

Chapter One

Titania gripped the knob of her closed dressing room door and made one more cursory look before meeting her band onstage. Without warning, an undulating wave of anger and hatred slammed into her, and she staggered backward with a cried squeal of alarm.

Her first terrified thought was someone had discovered her, and she yanked in her mental barriers to block the waves of emotion. She forced air in and out of her lungs. Bowing her head, she let her eyes drift closed as the onslaught continued without mercy. Sparks scattered in front of her vision as she stilled, completely frozen, and fought for control. She concentrated, forming a solid wall between herself and whoever was out there. She knew without a doubt it was a man, close, at the bar by the stage. It took work to be able to breathe normally, keeping the pressure of his emotions at bay.

He had come to kill, she knew that with a certainty that chilled her to the quick. His hatred pulsed, feeling thick around her. There was a tang of insolence in his hatred, a sense of omnipotence. She studied the waves, unraveling them, and found...emptiness. A dark chasm where his soul had once been.

She shuddered with a convulsive shake, ripping her thoughts back to her own mind. Her eyes snapped open, her entire being feeling colder than she'd ever felt in her life. Her arms wrapped around her body, and she rubbed herself in reaction. She took a deep breath, feeling relief blossom inside her when she focused and found herself still ensconced in her dressing room.

She had touched death, and was still living.

She jumped a foot seconds later when a knock echoed through her door. "Tani! Hey, come on. The natives are getting restless."

"Coming," she shouted through the door. She swallowed down the quake that dared to grip her. She pictured the strongest walls, the thickest barriers she could imagine, adding a prayer for strength before she reached for the door again. It was going to be hard to do her show with him in the audience.

Laney, her backup singer, stood right outside when she found the strength to come out of her sanctuary.

"You feel him too, don't you?" Laney asked, taking one look at Titania's taut features, then casting a furtive glance to the darkened stage.

"How could I miss him?" Titania shuddered again. "Cold, so cold." She stood staring at nothing, but feeling everything. Like a cold hand had found her, gripped her and wouldn't release her.

"Hey, if you can't get on the stage, don't make yourself sick over this." Laney looked backward over her shoulder and called out to her husband.

Houston put an arm around Laney immediately, taking in their drawn

faces in a glance. "You two going to be all right?"

"I have to do something about this," Titania told them, feeling the man's intent, knowing she had no other choice.

"You're kidding, right?" Laney's green eyes grew. "You'll pass out trying to fix this. I don't think you can reach this one. Even I can feel him, Titania," she breathed. "Easily."

"I have to try. Someone is going to die tonight. I know it. That's why he's here. I have to try," she repeated, imploring her friends for their support.

Houston passed a hand over his hair, watching Titania. His shoulders tightened in indecision. Both she and Laney were pale and wide-eyed, feeling the absolute desolation of the man in the crowd. Titania could tell even Houston sensed a touch of overflow from the guy lying in wait, and he had nothing but his natural instincts to go on. Houston's watchful gaze kept moving out to the darkened stage then flickering back over the girls with decided concern. That was all the sign she needed to know Houston knew he was out there too.

"All right," he murmured with hesitant approval. "Do your thing. I know you would without our blessing simply because he needs it."

Titania's eyes unfocused as a shiver tore over her frame with little warning. "He's not the only one. Someone else... He just got here. So much hate," she whispered, her voice sounding faraway even to her own ears. Her vision shot up to them, a new chill sliding up her spine. "Whatever happens tonight, you two stay safe."

Laney gripped Titania's arm. "What are you talking about? You've never given us a warning."

"I've never felt this before." Titania's head swiveled in slow motion to the darkened stage. "It's only between them," she said with a small touch of relief. She swung back around, her gaze unrelenting. No matter what her night brought, she'd make sure her friends weren't caught in the middle between the two men who she could feel so easily. "I mean it. When this is over, get everyone out of here. We'll meet at the hotel tomorrow afternoon."

"Is the party here, or onstage?" David, their drummer, joked as he sauntered up to the trio. He caught Titania's expression and stuttered to a stop next to them. "Oh, Lord. How bad is it?"

"It's bad," Houston said. "Two sets, no encores."

"Gotcha." He made a pistol out of his fingers, clicking his tongue at Houston. "Don't worry, Tani. We got your back. We also know you can't help yourself either," he told her in an understanding, brotherly voice.

"Thanks, guys." She took a steadying breath. Her arms fell from her sides, having forgotten they were wrapped around her body. "I'll be fine. There's always someone out there. He's just very angry tonight."

