THE DAY OF THE DEAD

"Karen Chance will enthrall you."
--USA Today Bestselling Author Rebecca York
The Day of the Dead

Karen Chance

Smashwords Edition

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‘I’m looking for my brother,’ the girl repeated, for the third time. Her accent was terrible, New Jersey meets Mexico City, making her difficult to understand, but Tomas doubted that was the problem. The largely male crowd in the small cantina weren’t interested in a gabawith a sob story, even one who was tall and slim, with slanting hazel eyes and long black hair.

Japanese ancestry, Tomas decided, or maybe Korean. There might be some Italian, too, based on the slight wave in her hair and the Roman nose, which was a little too prominent for her slender face. She was arresting, rather than pretty, the kind of woman you’d remember, although her outfit would probably have insured that anyway. He approved of the tight cargo pants and the short leather jacket. But the shotgun she wore on a strap slung over her shoulder and the handgun at her waist took away from the effect.

‘He’s nineteen,’ she continued stubbornly. ‘Black hair, brown eyes, 6 foot 2 – ’

The bartender suddenly snapped to attention, but he wasn’t looking at her. His hand slid under the counter to rest on the shotgun he kept there. Tomas hadn’t seen it, but he’d smelled the old gun oil and faint powder traces as soon as he walked in. But the man who slammed in through the door was merely human.

‘Hijole, Alcazar!’ the bartender shouted, as the room exploded in yells of abuse. ‘What do you mean, bursting in here like that? Do you want to get shot?’

The man shook his head, looking vaguely green under the cantina’s bare bulbs. ‘I thought I heard something behind me,’ he said shakily, joining a few friends at an already overcrowded table. ‘On the way back from the cemetery.’

‘You shouldn’t have been there so late,’ one of his friends reproached, sliding him a drink. ‘Not tonight.’

‘I lost track of time. I was visiting Elia’s grave and – ’

‘¡Aguas! You will do your daughter no good by joining her!’

There was frightened muttering for a moment, and several patrons stopped fingering their weapons to actually draw them. Tomas had the distinct impression that the next time the door opened, whoever stood there was likely to get shot. Tension was running far too high for good sense.

Then the bartender suddenly let out a laugh, and slid another round onto the men’s table. ‘I wouldn’t worry,’ he
said heartily. ‘From what I hear, even your Consuela doesn’t want you. Why would the monsters?’

The room erupted into relieved laughter as the man, his fright forgotten, stood up to angrily defend his manhood. ‘She ran off with some wealthy bastard,’ he said, shooting Tomas an evil look.

Tomas calmly sipped mescal and didn’t respond. But he wished for about the hundredth time that he’d given a little more thought to blending in. His reflection in the chipped mirror behind the bar, while not Anglo, stood out as much as the girl’s.

The high cheekbones and straight black hair of his Incan mother had mixed with the golden skin and European features of his Spanish father, resulting in a combination that many people seemed to find attractive. He’d always found it an inconvenient reminder of the domination of one half of his ancestry by the other. The conquest of a continent written on his face.

He couldn’t honestly blame the locals for mistaking him for a wealthy city dweller, despite the fact that he’d been born into a village even poorer than this one and was currently completely broke. He’d picked up his outfit, a dark blue suit and pale grey tie, at an airport shop at JFK. He’d needed a disguise, and the suit, along with a leather briefcase and a quick session with a pocket knife in front of a men’s room mirror, had changed him from a laid-back college student with a ponytail to a thirty-something businessman in a hurry.

He’d eluded his pursuers, but with no money he’d been forced to use a highly illegal suggestion on the clerk. Since then, he’d lost track of how many times he’d done something similar, using his abilities to fog the minds of airline employees, customs agents and the taxi driver who had conveyed him a hundred miles to this tiny village clinging to the side of a mountain.

Every incident had been a serious infraction of the law, but what did that matter? If any of his kind caught up with him, he was dead anyway. He just wished he’d thought to find something else to wear after landing in Guadalajara. There weren’t a lot of locals in $1200 suits.

Tomas couldn’t see the outfit that helped him stand out like a sore thumb, because an altar to the souls of the dead had been placed in front of the mirror. Hand carved wooden skeletons in a variety of poses sat haphazardly on the multi-tiered edifice, each representing one of the bartender’s family members who was gone but not forgotten. One hairless skull seemed to grin at him, its tiny hand wrapped around an even tinier bottle of Dos Equis – presumably the man’s favourite drink. A regular-sized bottle stood nearby, a special treat for the spirit that would come to visit this night. It was El Dia de la Muertos, the Day of the Dead.

A particularly fitting time, Tomas thought, for a vampire to return home.

At least resentment of the city slicker gave the men something to talk about other than their fear. They didn’t relax, being too busy shooting suspicious glances his way, but most of them let go of their weapons. Which is why everyone jumped when a shot exploded against the cracked plaster ceiling.

It was the girl, standing in the middle of the cantina, gun in hand, ignoring the dozen barrels suddenly focused on her head. ‘My. Brother,’ she repeated, pointing the gun at the bartender, who had lost his forced joviality. ‘Where is he?’

‘Put your weapon down, senorita. You have no enemies here,’ he said, eyeing her with understandable concern. ‘And I told you already. No one has seen him.’

‘His car is parked by the cemetery. The rental papers have his name on them. And the front seat has his handprint – in blood.’

She threw the papers on the bar, but neither they nor her speech seemed to impress the bartender. ‘Perhaps, but as I told you, this is a small town. If he had been here, someone would know.’

The glasses on the shelf behind him suddenly exploded, one by one, like a line of firecrackers. The gun remained in the girl’s hand, but she hadn’t used it. Tomas slowly set his drink back down.
‘Someone here does know. And that someone had better tell me. Now.’ Her eyes took in the bar, where most of
the men’s weapons were still pointed at her. That fact didn’t seem to worry her nearly as much as it should have.

‘I saw a stranger.’ The voice piped up from a table near the door, and a short, stocky man, dressed in the local
farmer’s uniform of faded jeans, cotton work shirt and straw hat, stood up. ‘He was taking photographs of the
ceremony, out by the graves.’

‘He’s a reporter,’ the girl agreed. ‘He was doing a story on...something...but said he’d meet me here.’

‘I told him to go away,’ the man said. ‘This is a day for the dead and their families. We didn’t want him there.’

‘But he didn’t leave. His car is still there!’

The man shrugged and sat back down. ‘He said he was going to photograph the church, and I saw him walking
towards town. That’s all I know.’

‘The church is the white building I saw driving in?’

‘Yes.’ The bartender spoke before the man could. ‘I can show you, if you like.’ He motioned for the boy who’d
been running in and out all night from the back, clearing off tables and wiping down the bar. ‘Paolo can take over
for me here.’

‘You’re going out?’

‘But it’s almost dark!’

‘Are you mad?’

The voices spoke up from all directions, but the bartender shrugged them off. He brought out the shotgun and
patted it fondly. ‘Ocho ochenta. It’s only a short way. And no one should go anywhere alone tonight.’

The murmuring didn’t die down, but no one attempted to stop him. Tomas watched them leave, the bartender
solicitously opening the door for the girl. His broad smile never wavered, and something about it made Tomas’s
instincts itch. He gave them a couple of minutes, then slid off his stool and followed.

There was little light, with the sky already dark overhead, the last orange-red rays of the sun boiling away to
the west. But his eyes worked better in the dark. And in any case, he could have found his way blindfolded.

The village looked much the same as it had for the last three millennia. Many of its people could trace their
ancestry back to the days when the Mayan Empire sent tax collectors here, to reap the benefits of the same plots
these farmers still worked. The 500- year-old village where he’d grown up in what was now Peru seemed a young
upstart by comparison. It was gone now, bulldozed to make way for a housing development on the rapidly
expanding outskirts of Cuzco. But although he hadn’t been back here in almost a century, nothing seemed to have
changed.

