

Chapter 178 Guest Of Honor

Third person

The hotel room where Scarlet had been staying was plenty comfortable. Luxurious, even. A sprawling suite with a spacious bedroom, a well-stocked kitchenette, a cozy sitting room with a big-screen TV, and a large bathroom with both a spa shower and a soaker tub.

But she was about to crawl the walls, out of her mind with boredom. It had been days since she had seen or spoken to anyone.

And Donovan had forbade her from leaving the room on her own. She wasn't tempted to disobey this instruction, knowing how quickly Alexander was apt to find her if she provided any clue as to her whereabouts. And then her vampire comrade had abruptly stopped visiting her, too, with no word about when he would be back next. Or when she would finally be meeting with his boss to discuss the second part of their plan.

At least she had finally gotten some rest and adjusted her internal clock. She'd begun tucking herself into bed after sunrise, waking in the afternoon and spending the evening making herself presentable, just in case nightfall brought her allies and protectors up to her room for an eagerly awaited visit.

Tonight she was fully dressed, her hair styled neatly and her face made up, and pacing the room while gazing out her twelfth-floor window. Finally, the last dregs of a dramatic pink sunset slipped down past the horizon.

And not long after that, a gentle knock sounded on the door.

She walked extra slowly to answer it, not wanting to appear as desperate as she felt. She turned the locks and swung the door open.

It took great effort and discipline to swallow down and hide the fear that struck her at the sight of her guest.

She knew who he was, of course. But she'd never met him before. And though she'd been anxious to do so, there was no getting around the reaction of her wolf, which raised the hair on the back of her neck and elevated her body temperature, instinctively preparing her to run.

"Scarlet," the vampire said smoothly. His voice was deep and velvety. "We meet at last."

"Caius." She felt inclined to bow, and decided to go for it. No harm in showing extra respect to someone as powerful as the ancient vampire who loomed before her. "Please come in," she said, rising to stand and taking a few paces backward to make way.

He stepped into the room slowly, an air of power and dominance rolling off him like icy fog.

Caius was taller than tall, reminding Scarlet of her hated step-son. If anyone was a match for Alexander, she thought, this must be it.

The vampire was dressed in a crisp, expensive suit: gray-black pants and jacket and a red button-down with a tall, stiff collar and the top six or so buttons undone to reveal a glimpse of a smooth, pale chest rippled with muscle and covered with faded blue tattoos.

Yes, he had a formidable stature. But the thing that was truly terrifying about Caius was his face.

It was impossibly angular, with a steep jawline so sharp, it looked like its edge could cut glass. His dark eyes were set deep in his head, hooded by bony, protrusive eyebrow ridges. And from the edges of a wide forehead grew a pair of weathered, bony horns about six inches in length. Only one of the horns was still tipped with a fatally sharp point; the other was damaged, its last half inch or so having been severed. Scarlet knew it had been blunted in the last war by none other than their mutual foe, against whom Caius was known to harbor a vicious personal vendetta since sustaining this injury.

Caius was older than just about any other living creature to walk the earth. He was thousands of years old, from a time before recorded history. It was rumored that he had horns, a feature otherwise unknown to any still extant being in this world, because he was part demon. The story went that his mother was born human, raped and impregnated by an incubus, and then turned vampire while the demon seed still incubated in her womb.

Of course, that didn't really make any sense. But it was as good an explanation as any for something otherwise inexplicable.

After wandering around Scarlet's room for a minute, apparently evaluating her accommodations, Caius turned to face her and stepped close. Close enough that she had to crane her neck back to look up at him.

"I've been wondering something," he said.

"And what's that?"

"Why does it seem like whenever you and I work together, things just never go exactly as planned?"

Scarlet gulped. She knew she shouldn't react petulantly. But she was tired of being given shit for providing the vampires with decent information that they never seemed to be able to take effective action on.

"My husband is out of the way," she said as calmly as she could. "That attack may not have gone perfectly, but he is as good as dead."

Caius frowned, nodding. "Maybe. Maybe."

He went over to the window now and paused there, looking out and upward into the deep dark of night. The moon was a slim crescent tonight, concealed at intervals by a light cloud cover.

"I hope for your sake," he said, swiveling back around to face her again, "that our next effort is more successful. With Alexander, 'as good as dead' will not be good enough."

"All I can do is get you access to him. It's up to you and yours to handle it from there."

Caius pressed his lips together, nodding again, and resumed his slow, predatory pacing around the room.

"I know he hasn't been following the schedule I expected him to. Going any of the places I told you that he would. But I know why now, at least. I saw on the news that his wife finally had her baby, that has to be why he's changed his routine so completely, why he's been holed up in the palace for so long—"

Caius held a large, white palm up in the air. He wanted Scarlet to shut up. She was rambling.

"Why don't we get you some fresh air, my dear? I'm sure you're tired of being cooped up in here. Come. Let's go meet some of my friends. We've got something I'd like to show you."

They entered what Scarlet thought was going to be another bedroom suite, but turned out to be some sort of event room... a grand, high-ceilinged space furnished with a multitude of plush sofas. And populated by dozens of vampires.

Chatter in the room fell quiet when Caius walked in with Scarlet trailing behind him, leaving only the silky sounds of seductive music playing in the air. It was dark in here, lit only by pale moonlight glowing in through the windows and small, flickering pools of candlelight.

"Friends." Caius's voice was somehow still soft and gentle-sounding, even when he projected it to a staggering volume. "Meet our guest of honor."

Scarlet's eyes began adjusting to the dark. She scanned the faces of her new acquaintances and as their mouths broadened into smiles, she noticed that all of them had their fangs out, and many of their pale chins were dripping with crimson.

She looked lower next. And discerned several shapeless lumps on the floor that she understood to be the lifeless bodies of drained werewolves.

These vampires had just been feeding.

No— she heard some faint, pained whimpers and gurgling sounds just under the music.

They were still in the middle of eating.