Houston leaned over and kissed her forehead. "And you're an angel in disguise. Just be careful," he warned her, his brown gaze assessing with his warning. She nodded, knowing how far she could push after years of being in the public's eye.

Her smile was weak but heartfelt as the men flanked the women to take their places on the pitch black stage. Justin was already onstage, swinging his guitar onto his shoulder. He nodded once as David spoke to him, climbing onto the dais where his drums were.

Titania took a long, deep breath. She heard Houston start the count and felt herself relax, felt the first chords reach her as his music always could. The welcoming cheer made her smile. Houston was incredible on the guitar, a born talent.

Before she could have second thoughts, she began to sing and did what came naturally, her gift flowing from her in waves, and prayed she could save the one who had been targeted.

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Diego sat astride his motorcycle, taking a deep breath, appraising the night. The damp mist had finally stopped falling, but the air was thick and heavy with moisture. The rush of conversations was easy to hear from where he sat, people anxious to be inside the club he was in front of, to hear the woman who would be singing.

Diego was there because he was positive Brakka was already inside, hunting. Diego shook his head. He was just asking to get his ass kicked. He had come into Diego's territory and stayed. Big mistake.

He silenced the mechanical monster, letting his leg slide easily over the leather. He should have reconsidered the motorcycle, but it suited his mood. Black as midnight with the rumble of a hungry lion. His smile was cold. It fit—perfectly.

Diego approached the microphone wearing doorman who thought to stop him with a strong hand on his chest. He was a good-sized bouncer, but Diego still towered over him. He could have entered completely unseen if he had wished it, but the flux of power would have been noticeable. He preferred to keep Brakka unaware he had tracked him to the bar. "Sir, there's a line. Please, wait like everyone else," he said, sounding bored, assured of his persuasive ability. On anyone else, it probably would have worked.

Diego tilted his head down. "Remove your hand." Menace vibrated in the air, the words spoken low. Stunned brown eyes found pale gray. The hand fell away as if burned.

“Yes, s-sir. V.I.P. I understand.” The bouncer reached for the door. “Enjoy your evening.”

Diego strode through, unconcerned for the slam of humanity inside, having already slaked his rising hungers. People stepped aside, making way for the solid wall of menace walking into their midst. He shook out the length of his leather coat, water spraying outward. A single man spun, then thought better of saying anything when his gaze fell on the source of the indoor rain. He dropped his eyes to the floor as Diego passed, the challenge locked in his throat. Diego’s stride never changed.

He glided through the crowd, making space at the bar to wait, his broad shoulders creating an unfriendly barrier to the world. He watched the people on the crowded dance floor, the throb of music vibrating walls and floor alike. He tuned it down. Diego shook his head when the bartender approached him a moment later. He was not there for a drink. If he was lucky, he would not be there long at all.

Diego searched the dim interior and found the telltale scent. Pungent, earthy, the stench of old blood like a cloud around his prey of the evening as Diego pinpointed his target. His lips lifted cruelly. Diego still had not been discovered. Brakka was too busy wooing a victim. He always had believed himself to be a lady’s man.

Brakka’s arrogance had grown over the centuries, Diego mused with his gaze roving patiently over the crowd. Diego refused to do anything within the club, unwilling to jeopardize the people inside. He had a feeling Brakka was aware of that, probably even naming it a weakness, but Diego did not care. Nothing that Brakka thought about him mattered, not anymore.

For a moment, he allowed himself to remember what it had been like when the two warriors had been friends so long ago. Now there was only a need for vengeance for the one who had stolen his soul and his life. Now, just his name brought the bitter bile of betrayal to Diego’s tongue.

For a man who did not desire food, could not remember the taste of it, the rawness of betrayal was twice as revolting. It was like a hot acid. It ate at him constantly.

Brakka had been his best friend—once. Fists tightened as hatred seethed again. Brakka did this to him. Plunged the knife of bloodlust so deep into Diego’s soul, he would never be free. The only reason he refused to walk into the morning light was because Brakka deserved to die—again. He had only lived this long to pay back the favor, to serve justice cold to the man who had created him, or die trying.

When they had landed in the Americas, Brakka had changed. Diego had witnessed the changes, had been sickened by the way Brakka learned to enjoy

the pain of others, loved to hear their screams for mercy. He never granted it. He grew cruel, violent, sooner killing than giving peace or relief. His behavior sickened Diego to this day because that was not the man he had trained with and fought with for nearly a quarter of a century. Was not the same man he remembered growing up with in the villas of Southern Spain.