A trail of bright yellow petals led the way to a small church with crumbling stone steps overlooking the jungle
that floated like green clouds against the mountains of the Oaxaca. The church was still draped with the flor de
muertos, garlands of marigolds, from the morning service. He went in to find the same old wooden crucifix on the
altar, surrounded by flickering votive candles and facing rows of empty pews. He edged around it and paused by the
back door, where the sweet, pungent smell of incense mingled with the damp, musty odor of the jungle. Beyond it,
out in the twilight, he caught a whiff of the girl’s perfume.

The church faced the red earth of town’s only street. Behind it, the jungle washed up almost to the steps,
except for the area where a small cemetery spilled down the hillside. It had never been moved despite each summer
storm threatening to wash the bodies out of their shallow graves and into the valley below.

Tomas picked his way down a marigold-strewn path to the cemetery gate, pausing beside a statue of La Calaca.
The skeleton lady was holding a placard with her usual warning: ‘Today me, tomorrow you.’ In many such villages,
families stayed all night at the graves of their dead, waiting to welcome the spirits that returned to partake of their offerings. But not in this one. Only four people stood among the flower decked crosses and scattered graves, and only two of them were alive.

There was little light left, other than a few burning votives here and there, shining among the graves. But Tomas didn’t need it to recognize the new additions. The wind was blowing towards him and it carried their scents clearly: Rico and Miguel, two thugs in the employ of the monster he’d travelled a thousand miles to kill.

‘I saw her. She shattered them with some kind of spell.’ The bartender was talking, while Rico held onto the girl.

‘Why carry all this?’ Miguel held one of the girl’s guns negligently in one hand, with the rest tucked into his belt. ‘If she’s so powerful?’

‘I’m telling you, she’s some kind of witch,’ the bartender said stubbornly. ‘That mage I sent you this morning was her brother. She came looking for him.’

‘Where did you take him?’ The girl demanded, her voice full of cold, brittle anger.

Everyone ignored her. ‘Her aura feels strange,’ Miguel said, running a hand an inch or so above her body. ‘Not human, but not exactly mage, either.’

‘What are you girl?’ Rico demanded, his breath in her face. She didn’t flinch, despite the fact that she had to be able to see his fangs at that range. If she hadn’t known what the villagers feared before, she certainly did now.

‘Tell me what you’ve done with my brother or I’ll show you.’ She sounded no more concerned about her predicament than she had at the bar. Tomas couldn’t tell if that was bravado or stupidity, but he was leaning toward the latter. Her heart rate had barely sped up, despite the obvious danger.

‘What about me?’ the bartender demanded. ‘You said if I brought you the mage, I was safe. I want my nephew’s safety in exchange for this one.’

‘That will depend,’ Rico said, jerking her close, ‘on what she can do. You had better hope one of them is what the master wants, or we’ll be taking out the price for our inconvenience in your blood.’

Tomas didn’t move, didn’t breathe, a lifetime’s habit keeping him so still that a small bird lit on a tree branch right in front of his face. But inside, he was reeling. It wasn’t the cavalier kidnapping that surprised him. The men’s master, a vampire named Alejandro, had been organizing hunts on the Day of the Dead for as long as Tomas had known him.

While families across Mexico were busily collecting delicacies for the dead – chocolate for mole, fresh eggs for the pan de muerto, cigarettes and mescal – Alejandro was collecting treats of his own. Strong, smart, cunning – they’d all had some advantage that made them attractive prey. Assembled together, they were always told the same thing: last until morning or escape beyond the borders of Alejandro’s lands and win your freedom. They were given flashlights, weapons and maps showing the extent of the ten mile square area he claimed. Then, at midnight, they were released.

No one ever lived to see dawn.

The participants had changed over the years, from Aztecs to conquistadors to local farmers sprinkled with the occasional American tourist. But one group Alejandro had always left strictly alone were magic users. He liked a challenge, but not prey capable of bringing down the wrath of the Silver Circle, the guardian body of the magical community, on his head. He was twisted, cruel and sadistic, but he wasn’t crazy. At least, he hadn’t been before. It seemed that some things had changed around here, after all.

‘I told you to let go of me.’

The girl’s heart rate had finally sped up, but Tomas didn’t think it was from fear. Her complexion was flushed
and her eyes were bright, but she wasn’t trembling, wasn’t panicking. And there was something wrong about that. Because even if she was a witch, at three to one odds, with two of the three being master vampires, most magic users would be more than a little intimidated. His estimate of her intelligence took another dive, just as what felt like a silent thunderclap exploded in the air all around him.

A shockwave ran through the ground, shivering through his body like a jolt to his funny bone. It shook the surrounding trees and caused the dusty soil to rise up like steam. The little bird took off in a startled flutter of wings and Tomas made a grab for the limb it had been sitting on, catching hold just as the ground beneath his feet began to buck and slide. Within seconds the slide became a torrent of red earth heading for the side of the mountain – and a drop of more than a mile.

The bartender lost his footing and went down, hitting his head against the side of a massive oak. It must have knocked him out, because the last Tomas saw of him was his body tumbling over the cliff, still limp as a ragdoll. The two vampires jumped for the trees on the opposite side of the path, out of the main rush of earth. They made it, but the girl wasn’t so lucky. She fell into the crashing stream of rocks, foliage and dirt, her scream lost in the roar of half a mountainside sluicing away.

Tomas hadn’t wanted to get close enough for the vampires to scent him, but it meant that she was too far away for him to grab. She managed to catch hold of a tree stump in the middle of the sliding mass, but she was getting pounded by a hail of debris. Tomas tried to tell himself that she could hold on, that he didn’t have to risk being seen by Alejandro’s men on a dangerous rescue attempt. He didn’t mind the thought of dying so much – considering what he was about to face, that was pretty much inevitable – but he was damned if he wasn’t going to take Alejandro with him.

Then the church bell began to chime, its plaintive call cutting through the sound of the earthquake, reverberating across the valley only to be thrown back by the nearby hills. Tomas glanced behind him to see the back end of the old building hanging precariously over nothing at all, its foundation half gone in the landslide. With a shudder and a crack, the church broke in half, the heavy stones of its colonial-era construction beginning to crumble. Some of them were ancient, having been looted by the builders from nearby Mayan ruins, and weighed hundreds of pounds apiece. Even if the girl managed to hold on to her precarious perch, they would sweep her over the mountainside or break her into pieces where she lay.

Bile rolled up thick in his throat. Alejandro had wanted to make a monster of him, a carbon copy of himself. But he’d probably be pleased enough at the thought that he’d turned Tomas into someone who would stand by and watch an innocent die because saving her might cost him something. He might never live to kill that creature, but he wouldn’t give him that satisfaction.

Tomas let go of the limb and leapt for the one spot of color in the darkness, the girl’s pale face, using her as a beacon to guide him through the hail of falling debris. He reached her just before the first of the ancient stones did, grabbed her around the waist and leapt for the side of the path that remained half stable. It was the one where his old associates were trying to scramble to steadier ground, but at the moment, that seemed a minor issue.

Despite senses that made the falling hillside look as if it was doing so in slow motion, he couldn’t dodge everything. He twisted to avoid a stone taller than him, and slammed into a smaller one he hadn’t even seen. He heard his left knee break, but all he felt was a curious popping sensation, no real pain – not yet – and then they were landing on a surface that wasn’t falling but was far from steady.

Tomas rolled and got up on his good knee in time to block a savage kick from Miguel. He’d hoped that, in the confusion and danger, his old comrades might not have recognized him, but no such luck. Miguel hit a nearby tree hard, but flipped back onto his feet almost immediately and was back before Tomas could regain his stance.

Powerful hands choked him, setting spots dancing in front of his eyes as he grabbed his assailant’s arms, trying to keep his throat uncrushed. He pushed Miguel’s arm the wrong way back until he heard the elbow crack. The vamp didn’t let go, but his hold weakened enough for Tomas to twist and get an arm into his stomach, using all his strength to send him staggering into the path of the falling church. One of the tumbling pews caught Miguel on the side of his head, knocking him back against the newly created embankment, where the heavy wooden cross from the altar pinned him with the force of a sledgehammer.
It wasn’t quite a stake, but it seemed to do the trick, Tomas thought dazedly, right before something long and sharp slammed into his side. ‘So the traitor has come back at last,’ Rico hissed in his ear, twisting a shard of wood so that it scraped along his ribs, sending stabs of hot pain all up and down his midsection. ‘Allow me to be the first to welcome you home.’

