

## Chapter One

Time. There always seemed to be time. Jackal flitted between dreams. In the surreal world of dreams, time was never an issue.

Until now.

“Who are you?” he murmured, his voice thick. He knew he was asleep, but he was being drawn irrevocably toward *something*.

A raw voice reached out to him. “Help me.”

Jackal frowned. His body felt sluggish. It was hard to move, like forcing his way through quicksand, or thigh-high swamp water, the silt sucking at his feet with each step. He was reaching for *someone*, of that he was sure. He cocked his head, listening. “Where are you?”

“Here. Please. They’re coming.” The male voice replied, plaintively filled with wave upon wave of pain and exhaustion.

He froze, his heart racing. Jackal hadn’t expected a literal answer. He’d never received one before. “Where are you?” he demanded, now getting worried. Anxiety made his words sharp. “What’s your name?”

“Kristof. I can hear you.” The words were dragging, confused. “So tired.”

“Don’t speak.” Jackal intensified his thoughts, forcing himself above the suck of the dream weave. Further disembodied, he floated, coursing through time and space. He’d had plenty of dream excursions, but no one had touched him as intrinsically as this voice. Something dire and desperate waited beyond his reach, needed his help. He knew he had to answer.

Soon, images began to form out of the swirls of his dream. Buildings. Street shapes. Sounds. A world at night.

Cautiously, he landed on a sidewalk. The chill of late night filled the air, hazy stars glinting overhead, as though seen through a thin gauze sheet of clouds. “Kristof?” The sound of his voice was a whisper between his ears. It shook him to his soul that this being was reaching *for* him.

A roar of pain almost threw him completely back into his own body. Staggering where he stood, Jackal shook his head. This was not normal. He could hear them, but never had a dreamer heard *him*, or responded, trying to reach out for him. It was almost as though he were being pulled in this direction by sheer will. Steeling himself to move forward, he let the fading tremors of pain guide him. Kristof couldn’t speak. A sense of connection lurked between Jackal’s soul and this man’s subconscious. It was the most the other man could manage, and for even that, Jackal was sure Kristof was hurting because he had to stay cognizant for the thread to remain.

“Hear me, Kristof. Help me find you.”

Closing his mental doors to everything but that one sensation, that one yearning to connect, he spun slowly, his world shifting and reshaping as he desperately fought to pinpoint the man who had linked to him.

A brick wall drew up, filled his vision. Jackal lifted his hands, and the wall faded. He walked through where it had stood.

The impact of pain and blood was overwhelming, blind-swiping him when he found himself inside the room. Jackal crumpled to a knee, holding himself steady to not fade from the sight in pure escapist reaction.

“Mother Goddess,” he gasped, shaken and fighting to claw above it. Even in his dream state, it was beyond his strengths to ignore and sufficiently block the magnitude of what had happened there.

Throughout his life, Jackal had witnessed many things. Some humane, caring and full of benevolent compassion. He would sink to his knees and willingly soak up the sensations and feelings, others so grotesque and cruel, it would take weeks or months to clear the images and echoes of pain from his thoughts and memories. This was the latter.

His own body, safe in his bed at the hotel, shuddered. He was aware of his physiological and psychological reactions, and both were entrenched in what he’d found.

Blood coated the walls and floor, the metallic rot heavy in the air. The screams and echoes of pain rendered over the recent weeks permeated the air and stone. Within those screams, he knew Kristof’s own voice now mingled. It took several moments before dense agony broke through the bleakness surrounding him, bringing him to the reason he was there. Raising his head, Jackal chilled.

“I found you,” he whispered, but even as he stared at the bloodied, broken body of the man before him hanging from chains, sagging on his knees on the cold concrete floor, he knew in his heart he was already too late. Jackal couldn’t help him from the dream weave.

Standing, he drifted forward. He sank to his knees at the man’s front. “Kristof? Can you hear me?”

A shudder struck the man, and he moaned.

“I can’t touch you. Look at me. Help me.”

Matted hair stuck to a bloodied skull. Jackal thought it might have been a dark brown, but it was hard to tell. He was bare from the waist up, his back and front literally shredded by claw and whip marks. Bruises discolored his ribs and the tremors that rocked his frame terrified him that there was internal damage. Hands hung limp in cast iron cuffs, blood dried in drips from his wrists down his arms where punctures broke his skin, as though he’d been used as a pincushion.