Diego still remembered his disbelief when Brakka had offered a tireless arm when a single lash was called for. His stomach rebelled with the memory of the horses that were destroyed because of his friend's heavy hand. He shook his head. No, Brakka was definitely not a friend. He was the one responsible for destroying Diego's life.

This memory was as sharp as a sword blade and just as cold. The night had been dark, cloudy and starless. Bonfires had been set at the perimeters where guards were doing their watches while DeSoto prepared his advances in his quarters. Diego had gone to make a last check with his own men, selected to guard the precious horses they had brought overseas. The local Indians had been close and troublesome. It was the last night Diego would spend ignorant of the evil prowling those jungled lands, the last real night he would live as a human. And as they say, it had all gone downhill from there.

He had been attacked, silently and with a ferociousness that had caught him completely unguarded. Brakka's strength was unbelievable, pinning him to the ground in hardly more than a span of seconds. Diego had demanded to know where Brakka had been, missing for the last two days, when an icy chill had stolen over him.

Sharpened fangs had elongated, filling Diego's vision, silencing his roar of rage in an instant as Brakka had buried those teeth into his jugular, ripping a burning gash to gulp at his blood in a frenzy. He had drunk his fill like a dying man in the Sahara, but he had not killed Diego. He had offered salvation, and Diego had grabbed at it, unaware of the price. Diego had never forgiven him for it, either.

There was no shame in Brakka for what he had done, only an increasing need for violence, to feed and kill. Diego had realized as the night grew deeper, he could not return to camp. His friend had branded him a deserter in seconds. He had weakly stumbled after Brakka into the jungle, to hidden caves, and was appalled at the lifeless, decaying bodies. Women, men, children. The roiling stench of death had overpowered the earthen dampness that radiated through the jungle. Brakka had only sneered when Diego lost everything in his stomach twice.

There was nothing in the least remorseful about Brakka's actions that night. Brakka had been given a gift and a chance to choose one to join the ranks, to prove himself among the Brethren. He had chosen Diego.

Diego had managed to keep his disgust hidden, knowing Brakka had expected gratitude, except the nightmare had grown over the following nights. Brakka had completed the conversion, irrevocably bonding them together, but they were not friends, not anymore, not by a long shot. By the time Diego had realized what had happened, learned the little that Brakka knew with his own recent change, his life was over as he knew it.

Brakka had challenged him, cursed him, demanded things from Diego, but Diego had refused to kill. He would not take an innocent life to feed an appetite that was as abnormal as it was disgusting to his mind. Two nights after his most adamant refusal, Brakka had disappeared. Diego had been on his own, doomed to the life he now lived. Or did not live, he ridiculed himself.

Over the decades that had grown into centuries, Diego had learned to survive, had learned a lot, in fact. He had witnessed fable and fantasy come to life. Great metal airplanes that flew across the sky endlessly with people inside. Carriages to cars, making the stable of prized horseflesh he had once owned, obsolete. The advent of medical science, modern music, technology so small it fit in the end of a pen. The ability to speak in multiple languages across the world without ever leaving home by simply typing on a keyboard to people. The scope of it still amazed him some days.

Today was not one of them.

Loneliness clawed at him unnaturally. It beat at him almost as constantly, as viciously, as the hunger. A heaviness, an unfathomable, bottomless ache proving irrevocably what he was.

He had considered giving up. He was completely alone in a cruel world. He knew if he even tried, the humans he used to stay alive would as soon tear him apart and put him under a microscope than talk to him. His last friend—this time he sneered at the thought—had created him. There had been no love waiting for him in Spain. His family was gone. He had no life, no joy. His only contact with humans was to control them, and as he aged, that had become surprisingly easier. Evidently the powers Brakka had called fledgling at his turning, had grown with his aging. Diego was sure for many, the abilities he had been granted in the beginning would have been reason enough to accept this travesty of a life. *I should have read the small print.*

He knew he was not like the others of the Brethren, as they were collectively called, the few of whom he had met in a high state of caution while training with Brakka. They did not trust him, and he refused to trust others. Most avoided him completely, but that was fine with him. Diego discovered he could not agree with the Brethren's attitude toward their food supply.

It was simple for them; death was easy, just a way to feed. The body, the person meant nothing. The Brethren enjoyed playing with their victims, torturing

them, or inciting fear and chaos with their victims through their deaths.

Diego refused to travel that paved road to true damnation, condemning the soul of an innocent life just so he could live one more night. He also swore to never pass on his own curse. Once it sank in that he could live without killing, he swore he never would, because he refused to ensnare a mind, watch as they offered themselves under his control, and purposely steal a life.