Tomas jerked away before the sliver could reach his heart, but his knee wouldn’t support him and he stumbled. He felt the hillside disintegrate under his foot, then he was falling, tumbling halfway down the side of the embankment. He grasped the top of a coffin, one of many now sticking out of the newly churned earth, and the lid popped open just in time to intercept another slice from Rico’s stake. A pale, silverfish-grey arm flopped out of the tilted casket, and Tomas sent its owner a silent apology before breaking off the limb to use as a makeshift weapon.

He spun to see Rico a few feet away, his hand raised as if to strike. Only the blow never fell. Rico jerked once, twice, then he dropped, falling along with the last of the debris into the valley below. For a moment, Tomas didn’t understand what had happened. Then a cascade of spent shotgun shells tumbled down the embankment, rattling against the coffin lid like bones, and he looked up to see a pair of slanting hazel eyes staring down at him.

‘Are you all right?’ The girl’s blood was dripping onto his face, a soft wet plucking like a light rain.

‘I should be asking you that,’ he said, struggling to get back over the edge with only one good leg.

He felt it when his skin absorbed her blood, soaking it up like water on parched earth, using it to begin repairs on the damage he’d suffered. But it wasn’t enough to do much good. What he needed was a true feeding, something he hadn’t taken time for recently. It had cost him in the fight; he couldn’t afford to let it lessen his already slim chances against Alejandro.

He paused by Miguel’s impaled body, still full of the blood he’d recently stolen, some of it already pooling in his eye sockets. The sight worked on Tomas the way the smell of a feast would on a starving human. His mouth began to water and his fangs to lengthen without any conscious command from him. He would have delayed it, would have gotten rid of the girl first, but he couldn’t risk having the blood coagulate and lose the energy it contained.

‘I have to feed,’ he said simply.

Instead of recoiling as he’d expected, she merely took in his injuries with an experienced eye. ‘Yeah. Heroics have a way of coming back and biting you in the ass. But when you’re done, we need to talk.’

He nodded and hunched over Miguel so at least she wouldn’t have to watch. Tomas couldn’t remember the last time he’d fed from another vampire, but he quickly recalled why it wasn’t a common practice. The reused blood nourished him, the lightheaded rush of feeding giving the same almost narcotic high as always, but the taste was like metal in his mouth.

He forced himself to finish, trying to concentrate on the feel of his cracked ribs re-knitting, on the tear in his side mending and on the grating sensation in his knee slowly fading. The healing of wounds, especially if done so quickly, was excruciating and this was no exception. Tears had leaked out of the corners of his eyes by the time he was finished, forced out by the pain, but Tomas didn’t mind. Pain was good. Pain meant he was still alive.

‘I hate it when that happens.’

Tomas looked up to find the girl scowling around at the cemetery. Or what was left of it. A huge swath had been carved out of the middle, where nothing but slick red earth remained. On either side, coffins stuck out of the ground like bony fingers, with a few marigold crosses scattered here and there haphazardly.

Up above, on the crest of the hill, the remaining half of the church swayed dangerously on its ancient foundations. One last pew teetered precariously on the edge of the abyss, half in and half out of the structure. Inside the church, a single candle still burned.

‘You handle yourself pretty well in a fight,’ she continued, as Tomas rose from Miguel’s exsanguinated corpse.
‘I’ve had some practice.’

She gave a sputtering laugh, short and mocking. ‘Yeah. I bet.’

Tomas pulled himself over the edge and examined her. Amazingly, she seemed to be all right. There was a shallow cut on her forehead and few scrapes and scratches here and there, but nothing serious. It was little short of miraculous.

‘We need to talk, but we ought to get out of here,’ she said, slinging her shotgun over her back again. He’d heard her reloading while he fed. ‘Half the village is likely to be here any minute.’

Tomas sat down on the edge of a stone bearing weathered Mayan hieroglyphs. ‘I doubt it,’ he said wryly.

She studied him silently for a moment, then plopped down alongside. ‘Want to fill me in?’

‘This is the Day of the Dead. And in this area, that term has always had more than one meaning.’ He spent a few minutes sketching out for her Alejandro’s idea of a good time, making it as clinical and unemotional as he could. It didn’t seem to help.

‘Let me get this straight. That son of a bitch has taken my brother to use in his stupid games?’

‘Possibly,’ Tomas agreed. ‘Although I can’t understand it. He never took magic users before.’

‘Maybe he got bored. Wanted more of a challenge.’

‘Does a cat get tired of playing with lizards or mice, and attack the neighborhood dog instead? Preying on weaker creatures is Alejandro’s nature. But if your brother is a mage, he wouldn’t fall into that category.’

‘His type of magic isn’t likely to help him much,’ she said curtly.

‘I don’t understand.’

‘You don’t need to.’ She stood up. ‘Just tell me where I can find this guy.’

Tomas shook his head. ‘I can’t do that.’

‘Why not? Based on how his vamps treated you, I got the impression you weren’t all that close.’

He smiled at the understatement. ‘We aren’t. But helping you commit suicide won’t aid your brother.’

‘Tell me where to find this Alejandro, and the only one dying will be him.’

Tomas got slowly to his feet, gingerly putting his weight on the injured knee. It held. ‘For what it’s worth, I’ve come to kill him. If I succeed, it may cause enough chaos to allow your brother to escape. Wish me luck.’

He started to go, but a hand on his arm stopped him. ‘I’ll do better than that. I’ll go with you.’

‘I told you – that would not be wise.’

‘Really? And you think you’d have survived just now without me? It sounds like you going alone isn’t so wise, either.’

Tomas turned to face her, already exasperated. He had enough on his plate tonight. He didn’t need this. ‘You may be good with a gun, but that won’t keep you alive. Alejandro was once my master. I know what he’s capable of.’

‘Uh huh. And can he break off half a mountain because he loses his temper?’

Tomas regarded her narrowly. ‘You’re saying that was you?’
‘That’s what I’m saying. I’m a jinx.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

Jinx. J.I.N.X. A walking disaster area. Fault lines love me. Of course, so does just about anything else that can go wrong.’

‘An inconvenient talent.’

‘And an illegal one. If the magical community ever finds out a jinx as powerful as me is walking around, they’ll kill me. Which is why I got really good at protecting myself – and other people – a long time ago. This vampire has bought himself more trouble than he knows.’

‘Bringing down a mountainside won’t help your brother. If he’s where I think he is, it would only bury him as well.’

‘I can control it. And this isn’t exactly my first time at the rodeo. I can take care of myself.’

Tomas hesitated, instinct warring with dawning hope. ‘I tried to draw someone else into this recently, and almost got her killed,’ he finally admitted. ‘I swore that I’d never do that again. This is my fight – ’

‘It was your fight. Once that bastard took Jason, he made it mine.’ When Tomas just stared at her, trying to think of some way to get rid of her that did not involve actual violence, the ground grumbled beneath him. The precariously perched pew gave up the struggle and slid down the hillside, only to go sailing off into the void like a huge wooden bird.  ‘Look, I’m not asking you, I’m telling you. You think you’ve got troubles now? Try leaving me behind. My brother is all I’ve got, and he is not dying tonight.’

‘It will not be easy,’ he said, wondering how to even begin to explain what they were up against.

The girl snorted. ‘Yeah. I kind of got that.’ She held out her hand. ‘Sarah Lee. And no, I don’t cook.’

‘Tomas.’

‘Well Tomas. We gonna stand here exchanging pleasantries all night, or go kill a vampire?’ Tomas didn’t say anything, but he slowly took her hand. She grinned. ‘Well, all right then.’

* * * * *

‘Jason is a reporter for the Oracle,’ Sarah said, as Tomas hotwired her brother’s rental car. Hers had been parked in the part of the cemetery that hadn’t survived and was currently exploring the bottom of the valley. ‘We were supposed to meet up in Puerto Vallarta for a vacation, but when I got to the hotel, he’d already left. All I found was a note telling me he’d got a lead on a story and asking me to meet him here.’