*Vampires?* No, the marks didn’t look right. Who had been doing this to him? “Kristof?” he tried again.

Achingly, so slowly, he lifted his head in front of Jackal. Features unlike any he’d seen in over a century rose up. Pure Spartan blood, fierce, unrelenting, and cut from stone. He licked a split lip, and Jackal almost fell on his ass. “A vampire?” The gleam of the long tooth was impossible to miss in the bloodied mangle of his mouth and face. What did they do to capture a vampire? Why were they doing this to him? Who?

Kristof’s gaze was cold. “Thank you for answering,” he managed, though it was graveled and a near growl. The iced desolation in his dark eyes vanished, a faint thankful warmth taking its place. Something had brought peace to the man before Jackal. “Go, before they discover you.” A shudder encased his frame, and his head fell.

“No, Kristof. Don’t give up. I’ll come for you.” Gods, he wished he could touch, but it was impossible when he was dream walking.

“Daylight—”

“Doesn’t matter. Save your strength.”

Kristof might have heard him. Jackal wasn’t sure. He knew even for being a vampire, he’d been beaten beyond endurance. That was why he’d reached out. He knew he wasn’t going to live. Vampires were stubborn, but they were not invincible.

“Don’t you dare give up now,” Jackal muttered. Straightening, he studied the room the vampire was being held in, then floated upward. Within minutes, he knew the building and how to reach the man beneath his feet.

His eyes snapped open while a sharp suck of air filled his chest. Jackal was awake in his hotel bed, sweat making the sheets stick to him. He’d kicked at least half the covers off his naked frame. He rolled his head to look at the clock. Four fifty-three. It only took a couple seconds to decide who to call for help. Jackal wasn’t a resident of Draven’s Crossing. Traipsing around the old warehouse district would likely see him being shot, and questioned after.

He was reaching for the phone at the same time he snatched his pants off the end of the bed. Dialing by memory, he waited.

“Torger.”

“Hey, I’m in town.”

“Excellent. How—”

“Later. I need your help.” He searched the tumbled covers for his shirt. “I found where they’re holding a vampire.”

“Oh shit! That was fucking fast.”

“I’ll explain it on the drive. Get your ass over here and get me.”

“Done.” The click of the line ended the call.

Ten minutes later, he was waiting outside the hotel when two heavily tinted H3s pulled up. He jumped into the passenger seat of the first one. “You’re up early,” Jackal said, grasping one of the coffees in the front holder.

“I was already going over the day’s bullshit list. What happened?”

He kept his voice even with effort. He’d never connected like this with another person, living or otherwise. His skin tingled, the moments replaying through his mind. The sharpness of the dream, like he’d lived it, made him very edgy. He explained the dream, giving directions as he did so. Then he gave the gruesome news, that he was positive the vampire wasn’t the first to have this happen, and would likely not be the last.

Torger snarled. “This is getting fucking way out of hand.”

“Do you think this is tied to the murders?” Jackal sipped his coffee, keeping his expression flat, his attention tuned to the waking world, daylight not yet a mere hint on the horizon. Another hour, maybe, and Draven’s Crossing would begin hurtling through the day again. Inside was a whole different story. He wanted to scream for him to hurry, impatient claws scraping at him from the inside to *get there now*. The vampire was holding on by a thread. Somehow, he knew Kristof was still alive. Barely. *Wait for me, my friend. I found you. Just wait for me.*

“I don’t know. Fucking ironic you show up and find a vampire your first night here.”

Jackal rubbed stiff fingers into gritty eyes. The images he’d walked into moments before would haunt him for the rest of his life. “Torg, they’ve had him for a while. A vampire only pleads for mercy when he knows he’s going to die and is ready to let go. He reached out to me, like he was looking for me.” *A last touch of humanity.* Jackal was sure Kristof would have as soon taken a bite out of his captor’s heart and spit it back in their face, without bothering to rip it out of their chest first.

People thought vampires were cold, bloodless, heartless creatures. They were wrong. Like any other breed or race, they had their share of corrupt. Most merely wanted to live in peace. Considering they lived as long as they did, it was a wonder they didn’t have more go

insane. Jackal could vouch for the loneliness that was unavoidable in a long-lived being. He sipped the hot drink to hide the tremors of racking emotion. Kristof wasn't one to be feared.

Torger's hands twisted on the steering wheel. "Draven is going to shit a brick when he finds out about this one."