That was true slaughter in his mind, and Diego was not a murderer. That one sin was reserved for Brakka's judgment.

Brakka had misjudged his appetites when he attacked and made his offer. Diego had managed to keep his soul when others had lost it easily and willingly to the hot taste of blood.

The stage before him fell into utter blackness, a thick blanket of nothing, silencing his spiraling thoughts. A cheer erupted as a guitar began to hum from the abyss. Diego located Brakka again, almost absently seeing his engrossed behavior with his evening's conquest. Diego rolled his eyes. What a playboy.

A guitar broke through the crowd's murmur, a riff of sound that brought a roar of greeting from the packed mass on the floor, surrounding the wide stage. The stage was still as dark as the murkiest night when her voice floated out to him.

Her voice wound over his ear, entrapping him in its exotic tone. His gaze snapped from Brakka to shadows that meant nothing to him and found *her*. The woman whose voice rang true, purity unleashed.

On a beat, the lights hit her, and Diego lost his breath. His reaction was beyond intense. It felt like being kicked in the middle so hard, he almost doubled over. Except it was not a physical pain, but so powerful a reaction to her, she literally stole the air from his body. Her arms opened wide, embracing the crowd, the night, her voice flowing, falling, finding, filling every crevice, every ear.

Stunned at his own reactions, he knew his night had changed. He still kept an eye on Brakka. There was no way he would escape, but the woman, she was something else entirely. There was life in her music, in the sound of the song as she lifted it over and through the crowd. She threw her arms wide once more and lifted her voice higher, further. The crowd went crazy, cheering.

He heard half the club sigh when she finished a particularly torchy, heated song, a seductress of passion, gliding slowly across the stage. Her eyes beckoned, her voice entranced. She was magical, was his only thought. There were over a thousand people inside hanging on her every note as proof.

She was a light of constant energy, sharing handshakes with her fans, sharing in their joy, smiling to include each person as if it was a private concert.

His admiration grew at her ability to find the notes, to lift them over the

people, to share her joy, her happiness, her hope and faith with each person. She was putting all of herself into the music. He could feel it, feel her in a way he had never experienced, before or after his dark life had begun.

Diego studied the beauty onstage a little closer. Her voice carried easily between the walls, amplified but not blaring. He watched as wave after wave floated outward from the stage, sifting, drifting over the people.

He followed it with a shocked gaze, amazed at what he was forced to acknowledge in the air that normal eyes would never see. She was not just singing; she was sharing. She was broadcasting emotion from her body to the crowd, uplifting hope, love, faith. A strength he had never felt poured from her as he recognized the glow of the golden notes rising to the ceiling, falling to the crowd.

The songs were not religious, the music was not gospel. Diego had already sought God, trying to be released from his curse. God was not to blame, and he had not been freed either for his prayers, so he had let it go. This woman's music sounded as normal to the ear as any he knew he had heard in recent decades.

It was the woman who was incredible. He dared a delicate mind merge, and caught a sharp breath at the amount of energy she spent to do this show, to share of herself. It was draining on her, but she would never quit. To her, the sharing, the music, was her life. His light touch made his discoveries cursory. She knew her talents set her apart, that she would be in danger if she was ever discovered, yet she refused to let the ignorance of others rule her. She was brave as well as endlessly compassionate.

This woman was different, very different from the majority of humans he encountered. Her mind was complex, with barriers, blocks and numerous links he could not even begin to understand. She was, in short, remarkable for a human woman.

She was also strikingly beautiful, wearing dark jeans and a cream-colored tank top, dressed as casually as the crowd to make herself one with them. She had waist length ebony hair, shining in the stage lights as if it held the very stars of the sky. Something new invaded his blood as he studied her. Suddenly the loneliness he had been battling for so long did not feel so ruthless. *Who is she?* The question echoed repeatedly through his thoughts.

Diego cocked his head, listening, wanting to hear more. He made himself comfortable, crossing his arms over his chest as he propped himself against the bar.

It was only a few minutes later when he felt them both. A warning, like a touch against his skin, and a guttural threat. Brakka was moving through the crowd, having discovered Diego, the trap sprung. It surprised Diego it had taken

Brakka that long to realize he was there, but accepted the discovery as inevitable. Brakka would not have slipped past him regardless. Diego's gaze shot to the stage for a split second and found hers, wide and fearful. Dark blue eyes flashed in the stage lights, and in an instant, he knew it had been her intention to keep this from happening.

He did not know how to tell her the confrontation was unavoidable and had been played out many times in the past. He followed Brakka through the mass and out the doors after one final glimpse of her — watching him.