‘If Alejandro has started kidnapping magic users, it would be front-page news,’ Tomas agreed, as the engine on the old subcompact finally turned over. ‘Or your brother could have found out about one of his other businesses. He controls everything from magical narcotics to weapon sales in much of Central and South America.’

‘I know. I’ve dealt with his people before.’ At Tomas’s sideways look, she shrugged. ‘I can’t buy weapons from legitimate sources, not in the quantities I need. The authorities monitor that kind of stuff.’

‘Why would you need huge quantities of magical weaponry?’

‘Why do you want to kill your old master?’ she countered. ‘I didn’t even think that was possible.’
They bounced out onto the main road through the village, with only the weak light of a quarter moon to see by. ‘It wouldn’t be, if he were still my master. I challenged him to combat, but he wouldn’t face me. He brought in a champion, a French dueling master, instead. But rather than kill me as Alejandro had wanted, after Louis-Cesare defeated me, he claimed me as his slave. I only recently escaped.’

‘And came straight back here.’

‘Yes.’

‘That’s very…heroic.’

Tomas didn’t think it qualified as heroism if he had nothing left to lose. But he didn’t say so. Her tone made it clear that the word she’d really been searching for was ‘stupid’.

‘Alejandro killed the entire population of my village. There isn’t anyone else.’ If the dead were ever to be avenged, it was up to him to do it. And after four hundred years, they’d waited long enough.

‘So you came back alone.’ She shook her head. ‘People like you are bad for business.’

‘You’re a mercenary.’ Tomas supposed he should have figured it out before.

‘We prefer the term ‘outside contractor’.’

‘I couldn’t afford to hire a team,’ Tomas said, turning onto the pitted road leading into the mountains. ‘And you also came here alone.’

A dark shape suddenly loomed in front of them, forcing Tomas to squeal tires and practically stand the car on end to avoid hitting it. The shape resolved itself into a tall, gaunt man, with the brilliant eyes of a fanatic set deep in the hollows of his craggy face. ‘Not so much,’ Sarah said, climbing out of the car. ‘Boys, glad you could make it.’

‘Looks like we already missed some of the fun,’ another man commented, stepping out of the jungle that hedged the road on each side.

Tomas stared hard at the new arrival. He hadn’t heard him approach, and that was unacceptable. Unless he was a mage using magic to mask his breath, the sound of his heart beating, his footfalls – all would have alerted Tomas to his presence.

But he didn’t look like a mage. He had a jagged, ugly scar on his right cheek, as if someone had dragged a fork with sharpened tines over his skin. It was the sort of thing that could be fixed by magical healers or covered by a glamourie. Unless, of course, its owner preferred to look like an extra from a horror flick.

‘Meet my knife and gun club,’ Sarah said, slapping the man on the back. ‘At least the ones close enough to get here in time for the festivities.’

The men didn’t greet him, and nobody offered any names, but they also didn’t demand to know what Sarah was doing with some strange vampire. Of course, she didn’t give them much of a chance, launching directly into an explanation of the problem. If Tomas had had a doubt about their profession, it would have been quieted by their reaction to the news that they were about to raid a vampire stronghold.

‘Can I keep the bones?’ the fanatic hissed, speaking for the first time. ‘They’re useful in some spells.’

‘Knock yourself out,’ Sarah said, shrugging. ‘But no collecting until we have Jason, understood?’

The man gave a quick nod that reminded Tomas of a lizard or some other kind of reptile. It wasn’t a human movement. The other man didn’t say anything at all, just switched out a couple of the weapons in the collection draped over his body for several others he drew from a pack on his back. Then everybody got in the car.

Tomas pulled off the road a few miles to the north, where a burbling stream snaked its way through the dense
jungle. ‘We walk from here,’ he said, pushing the car off the road in case any of Alejandro’s men were out a little early.

‘I don’t see a house,’ Sarah had pulled night-vision goggles out of her associate’s pack, and was staring around.

‘There isn’t one. Alejandro lives underground.’

‘Come again?’

‘There are some Mayan ruins near here, with a maze of underground passages beneath them. He’s lived there for centuries.’

‘Great.’ She sounded less than enthused.

‘What is it?’

‘Nothing. What about guards?’

‘ Normally, the entrances are all watched. That’s why I picked tonight to return. They will be open for the hunt, as the prisoners’ first challenge is to find their way out of the maze. Many never do.’

‘We need to reach them before they’re released, then. Otherwise, they’ll be scattered in the tunnels, in the jungle – we’ll never find them all.’

‘I thought the plan was to rescue your brother.’

‘Yeah. Like I’m going to leave you and the rest to be prey to that thing.’

Tomas glanced at her, but it was difficult to see much of an expression behind the absurd goggles. She’d sounded sincere enough, though. And he couldn’t let her go in thinking that way.

‘I know where they used to keep the prisoners. We’ll go there first. And if we’re lucky enough to locate your brother alive, you need to take him and go.’

‘I don’t abandon a colleague in the middle of a mission. We go in together, we leave together. That’s how it works.’

‘Not if you want to stay alive!’ Tomas grasped her arm. ‘I have the best chance of reaching Alejandro alone. If you stay to help me, both you and your brother will die. Not to mention that you will almost certainly cause me to fail at my task.’

She stopped, looking from the hand on her arm to his face. He released her, but the steady stare didn’t change. ‘If you don’t want my help, why are you taking me along?’ she demanded.

‘Because you wouldn’t find your brother alone. Not in time.’

‘And why would you care about that? You don’t even know him.’

‘I might not know your brother, but I’ve known plenty of others.’ A thousand faces, ten thousand, he’d lost count over the years. All of those eyes begging him to help them, to save them. They’d seen his face, the one that had prompted Alejandro to nickname him ‘my angel,’ and assumed he was their savior. Only to realize with horror that he was one of those hunting them.

‘What?’

‘Alejandro forced me to help with the hunts,’ Tomas said bluntly, ‘because he knew how much I hated it.’ Telling her was unnecessary, but it was probably his last chance for confession. He didn’t remember the last time he’d talked with a priest, not even the last time he’d wanted to, and she couldn’t absolve him anyway. But then,
considering some of the things he’d done, he doubted that anyone could. ‘I’ve killed hundreds just like Jason,’ he added, trying to keep his voice neutral. ‘And the only mercy I could show them was to make it quick. For once, I’d like to help someone survive. And to have Alejandro be the one wallowing in his own blood.’

‘That’s a plan I can get behind,’ she said, fingering her automatic.

Tomas shook his head and didn’t comment. Once she saw what was waiting for them, her bravado would fade. Just like everyone else’s always did. The two men didn’t say anything. But when he and Sara stepped into the undergrowth, they followed.

The next hour was taken up with slipping through a jungle through which no paths had ever been carved, followed closely by a damp cloud of mosquitoes. Sara managed it better than Tomas had expected; it wasn’t easy going even for him. Alejandro had left the jungle intact for exactly that reason: it formed an added layer of protection. It also added to the fun of his hunts, watching mere mortals flounder around in the endless green sea until he chose to put them out of their misery.

They finally reached an old temple on the edge of Alejandro’s lands. The place was beautiful, silvered with moonbeams, the stones seeming to glow with a delicate light just bright enough to pick out shapes. Weeds and vines had half obscured the entrance and small trees were growing out of the tumbled stones over the lintel.

A crop of wild orchids had moved in, settling among the ruins like nesting birds, their white and orange petals spotted with brown like freckles. Tomas reached out to touch one and found it softly furred beneath the pad of his finger – like skin. A sudden shiver flashed up and down his spine, before twisting like a snake in his gut. For a moment, it felt like the last century had never happened, like he was returning from a mission for his master with blood on his hands, and all the rest was merely a dream.

‘This it?’ Sarah asked briskly, breaking the mood.

‘Yes,’ he said, and for some reason it hurt to talk, like he was scraping the words out of his throat.

They ducked under deeply sculpted reliefs and entered the main hallway, leading to a chamber with a stone altar. Like his own ancestors, and unlike the Aztec, the Maya had rarely practiced human sacrifice. It was far more common for their priests and kings to use their own blood as the sacrifices their gods required, letting it flow when crises occurred or when the auguries deemed it necessary. Tomas had always been proud that he came from a people who understood the real nature of sacrifice – and it wasn’t having someone else bleed for you.