Jackal closed his eyes, resting against the window. "*Kristof? Reach for me.*" A very thin link of energy warmed. "Thank the Gods, he's still alive. He's stopped his physical essence though."

"They do that to conserve energy. You know that."

Jackal nodded. He did, but it didn't keep him from worrying. "Who's behind us?"

Torger's smile was all teeth. He knew it was a werewolf trait. "Armed support."

"I love the way you think."

"I'm not Chief of Police around here for nothing," he scoffed.

Jackal allowed a small smile. "Glad you're on my side, man," he said.

"Mutual. Hey, this the district?"

Jackal closed his eyes. "Yes." Sitting straight, he honed his focus. "West."

"Uh, right?"

He didn't bother to bitch at him. Torger was just *bad* with compass directions. "Yes, right." He concentrated, following the ebb and flow of the singular link he maintained with Kristof. "It was a brown brick, with old red, or muddy brown roof gutters." Jackal waited, though he paced inside with impatience as they crawled through the warehouses. The whole time, he hung on to the thin throb of warmth touching his soul.

"I see it."

Opening his eyes, Jackal spotted the building ahead. "Slow down. Turn down a side street. I don't know what the welcome party is going to look like."

Torger gave him a disgruntled snarl. "Like I'd just knock on the damn front door."

"I don't understand this." The H3 slowed then stopped, its identical twin pulling up behind. He hadn't seen enough to know why they were holding and torturing a vampire, or who was behind it. He understood how Kristof had found him so easily, even less. Jackal found them, not the other way around. Dream walking was usually a one way street for him. The only option he had was to try to help the vampire. It was why Torger had called him in from Washington anyway, though he was sure no one expected him to hit pay dirt less than twelve hours after landing at the airport.

Torger opened his door and five armed men circled them. "What can you tell me?" he asked once they all stood together.

"There's three ways in. The basement has only one doorway. He's being held in an iced storage that isn't powered any longer."

"Okay, you know the drill. I want prisoners, not corpses, got it?" Torger gave his orders. All of his guys nodded. He faced Jackal. "You want to wait here? It might be safer."

"No. I better be there. He's weak, but he might still react."

Torger didn't press. He tapped an earpiece Jackal had missed then motioned. Two of the team jogged around the opposite way and two left for the front. "You're with me then."

He was glad he had backup there. He couldn't abide the use of a gun for himself. He'd never fired one in his entire life, and that was saying something. Torger and his partner, both dressed in black street clothes, slowed as they neared the entrance by which they were going to

invade. With a tap to his watch, his partner nodded. They flanked the door, and Jackal waited behind the werewolf's shoulder.

Torger tried to turn the knob. Suspiciously, it opened without a problem. When the door swung wide, he tapped his ear. His partner shook his head. He flipped his fingers forward and they each crept through the door.

Shots fired at the far side, echoing like cannons.

"Crap. Report," Torger ordered tersely.

Jackal waited.

"Bring the one still breathing. Any others? Fine, stand down and wait. Clint found two humans on that side of the warehouse. One pulled a gun."

"Guards?"

"Most likely," he replied, his step intent, measured.

Jackal felt a sudden, stabbing pain in his chest and clutched at the phantom agony, gasping, weaving on his feet.

"You okay?" Torger grasped an arm.

"They're trying to kill him. Hurry!"

Snarling, he led the charge. It was just as Jackal remembered from the dream walking. Blood everywhere. Chains hanging in pairs from the wall. Pinned to it was the man who had touched Jackal in his sleep. With a spike clear through his chest. The only thing keeping him on his feet was the cruel staff jammed into the wall.

"After him!" Torger's shout jerked Jackal back to the moment. A hidden door was sliding closed.

"Go!" Jackal shoved. "Don't let him get away!"

A hesitant gaze took in Jackal and the lone man on the wall. Jackal knew what he was thinking with the single look. The vampire would die the instant they removed the spike. He'd lost too much blood.

Jackal didn't hear their shouts or the sound of receding running feet. Cautiously, he neared the being on the wall. "Kristof?" There was no answer. Ignoring the blood, he touched the man's chest. It was cool, unmoving. There was no beat of a pulse in his neck. He wasn't breathing, but that was normal for vampires. Their biological systems only worked when they'd taken in blood, their bodies absorbing the strength and renewing. Jackal had little doubt it had been days, if not longer, since he'd been allowed a drop of blood. He palmed the man's face and fed energy into him so he could understand what was coming.

