some extra room in his now too-tight pants. "Think that's funny, do you?"

He stared at Viktoria, eyes boring into her naked back as he followed the curve of her ass to her hip and up the column of her spine.

The mage-infected minion approached Viktoria, hand extended to touch her.

Jael growled, the low rumbling sound startling him.

Viktoria turned to face him, seeming to sense his gaze on her. She shouldn't be able to do that. The magic in his swords hid him from view.

Their eyes met and held. Something in a soul he'd thought long dead stirred to life.

Pale colors turned vibrant.

A warm vanilla scent filled his lungs.

His heart beat once in his chest.

Oh. Fuck.

Dragă.