The altar sat in front of a raised dais, behind which was a small room where he supposed the priests might have once readied themselves for ceremonies. It was empty now, except for a set of rock-cut stairs leading down into darkness. Below were a series of chultuns, old underground storage chambers for water and food, and beneath them the reason Alejandro had chosen this site in the first place: naturally occurring limestone caverns that even Tomas had never explored in full. It was like an underground city, part of which the Mayans had used as a refuse dump, part of which had some type of mystical significance, with carvings on the walls showing ancient ceremonies and still partially covered in molding paint.

‘This is one of the lesser used entrances,’ he told them, as Sarah drew out a flashlight. ‘But we shouldn’t risk the light. Alejandro’s men don’t need it, and if they see it, it will only draw them to us that much faster.’

She nodded, but she didn’t look happy. Tomas wasn’t surprised. Descending into an unknown labyrinth that probably looked pitch dark even with her goggles would have upset most people. But there wasn’t much to see, unless she liked the look of striated stone and deep, dark holes branching off here and there. That was all until they reached the populated areas. And then, she was probably better off if she couldn’t make out what lay ahead.

The four of them entered the tunnels, and almost immediately Tomas found himself struggling to breathe against a thick, smothering pressure, voices rising like a tide in his head. He’d killed before he came to Alejandro, fighting against the men who had come across the sea to steal his homeland. But those deaths had never bothered him, he’d never lost one night of sleep over them, because those men had deserved everything he did to them. The ones he’d taken in these halls were different.
Taken. It was a good word, he thought bleakly, seeing with perfect clarity the bodies, pale and brown, young and old, faces spattered with blood, bodies cracked and split open. They had bled out onto the thirsty earth because the ones who hunted them had been so sated that they could afford to spill blood like water. And none of it had been due to the hand of God, through some natural, comprehensible tragedy. No, they had died because someone with god-like conceit had stretched out his hand and said, I will have these, and by that act ended lives full of hope and promise.

More often than not, Tomas had been that hand, the instrument through which his master’s gory commands were carried out. He hadn’t had a choice, bound by the blood bond they shared to do as he was bid, but that had somehow never done much to soothe his conscience. He had known it would be hard to return, but he hadn’t expected it to be quite this overpowering. Four hundred years of memory seemed to permeate the very air, the taste of it thick and heavy, like ashes in his mouth.

He glanced at his companions. Forkface had an utterly blank stare, cold as ice, while the fanatic kept muttering silently to himself and fingering a necklace of what looked like withered fingers around his neck. Sarah was looking a little green, as if something about the atmosphere was getting to her, too. He swallowed, throat working, and said roughly, ‘Are you all right?’

She nodded, but didn’t try to reply. He decided not to press it, struggling too much with the weight of his own memory. They silently moved forwards.

It was deeply strange to walk through the familiar halls, the bumps and jagged edges of the lintels stretching out claws of shadow that even his eyes couldn’t penetrate. He’d done so much to try to forget this place, but he’d been branded by Alejandro’s mark too long for that. The feeling of familiarity grew with every step, like each one took him further into the past. He kept expecting to meet himself coming around a corner, as if part of him had never left at all.

Tomas wondered what he might have been like, if he’d never been taken. Or if his first master hadn’t decided to show off his new acquisition at court, where Alejandro had chosen to claim him. Once, he’d yearned for freedom with everything in him, hungered for it as he never had food, lusted for it as he never had any woman. But it didn’t seem to matter how long he waited or how much power he gained, the story was always the same.

He’d had three masters in his life, but had never been master himself. The idea of being free was like an old photograph now, faded and dog-eared, and Tomas didn’t think he could even see his face in it anymore. All he wanted now was to end this.

Sarah stopped suddenly, breathing heavy, her hand gripping the wall hard enough to cause bits of limestone to imbed themselves under her nails. She saw him notice and tried to smile. It wasn’t a great attempt. ‘God, it’s hot.’ She ripped off her jacket, tying it in a knot around her waist, and gathered her hair into a riotous ponytail to get it off her neck.

Tomas hadn’t noticed much of a fluctuation in temperature. Usually, the caves were cooler than aboveground, not the reverse, although this time of year the transition was less noticeable. But patches of sweat had already soaked through her shirt and glistened on her skin, and her hand left a wet print on the wall where it had rested.

‘This way,’ he said, leading them into one of the outermost rooms branching off the main hallway before stopping dead.

‘What is it?’ Sarah had noticed him tense, instantly aware of a change in the atmosphere.

‘Something’s wrong,’ he said softly.

‘Like what?’ The three mercenaries had drawn up in a defensive wedge and were scanning the room, their weapons in hand. The two mages seemed to see fine in the dark, courtesy of a spell, Tomas assumed. But there was nothing to see except a few rat bones and a scrap of ancient material.

‘There are supposed to be mummified bodies here.’
Great,’ Sarah muttered. ‘For the extra creepy this place was missing.’

‘This was where Alejandro kept the remains of ancient Incan kings,’ he explained. Alejandro had acquired them as trophies shortly after following Pizarro to the New World, and had brought them along when he finally decided on a permanent residence. Once they were settled in, however, they’d largely been forgotten, left to mildew in dank, underground cells.

Tomas had been one of the few to ever visit them. They had been venerated by his people even after death, remaining in their palaces, supported by their lands, just as they had when alive. Each new Incan monarch had to wage his own wars of conquest to fund his rule, because what had been his ancestor’s remained theirs and beyond his control. Legions of servants had daily draped their withered corpses in the finest of garments and prepared lavish meals for them. On important occasions, they had been brought out to sit again in court, giving council to the living and presiding over the festivities.

There had always been something uncanny about them – brown, almost translucent skin stretched over old bones, empty eyes and hollow mouths, with shadows inside like parodies of human organs. Tomas had come this way knowing it was usually avoided by the court. That still seemed to be the case, but for some reason it worried him that the kings weren’t there. It made something cold go running along his spine.

‘I’m more concerned about the living,’ Sarah said, eyes on his face. ‘Are we close?’

Tomas swallowed. He was imagining things. The kings had just been moved, that was all; or perhaps Alejandro had finally decided to rid himself of his macabre trophies.

‘Yes. The old cells are down there.’ He pointed out a small hole in the wall, about two feet square.

‘Down there?’ Sarah peered into the darkness, her hand tightening convulsively on her gun. ‘You’re kidding, right?’ she sounded hopeful.

‘No. There is another way in, but it involves going through much more populated areas. This is safer.’

‘Safer.’ She didn’t look convinced. She peered inside the small, dank, black hole for another moment, then muttered something that sounded fairly obscene. ‘Stay here – keep watch,’ she ordered her men. Then she stowed her gun in its holster and went in head first, on hands and knees. Tomas followed close behind.

The tunnel slanted sharply downwards, leaving behind the mildewed plaster of the chultuns for true caverns. Tomas could sense the room’s emptiness almost as soon as they entered the small tunnel – there were no whimpers, no cries for help, no rapidly racing heartbeats. But before he could tell Sarah, she was already out the other side.

He emerged in a dark cave half-filled with ancient garbage, with deer bones and pottery shards crunching under his weight. His foot slipped on an old turtle shell, causing him to almost lose his balance, and then there was a rumbling that set half the room’s contents jittering.

‘There’s no one here!’ Sarah whirled on him, her face livid.

‘They must have moved them.’

‘A convenient excuse! I swear, vampire, if you’ve lied to me – ’

‘To what end?’

‘To get me down here alone – ’

‘I had you alone in the cemetery,’ Tomas pointed out, with barely concealed impatience. The rumbling just got louder, with rocks and small pieces of pottery stirring uneasily. ‘If I meant you harm, I would have acted then.’

‘You said they would be here! That you knew where they were!’
‘If Alejandro had followed the usual practice, the prisoners would be here,’ he replied, trying for calm. ‘But the contents of the room above were moved, and if they changed one long-standing practice, they may have changed another. I haven’t been back in a century –’

‘Something you might have mentioned before now!’ she was sweating harder, with a few drops glistening along her hairline before falling to stain her shirt.