"Listen very carefully, Kristof. I'll only have one chance to do this. The spear has to be removed, and you have to feed. You need to be released before I can remove the spear. I'll regenerate, so don't let that stop you. Do you understand? Do not hesitate. You cannot die."

A flicker, the smallest flame of a candle warmed within Jackal's body, shooting him with relief. With that sign, he didn't wait, quickly encircling one shackle and clutching it within his hand until it cracked under pressure. He managed to catch the slightly taller frame of Kristof on a shoulder when he sagged forward, the motion yanking the spear out of the wall. The vampire didn't make a sound. Jackal palmed the shaft and with a blunt force, shoved the end through the created hole in the man's chest. There was no doubt they were aiming for his heart, and by some god, had missed. A direct hit would have killed him instantly. With methodical stoicism, he plucked the thick, wooden length like a barb from Kristof's back, dropping it to the floor. Moving

as quickly as possible, he grasped and cracked the remaining shackle, then cradling his weight, lowered them both to the ground.

Kristof blanketed him, a cold, unmoving lump of blood and skin. With little thought to the coming pain, Jackal tugged his keys from his pocket and ripped the jagged points across his wrist over the exposed vein. He gritted his teeth, swallowing as tears formed in the corners of his eyes.

“Kristof, take it. I know you can do this.” He held his wrist at the vampire’s mouth, rubbing the welling blood over his lips. “Take what I offer.” The vampire wasn’t dead, but would be in minutes if Kristof didn’t register the blood and drink. His body would simply disintegrate if he didn’t drink to heal. “Don’t give up, damn it!” An urgency raking over him forced him to try harder.

Swiping a finger over the stream of blood, he stuck it in Kristof’s mouth, practically shoving it down his throat in the process. Kristof’s tongue moved. He jerked his finger out of the way and smeared his wrist against his cold lips again, waiting for him to smell the fresh blood. Blood that wasn’t his own.

The bite was lightning fast, the pressure intense as Kristof began to suck blindly on the offering of life. He knew the vampire would likely drain him with the mortal injury. The need for blood would be animalistic, sheer survival. It would hurt, but it wasn’t like Jackal hadn’t died a few times already.

Closing his eyes, he supported his arm for the weaker man, gently running his fingers over his head. As his vision began to blacken, his extremities grew cold. Pulling in his energy before he lost all conscious ability, he turned his focus inward, letting the power of his rebirth begin within. The blaze was small, but once it began, it grew on itself, devouring outward, sending energy and heat erupting upward. The loss of his body heat didn’t even register as the conflagration consumed him.

Holding onto the other man, feeling his weight lessen as his body became a force of energy, Jackal let out a last breath, his lips touching Kristof’s forehead. Then the burst of flame took him under.

## Chapter Two

“God damn it!” Unknown hands flipped Kristof over. He struck out in reflex without opening his eyes. The sound of a crunch and an *oomph* filled his ears. Kristof waited. His body tensed, anticipating.

Then he realized he could attack, and could open his eyes.

And he could move. And he wasn't dead. Sensation reawakened in stages. He was lying on the cold floor, not chained. All the pain he'd been living in for the last two weeks was gone. He knew better than to stand and cheer over the discovery. Something was going on, and he wanted answers.

“Dude, please don't do that again.” A sour grunt reached him from where he'd thrown his adversary. “Fucking wall hurts.” Not touching him, the voice spoke from over him. “Kristof? I'm Torger, Chief of Police for Draven's Crossing.”

His clearing vision rose to the man hovering over him. No, not man. *Werewolf*. A mean looking one. *Wait. The Chief of Police?*

“What happened?” His voice was still thready, raw from weeks of abuse. Though... It felt like he was...healing. *How?*

He licked his lips. The taste of blood was strong. Sweet, exhilarating, and something he couldn't name. Who had given him blood? How had he escaped? He had been nearly dead. Shudders seemed to be the only answers he could gather from his surroundings.

This time a hand was thrust visibly into his vision. Taking it cautiously, he was helped to his feet. All at once, he was able to see the place where they'd held him. Fury scorched him. “Where is he? I will kill him!” He whirled, looking for the bastard who had taken such pleasure in his pain.

“Whoa. We've apprehended two. We need you to make the case. Don't go all avenger on me now.”

Kristof straightened. “You caught them?” It took a few seconds for what he said to sink in. His hand lingered over his chest where the spear had been shoved clear through him, only now there wasn't even a sign of a scratch. None of the abuses he'd suffered remained.

“Let's get out of here and call in the teams to do a once over. I'll need you to answer some questions and make a statement.”

Kristof nodded, hardly listening, his brain trying to grasp that he was free. And healing.

A man entered through the door of the basement. “All clear.”

“Thanks, Clint.”

Clint froze in his tracks, gaping at Kristof. “How? You were...” A moment later, he seemed to catch himself, replacing his shock with a professional blankness.

“Could you call the blood bank and have them send a fresh supply for our guest?”

“Right away.” Clint whirled and left them.

Kristof ran a hand over his head. He was coated in sweat, grime and blood. But he was whole. Kristof almost stumbled, the urge to crumple to his knees overwhelming. “How am I alive?” He remembered the dream walker, the man who'd spoken to him. But he'd been a dream, hadn't he? Except that man had been there, talking to him. But that wasn't possible, was it? It was a blur, his life fading. Ready to let go. *Weak and tired*. The dream walker refused to let him die. The dream walker saved Kristof. It had to be.

Torger adjusted his holster. “A good man had the balls to save you.”

Kristof raised a hand, realized he was shaking. He touched Torger's arm. "The dream walker?" he nodded, though reluctantly, in answer.

With a flat glance at the prison the man's sacrifice had released him from, he told the werewolf, "Anything you need." Seeing them all fry in Hell for eternity would be a small compensation for the last two weeks.

Torger nodded once more, brusquely in answer, then led the way out of the warehouse basement where the torture chamber had been well hidden. For the first time in two weeks, Kristof basked in the warming glow of a sunrise.

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Jackal's lungs drew a breath of sweltering air as though a balloon was being force filled. He shivered, his knees tucked into his body. He held himself tight, arms clasped around his shins. It would all pass, though the reawakening was a major bitch of a ride. He never knew how long it lasted, or when it physically began, just that it *was*, and he couldn't avoid it. Sweat coated his skin while his heart pounded into his ribs like a bird beating to escape a cage.

Gradually, the ache in his lungs subsided and the tight flutters of his chest faded. He stretched his neck and found his head resting on a pillow. Relief made him shudder. An actual bed. How lucky was that?

Jackal swallowed, moving his jaw. The sweat on his skin cooled, chilling him. Muscles popped as he tested his frame's mobility. He moaned quietly as his spine unfurled, the tension of his pose relaxing.

As blood pulsed through his system once more, memories flowed through him. *Kristof. The warehouse.* Sluggishly, it took time to reenergize, not too surprisingly he guessed. It took a lot of energy to invoke his phoenix blood. He wondered how much time it had taken for him to reemerge from the between. The longest was eight months, the shortest, three days. Though he never knew until he actually lived through the 'rebirth' of his line. Slow breaths eased the sparks and tightness out of his nerves and muscles one dragging moment at a time.

He cracked his eyes open, taking in the first glimpse of his surroundings. Sunlight slanted with late day heat through the window blinds. He didn't recognize the room, but that was par. How many times had he had this happen to be miles from where he'd died? He'd lost count. Stretching his length out to lay on his back, he absorbed the sensation of clean cotton against his shoulders. The smooth softness was a balm to his overheated skin and aching frame. After the rebirth, it was almost as good as waking on a cloud. It beat reawakening on a straw pallet, or in one very bad case, the dry rock bed of a river, there was no doubt about that.

More aware, he focused on a folded sheet of paper on the stand next to the bed. It had his name scrawled on it. Frowning and confused, he picked it up.

*"Pull a stunt like that again and I'll leave you to pace in the ether. Let me know when you return. Your secret is safe. Torger."*

Jackal managed a weak grin. Taking in the room, he realized he must be at his friend's house, probably in a spare bedroom. He wondered how he'd managed to redirect his rebirth. Jackal would have to ask him.

Grasping the covers in a hand, he burrowed beneath them and closed his eyes.

He'd ask him after a nap.

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Jackal called Torger when he awoke to tell him he had a houseguest, then promptly made himself at home in the shower. He loved the feeling of cascading warm water. He could lounge under the drenching spray for hours—if the water didn't chill. Gratefully, his friend had brought all his personal belongings from the hotel. Informed he was staying there with him for the duration, he'd gone ahead and unpacked a few things. A room with Torger was infinitely better than a hotel anyway. It gave him the opportunity to harass his best friend.