‘We will find your brother,’ he told her. ‘I swear it.’

‘Why should I believe you?’ she sounded frantic.

‘Why shouldn’t you?’ Tomas asked, bewildered. ‘What reason do I have to lie?’ A crack formed in the ceiling overhead, raining dirt and gravel down on them. ‘I thought you said you could control this!’ The caverns weren’t entirely stable, as multiple cave-ins had demonstrated through the years. If she didn’t cut it out, she was going to bury them both.

Sarah looked around, as if she honestly hadn’t noticed that the entire room was now shaking. ‘I can! Usually.’

‘Usually?’

‘I’m a jinx. My magic isn’t always ... predictable. I’ve learned some control through the years, but it’s harder when I’m angry.’ She paused, her breath coming hard. ‘And I really don’t like being underground.’

‘You’re claustrophobic?’

‘I have a small problem with enclosed spaces.’ There was a badly-concealed edge of panic in her voice.

‘But you’re a mercenary! Surely –’

‘I’m a mercenary who prefers to fight in the open!’ she snapped, her face scrunching up with effort. The shaking didn’t noticeably diminish.

‘Something you might have mentioned before now!’

‘Very funny.’

The crack widened, dirt and rock exploding inwards, peppering them with pieces of rock as sharp as knives. ‘Do something!’

‘I’m trying!’

She was almost doubled over in effort, pain written on her face, but whatever she was doing wasn’t working. A huge crack reverberated around the small space, knocking them both to the ground, hands pressed against their temples. A moment later, a chunk of the ceiling the size of a sofa broke away and came crashing down, missing them by inches.

Tomas stared at it for a split second through a haze of dust before grabbing her around the waist and dragging her back to the entrance. ‘Hurry! Back up the tunnel!’

‘It won’t help.’ She’d braced herself against the wall. Her face was pinched and white and her eyes wide and panicky as they met his. ‘Hit me.’

‘What?’

‘I need a distraction! Something else to think about. Pain sometimes works.’

Tomas could feel the pressure building in the room, like a storm in the distance, about to break. ‘Sometimes isn’t good enough! I can put you under a suggestion –’
‘No, you can’t.’

‘I assure you – ’

‘I’m a jinx!’ she repeated furiously. ‘My magic doesn’t work like most people’s! I’m not susceptible to suggestions, vampiric or otherwise. Now hit me, goddammit!’

‘No,’ he said, and kissed her. It was an instinctive reaction, something unexpected that might shock her enough to stop this without actually hurting her. But then she shuddered slightly and her mouth opened under his and her hands clenched on his shoulders and somehow he was kissing her savagely, this woman he barely knew who might be the last person he ever touched, the last warmth he ever felt.

Sarah’s heartbeat was hard against his hand, the urgent thump resonating through his body. They stumbled back into the cavern wall, Tomas cradling the back of her head to save her from a concussion, trying to remember to be careful when his hands were so hungry that he couldn’t hold them still. Sarah was shaking almost as hard as the room. And, for a moment, it was the most natural thing in the world to be kissing her desperately, both hands locked around her head, the long hair coming loose under his fingers, while the mountain threatened to fall in around them and death lay waiting, sure and inevitable, only moments away.

Tomas hadn’t realized fully until that moment how certain he’d become that he wouldn’t survive the night. He felt the knowledge settle into him now along with her breath, and instead of sadness or regret, he found himself just overwhelmingly grateful that, if this was the end, at least he wasn’t facing it alone. It was, all things considered, more than he deserved.

And then Sarah pulled away, her eyes wide open, shocked and angry, and struck him hard across the mouth. It was enough to rock his head back, to make him taste the rich, metallic tang of his own blood. He wiped a smear off his lip with a thumb as she pushed at him, hard.

‘I said hit me! Are you deaf?’ She didn’t wait for an answer, but launched herself towards him, fist clenching.

Tomas caught her hands, effortlessly holding her away from him. ‘Vampires don’t get in fights with humans unless we intend to kill. You’re too vulnerable, too easily broken.’

Another rock hit the floor, hard enough to send bones and debris flying. Sara looked around wildly. ‘If you don’t, we’ll both be broken! Nothing else works!’

He grabbed her by the hips, swinging her against the wall, slamming her backwards into it. Startled out of fighting for a moment, she just stood there, panting and staring up at him as he pressed against her. ‘If I misjudge, there will be no one to stop this hillside from erupting just as the cemetery did. You’ll be unconscious or worse, and we’ll both die – as will your brother.’

His hands were busy as he spoke, and with a sharp tug on the hem of her blouse, he sent the buttons flying. By the time he’d pushed the cloth out of the way, getting his fingers on the living warmth beneath, her nipples had gone tight and pebbly and she was gasping, her hands fisting in his shirt. But she wasn’t pushing him off. She was kissing him brutally, lips and teeth savage, pressing hard against his body while her hands clawed at his back.

‘Are you distracted yet?’ he breathed, as she ripped open his shirt, pushing his undershirt up to his neck and biting at a nipple.

‘I’ll let you know,’ she said roughly, dragging their lips together again.

Her mouth tasted of the sharp sweet tang of mescal, or maybe that was him. Her lips were sweet, but her body was shaking and her eyes were darting everywhere as if certain this wasn’t going to work. And it wasn’t, if he couldn’t get her mind off the room and onto him – and keep it there. The room was coming down in chunks around them and the only thing that kept running through his mind was that it would be truly typical to come a thousand miles to die in some deserted anteroom.

He was breathing hard, adrenaline pumping through him, as he managed to get a hand between them. He
dipped his head for another kiss, hands slipping away from hot, damp skin to tug impatiently at the button on her jeans, to work at the zipper. He pushed the maddeningly tight material down her thighs, his hand clenching on the soft flesh of her hip, rounded and warm for his palm. He pulled her closer, fixed the angle between them, and pushed into her.

Her legs wrapped around his thighs, clenching, as he began moving. He’d been careful because he hadn’t prepared her, but she gasped out, ‘I won’t break,’ her voice low and rough, and he began thrusting hard and fast, the way his body craved. His only concession to her comfort were his fingers working between her thighs roughly.

Within moments she was shuddering, her breath fracturing into harsh, quick gasps, panting. ‘Harder, damn you!’

‘Make me,’ he growled, and in one quick movement she shoved him back, her foot behind his, tripping him, sending them both falling to the floor and driving herself onto him. Tomas barely noticed the hard floor or the pottery shard that was gouging him in the back or the unstable ceiling hanging above him. He was too busy watching her face. He kept his hands on her hips, guiding her, but not giving in to her gasped commands. Instead, he deliberately slowed down, then abruptly stopped, waiting.

‘Tomas!’ He ignored her, even though she wouldn’t stop squirming, pushing the jagged pot shard further between his shoulder blades. She shifted, pulling back enough to rip open his shirt, to rain biting kisses all along his neck, to lick the hollow of his collarbone and mouth, his shoulders. Tomas’s hands scrambled desperately at the rubble beneath him, but he didn’t move. He just lay there and took it, amazed at how much he needed this, until she let out a frustrated scream and raked her nails down his chest. ‘Move, damn it!’

He just stared up at her, at her glittering eyes and sweat drenched, dusty hair, her blouse open and her jeans around her knees, giving him a view of the dark stain of his hands against the pale skin of her hips. He wondered how he’d ever thought her less than stunning. She glared at him and then pulled farther back, letting him almost slide out of her, then suddenly forced herself back onto him. She did it again and Tomas bit back a groan, but he held himself completely still.

‘Some help here!’ she demanded, and did something with her hips that made his eyes roll into the back of his head.

He slid his hands down the curve of her back and tightened them on her slim waist. He could feel the tremors in his frame the longer he held on and knew he’d soon have no choice but to move. And she knew it, too– she was laughing when he finally gave in, an exultant sound that ran like fire through his veins.

He let her have her moment of triumph, before suddenly stopping once more. It took her a second to notice, then she stared down at him, momentarily speechless.

‘That’s inhuman!’ she finally hissed.

He grinned. ‘So am I.’

She wrapped her hand around his tie and jerked him upwards, the new angle forcing a moan out of them both. ‘Finish this or I swear – ’

Tomas was moving before she completed the sentence, ignoring caution this time, fast and furious, glad that he didn’t actually need to breathe because she hadn’t let go of the tie. And then her hips were jerking in a way that was making it hard for him to focus, her gasps loud in his ears, her body’s pleasure doubling his own. He felt her shudder her release and the clenching of her body triggered his, making them both groan deep in the back of their throats – and a great mess of pebbles and dust poured out of the ceiling.

It took Tomas a few seconds to realize that he wasn’t trapped beneath a ton of dirt and rubble, that this wasn’t a cave in, just the result of one final tremor. He dug himself out to find Sarah staring about room, which was, surprisingly, mostly still intact. It was also blessedly quiet.

Those hazel eyes came back to rest on him and she smiled a little crookedly, teeth a shock of white in her dirty
face. ‘Okay. I guess that method works, too.’

* * * * *

Instead of having to fight their way to the centre of the complex as Tomas had expected, their path was unobstructed, the halls echoing, silent and empty except for the carved faces of long forgotten gods staring down from the walls and lintels. That was more than strange – it was unprecedented. And very bad.

Tomas had always known that his only real chance was that he knew this place, and its master, better than anyone. But nothing had gone as planned all night. He honestly didn’t know what to expect when they finally made it to the huge natural cave that Alejandro used as an audience hall.

He brought them in through a little-known side tunnel that let out onto a set of steps about a story above the cave floor. There were guards at the entrance, finally, who Tomas dealt with by simply ordering them to sleep. He was a first-level master; he hadn’t been worried about them. But the creature sprawled on the throne-like chair at the head of the room was first-level also, and far older than he.

As usual, Alejandro was dressed like a Spanish nobleman of the conquest period, which he’d once been. He didn’t look like a monster, with an attractive if florid face and bright, intelligent black eyes. But then, the worst ones never did. Seeing that face again brought a sudden, miserable lurch, a shuddering memory of centuries of heartbreak and horror and nauseating fear. Tomas had to clutch at the door jamb, feeling the rock crumbling beneath his fingers, to keep silent.

Nobody else said anything, either. Tomas had warned them that even a whispered word was likely to be overheard, as beyond the excellent acoustics of the room itself was the small factor of vampire hearing. So Sarah was quiet as they surveyed the scene spread out below, although her face was eloquent.

Tomas now knew why they hadn’t met anyone on the way. The prisoners should have been downstairs, the vampires getting ready to disburse throughout the property for the hunt. Instead, the entire cavernous space was crammed with people, mostly human, but with a ring of vampires circling them. It took Tomas a moment to understand what was happening, because none of this was normal.

A young Mexican man stumbled forward, pushed by one of the guards. He landed near a group of five bodies. There were lined up in a row at the front of the hall, their throats slashed down to the bone, white gleaming through red flesh in wide, jagged lines.

The floor beneath them was not the chipped, angular surface of the outer halls, but worn to a smooth, concave trough by generations of feet. A small stone altar had been found when Alejandro moved in, leading to speculation that this had once been the site of sacred rights. Blood from the corpses had run down the central depression, looking like a long finger pointing the way to the altar and to his throne above it.

Standing to the side of the carnage were two men and a woman, all human, with expressions ranging from dazed to disbelieving to horror struck. Tomas felt a hand grip his arm, and looked down to see Sarah clutching it hard enough to bruise had he been human. ‘To the right,’ she mouthed, and nodded to indicate the tall, lanky young man at the end of the lineup, his face dead white and smeared with blood.

He looked like he’d put up a struggle, but there was nothing of that spirit visible now. He was swaying slightly on his feet, mouth slack, and blinking slowly behind his glasses like a sleepy owl. Shock, or close to it, Tomas thought; so much for hoping he could run on cue.

‘You want to save the life of this man?’ Alejandro asked, addressing the young brunette on the other end of the line. ‘Because you know what I want.’

Instead of answering, the young woman giggled, a nervous, high-pitched sound that warned of incipient
hysteria. It reverberated oddly in the high vault of the room; laughter wasn’t a sound that lived here, and the echoes came back with sharp, mocking edges. She stopped, cutting it off abruptly.

‘We told you already,’ the older man next to her said, his salt and pepper beard quivering more than his voice. ‘What you ask is impossible. Even if we could create that many – which we can’t – keeping them under control would be – ’

‘They’re zombies!’ Alejandro screamed, cutting him off. He gestured savagely to a row of odd-looking spectators assembled behind his throne. The missing kings looked out with dead, empty eyes onto the crowd, assembled once more in an audience chamber, as if to give their advice. ‘They’ll have no more mind than these! A child could control them!’

‘If the child had multiple souls,’ the older man snapped. ‘We’re necromancers, not puppeteers! To raise a zombie, we must lend it part of our soul – that is the only way to direct it. I can create one or two zombies at a time – no more. An especially-gifted bokor might be able to manage as many as five, but a whole army?’ he gestured to the mass of waiting humans. They were there, Tomas realized with a sickening lurch, to be turned into more troops for Alejandro’s growing megalomania. Troops who wouldn’t question his orders, wouldn’t challenge him as Tomas and a few others, had dared. ‘You ask the impossible!’

Alejandro didn’t move, didn’t blink, but Tomas knew what was coming. A flick of a guard’s wrist broke the man’s neck, his body tumbling to the floor to join the others. The young man who had been intended as the next victim fainted and was dragged back into the waiting throng.

‘Do it,’ Alejandro told the girl, who was staring at the body of her fallen colleague as it was arranged in line with the others. ‘Now.’

She transferred her stare to the creature on the throne, and Tomas knew she couldn’t do as he asked. It was written on her face, along with horror and revulsion and abject terror. She was shaking just standing there, and he doubted she could concentrate enough to remember her name at this point. Much less how to manage a complex spell.

‘She’ll fail,’ Sarah said suddenly, ‘and my brother will be next.’

Tomas looked around frantically for any sign that she had been overheard, but there was nothing. The closest vamps, two guards a few yards away at the bottom of the stairs, never even flinched. They were watching one of the captives, who was busy vomiting up his dinner, the gasping, wet sounds followed by painful dry gasps.

Tomas glanced at Sarah, who nodded at the fanatic. He was clutching his bones and murmuring something with a distracted air, as if everything below wasn’t enough to hold his attention. ‘Silence shield,’ Sarah explained. ‘Have any suggestions, or do you just want to wing it?’

Forkface had taken off his bulging pack and was systematically tucking stoppered vials into his already weapons-filled belt. It was pretty obvious how he was voting. Too bad they’d all be dead within half a minute of an attack.

‘This is Alejandro’s power base,’ he said, struggling to explain in terms a human could understand. ‘In addition to his own, he can draw power from every vampire in the room. A frontal assault will not be successful.’

‘Any idea what will?’

Tomas’s eyes were on the woman necromancer, who was crying and chanting at the same time, with theatrically raised arms but no discernable effect on any of the bodies. ‘Can he do a spell to allow you to move through the crowd unseen?’ Tomas nodded at the fanatic.

‘The best he can do in full light is a shadow spell to make us less obvious. It works on humans by redirecting attention away from us. But I don’t know what effect it will have on vamps.’

She glanced at her colleague, who was still muttering to himself but was now staring at an old inscription in the
rock. She kicked him. ‘Yes, yes. Will not work on master-level, but all else, yes.’

Tomas nodded. ‘I will distract Alejandro. While he is occupied with me, slip through the crowd and get your brother.’

‘That won’t help everyone else.’

‘If I can defeat him, his position will devolve onto me and they’ll be safe.’ But the odds were a lot less in his favor than he’d hoped. Catching Alejandro somewhere in the tunnels or the jungle, alone except for a few of his closest attendants, he might have stood a chance. But nowhere in his plans had he figured on anything like this.

His voice must have reflected some of his doubt, because Sarah narrowed her eyes. ‘And if you can’t?’

‘Once they see me, the court will likely have eyes for nothing else. Get as many people out as you can while they are distracted.’

‘Distracted killing you, you mean. Bullshit.’