Now, he stood at the counter barefoot in jeans, rummaging through the kitchen cupboards when the front door swung open and smacked shut. He turned around and faced one of his best friends. "Rough day at the office, honey?"

"Bite me." Torger unhooked his holster. "How are you feeling?"

"Better. Do you have anything sweet?"

"Cookies, I think." He pointed to the pantry. "Try in there." Then he slid the holster over the hook of a chair at the kitchen table.

"Thanks." Jackal opened the door and smiled. "Score." He grabbed the bag and ripped it open, stuffing the chocolate chip goodness into his mouth.

"Chew, swallow, breathe. You animal."

"You, not me," Jackal mumbled, then wiped his mouth of crumbs, licking them off his hand. "How did you do it? Bring me back here?"

Torger shrugged, reaching for a bottle of water out of the fridge. "I asked Ginger to enchant the bed. I had no idea how long it would take, and I didn't want you popping up just anywhere."

Jackal slowed his cookie inhalation. He owed him for that one. His family had been the keeper of the phoenix bloodline for as long...well, at least as long as that phoenix was Jackal. Torger was a good friend on top of it. Really, his closest, best friend.

"Thanks. How long did it take?"

"Ten days today."

He ate his next cookie in measured bites rather than scarfing it like a starving person. Ten days wasn't that bad, considering. "What did I miss?"

Torger leaned against the closed refrigerator door. "Kristof is still here."

Jackal swallowed wrong and coughed. "Does he know?"

Torger shook his head, sipping his water slowly. "No, but he's no one's fool either. He's been a huge help in finding the people who were torturing the paras."

"Humans?" Jackal asked apprehensively.

"Every last one. He has a serious axe to grind, and I can't say I blame him."

Jackal thought in silence. He still remembered Kristof clearly. The dark hair, the near black eyes. Strength would have flowed through the man's body if he hadn't been beaten and drained to the point of death. The body of a warrior, and the spirit to match. All he'd wanted was one last contact before he let the pain take him completely. Jackal's heart thudded at the memory of that morning.

He was aware he shouldn't try to see Kristof again. Shouldn't dare to touch his dreams, but he knew he was going to. It wasn't a law, just an understanding that he not interfere twice. Except the man's face was clear, even beneath the abuse he'd suffered, and Jackal couldn't forget him.

He tugged Torger away from the fridge and found a bottle of water for himself inside. The news that the people responsible for what they'd found were human made Jackal twitch. "Do you think they're responsible for the other murders?"

"No. This group is fanatical."

Jackal huffed a crude sound. "Fanaticism? What? Were they hoping to bleed the paranormal blood out of their victims?"

"No, just tortured them until they couldn't take it anymore then when they finally repented, they killed them." He growled lowly. "Their brand of deliverance."

Jackal shuddered. *That's what they were doing to Kristof.* How the vampire lived as long as he did, he had no idea.

Torger chugged the rest of his water. "I need to get cleaned up and meet with Draven. You going to be okay?"

Jackal waved him off. "Yeah. I need to think anyway." If the murders weren't related to the mess at the warehouse, he still had a job to do.

Torger paused, speaking over his shoulder. "Hey. You did a real good thing for Kristof. It scared the shit out of me, but I'm glad you're back."

Jackal lifted a half smile. He knew how it pained him to share that much. So his response was pure 'poke the werewolf'. "Love you, too."

"Pussy." Torger stomped off.

"Alpha ass," he muttered, grinning.

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Kristof sank into a thickly padded chair and closed his eyes. After another full day of chasing leads and looking at photos of his attackers, he was ready to rest.

Almost instantly, the memory of his dream walker appeared. Something about the man, okay, *everything* about the man, refused to leave him alone. If it were possible, it was like Kristof was being haunted by the man's image, his voice. His appearance and disappearance the morning he'd been released made him...not edgy, maybe anxious. He'd never reacted or felt this way about another being. The scattered images of the morning he'd been found and rescued weren't crystal clear.

There were a few things he did know. The man had gray eyes, gray striated eyes, and he thought he had brown hair. His features weren't sharp though. Kristof guessed it was the way of the dream. He'd been more than half out of his mind with the pain, staying conscious to reach out for him. It wouldn't surprise him if he'd dreamed it all up, except Torger had admitted the man was real, *somehow*.

The only thing he knew without a doubt was he was going to die, should have died within minutes after that asshole who had taken such exquisite pleasure in his pain, skewered him like a stuck pig to the wall. Somehow, the dream man saved him. Was he the one he'd fed from? Where had he gotten enough blood to heal? He rocked his head in argument. No amount of blood would have healed him. Not in his depleted state.

No, it wasn't the blood that had saved him.

His hand absently rose to a point on his chest, the faint echo of that stabbing, burning pain still with him. Because of the second chance he'd been given, Kristof was helping any way he could to find the people responsible for his imprisonment and torture, and that of others.

Vampires could be killed, though it wasn't easy. He'd made fun sport for the men who'd wanted to experiment with their bloodletting techniques.

They'd said they were cleansing the beasts out of their prisoners.

Kristof growled. He'd love to show them what a real beast could do. A vampire at full strength was a deadly opponent. A man trained in the art of war even more so. Kristof was a soldier, a trained killing machine at the worst of times. He'd fought beside kings, with sword and crossbow, then when his life had been turned upside down, he'd learned how to fight with his body and his mind, able to outmaneuver and outthink any opponent who dared challenge him.

Until this one. But even a man at the top could be taken unawares. That was Kristof's only failure.

Michael. He'll never forget the man's name.

Kristof had gone out, though he never hunted in the clubs. This would certainly teach him to stick to that rule. It was more dangerous now than ever before with para-kind no longer living in the shadows, but alongside their human counterparts. The club had been packed, male bodies gyrating to the sound of the music. It hadn't taken long before a trio of cute, young flirts had their eyes on him. *How times have changed.*

Then one had even been brave enough to come up and ask him to dance. He hadn't even thought at the time if they'd suspected he was a vampire. He didn't walk around with his teeth hanging loose and free. He'd thought the club he'd picked was a safe place, but he wasn't that familiar with Draven's Crossing either. Kristof only wanted to blow off some steam, shed some stress. He'd been hitting walls of frustration of late, and couldn't discern the cause. A couple rounds on the dance floor would help that. He frowned through a grumble. Somehow, the cute trio had maneuvered themselves around him, flirting and playing on the dance floor.

He wasn't stupid. He knew what *they* were hunting for, but he might as well have been given the dunce honor of the year for what he allowed to happen.

Soon, the three and he had found their way out into the alley. What happened then went by almost in a blur as one began to kiss him and another began to dig for gold beneath his belt. Maybe a little physical release would help. If they were willing... He could pleasure all three. They looked like the kind.

Kristof pushed them off. "Easy." He offered a smile to soothe any hurt for the temporary rejection. "We have all night." Except he should have been watching the one behind him. The third of the group Kristof thought was the shyest of them.

Even vampires could be fooled.

The thrust against his neck took him by surprise, then they attacked *en masse* like a pack of hyenas on a carcass.

"Shut up, vampire!" the one on his back yelled, stabbing him again with a second syringe. The injection burned, and Kristof's muscles spasmed and tightened in reaction. Snarling, he tried to dislodge them, only to find his body wouldn't respond. It wasn't enough to knock him out—how he'd prayed for that. He was coherent for every sick and twisted thing they did. They wouldn't let him feed. If they'd given him enough blood, he would have healed, and they didn't want that.

Kristof shuddered, healed now, though all too easily able to remember. They'd found several of the group who had been part of Michael's following, including two of the bastards who'd tricked him. Michael and one of the attacking three were still at large. Kristof vowed he

wouldn't leave Draven's Crossing until they were found. Dead or alive, it made little difference to him.

Unclenching the claws he'd unconsciously curled into the arms of the recliner, he forced himself to calm. He had free passage through Draven's Crossing. He could leave when he was ready, though he would stay to see the end of this. He wasn't sure what he would do when it was completed.

He almost wished they'd just let him die. It had been too easy. Maybe he'd been hoping, waiting for the day when it would end, though being caught with his guard down like he had was worse than deplorable. Maybe he was simply exhausted, had lived for too long, much longer than he ever should have. He'd been ready to let go, though he wouldn't give that asshole the satisfaction of doing it while he was there, *for* him, or *because* of him.

He shut his eyes. He should have died. Kristof had no reason to live.