‘I came here knowing this was the likely outcome.’

‘Another little thing you forgot to mention. We’re gonna have to work on our communication.’

Tomas decided he couldn’t waste more time arguing. The woman necromancer had failed and Alejandro’s power was boiling through the room, hot on his neck. He was furious. And when he lost his temper, people died – a lot of them. It would be perfectly within character for him to simply order every human in the room put to death.

As if in response to Tomas’s thoughts, the guard behind the woman started forward, hand raised.

Tomas was grateful for vampiric speed, which allowed him to reach her before the guard could snap her neck. He caught the vamp’s arm, but he needn’t have bothered. The room had frozen.

‘Tomas.’ The voice was the one he remembered, echoing inside his head like cool silver, but crawling under his skin like something alive. But the power behind it, the force compelling him to do Alejandro’s will, was gone. For the first time, Tomas had reason to be grateful for his current master. As much as he hated the man, Louis-Cesar’s ownership insured that Alejandro’s unspoken command exerted no more pull than that of any other first-level master. A rank he currently shared.

Tomas opened his hand and the guard retreated in an undignified scramble. The rest of the court was moving closer, not attacking, not yet, but on high alert. No one had any doubts about why he was here.

Apparently, neither did Alejandro. The moment Tomas made a move in his direction, a strong force pushed against him, like a hundred invisible hands holding him back. Make that two hundred, he thought, glancing about at the family he’d once called his own.

The fifteen feet to the bottom of the stairs felt like miles; he had to fight for every inch with eyes burning into his spine like acid and a thick, roiling nausea in his gut. He had a moment of vertigo, swaying on his feet like a drunk trying to dance, and someone laughed, high and cold and mocking. It wasn’t Alejandro. His eyes were glittering dangerously and he’d lost the faintly amused smile that was his usual armor.

The stairwell leading up to his throne had twenty steps. By the time Tomas reached them, he was panting like he’d run a mile. ‘I challenged you once before,’ he said around the mass that had risen in his throat, huge and cold and sickening. ‘But you were too cowardly to face me. I have come – ’

It was a good thing he hadn’t worked too hard on his speech, because he never got to give it. The vampires had closed in on every side, jostling each other, trying to get up the courage to attack him. Tomas had hoped that Alejandro’s pride would force him to fight his old servant himself, especially with the odds so heavily in his favor. But Alejandro remained seated, letting his men get more and more worked up until, finally, two broke away from the crowd and dashed in, snarling.
They came from opposite sides, and while Tomas was dealing with the one on the left, turning his own knife back against him, the one on the right smashed something heavy against his leg. It was the one he’d injured earlier, the one that had yet to completely heal. He fell to his hands and knees, the jar of landing on the shattered kneecap turning the whole room white hot with blinding pain.

He pulled the knife out of the first vamp, who retreated back into the crowd, howling and clawing at his wound, and rolled in time to slash at the second’s throat. He missed because the man dodged, lightening fast, at the last minute. But Tomas didn’t need weapons to crush his throat with an application of raw power.

The vamp was young and that effectively put him out of commission. But it also used up power Tomas couldn’t afford to lose. And there were plenty more that the family would consider expendable if their deaths served to further weaken him.

Tomas dragged himself back onto one leg, momentarily crippled while his system fought to rebuild torn cartilage and shattered bone. Alejandro leaned forward, still not bothering to get to his feet. ‘Do you really believe you will make it all the way up here, Tomas? Because I believe I will sit here and watch them gut you as you try.’

Four more vampires rushed him, all from the same side, and although he dealt with them and with the low level master who had waited for them to distract him, he missed the ax that someone threw from the crowd. Alejandro made a small gesture and the assault halted, for the moment, while Tomas shuddered and leaned his forehead against the slick, cold surface of the third step, a buzzing uproar surging all around him. On the third or fourth or tenth try, Tomas managed to take a couple of shallow breaths. He brought up shaking hands and tore the weapon out of his belly.

‘Really, Tomas. I’m disappointed. I remembered you as better than this.’ Alejandro had finally bothered to get out of his seat, but he didn’t come any closer. ‘And to think, I was contemplating offering you a position at the head of my new army. I really will have to reconsider.’

Hot tendrils of agony shot out from his stomach wound as he tried to stand. At least he couldn’t feel the throbbing in his leg anymore, Tomas thought, and laughed to cover the scream that wanted to tear out of his chest. An all out assault on Alejandro was the only chance he had. If he hurt him badly enough, the family might back off, waiting to see the outcome before they risked attacking the man who might be their new master. Slogging slowly up these steps, one by one, being battered from all sides and buffeted by Alejandro’s power, was a sure recipe for disaster. But it was also the only hope the humans had.

He couldn’t hear anything from the back of the cave, from the mass of four or five hundred people who had been corralled there. And there was no way so many could remain silent while witnessing something like this. Not unless they were being shielded and hopefully guided out.

But it was a long way through the maze of hallways, as countless mortals had learned to their terror, and even further to the town beyond. He had to give them time, if they were to have any chance at all. And in this slice of hell, time meant pain.

Pain wasn’t a problem, Tomas decided, looking into Alejandro’s amused black eyes. He’d brought it to enough people through the years. It was his turn.

‘Still a coward posing as a gentleman,’ Tomas gasped, and threw the gory ax straight at Alejandro.

His old master turned it aside with an elegant wave of his hand, but anger and surprise caused his attention to waver slightly, allowing Tomas to make headway against the stream of power opposing him. He made it to the tenth stair before the world spun around and dropped out from under him, and he hit something hard and unyielding. Only when the pain receded a fraction did he realize he’d been dumped on the floor by another ax, this one to the spine.

And master or no, no one healed a wound like that instantaneously. Suddenly, his limbs didn’t work, his arms and legs flopping uselessly around him, his head falling back into a puddle of his own blood. Alejandro waved off the guards who were rushing in to finish him, as he slowly descended the remaining stairs.

He stopped directly in Tomas’s line of vision, his booted feet just touching the bloody pool. He unsheathed a
rapier, good quality Cordoba steel instead of wood, making it obvious that this wasn’t going to end quickly. ‘How the mighty have fallen. That is the phrase, isn’t it? From my lieutenant to this, all because of ambition.’

Tomas tried to tell him that ambition wasn’t the point, that it never had been, but his throat didn’t seem to work either. Although that might have been because of the sight that suddenly loomed up behind his former master. At first, Tomas was sure he was imagining things. But not even in a pain-induced near faint could his brain have come up with something like that.

Behind Alejandro, a withered arm encased in a few rotting rags appeared, a tracery of thin blue veins pulsing under the long dead skin. A head followed, cadaverous and brown, but with two enormous, glittering eyes rolling in the too large sockets. They stared at Tomas for an instant, full of terrible, ancient fury, before the arm caught Alejandro around the waist and a mouth full of cracked and yellowed teeth clamped onto his neck.

Alejandro gave one sharp gasp before the others were on him, a crowd of dry, old bones and tanned leather skins that glowed slightly from the inside, like someone shining a flashlight through parchment. And although Alejandro’s power still surged around Tomas like a hurricane, they didn’t seem to feel it. There was a crack, a thick, watery sound, and then silence – except for the ripping, chewing noises coming from the middle of the once human mass.

The kings had returned.

Another pair of feet came to rest beside him, just brushing his hair. Tomas looked up to see Jason, slack-jawed no longer, but with a quiet intensity in his eyes. It seemed Alejandro had kidnapped one necromancer worth his salt, after all.

‘You brought them back,’ he managed to croak after a moment.

Jason didn’t look away from the creatures and their meal. ‘They brought themselves.’

Tomas didn’t have a chance to ask him what he meant, because the earth began to move in a very familiar manner. Jason grabbed him under the arms and pulled him backwards down the stairs. No one tried to stop him. It was as if the court was frozen in place, staring in disbelieving horror at the sight of their master being attacked by supposedly harmless sacks of bones.

They made it to the edge of what had been the holding pen before Alejandro’s power suddenly cut off, like someone throwing a switch. A ripple went through his vampires as they felt it too and realized what it meant. They came back to life with a vengeance, but too late; half the roof collapsed in a cascade of limestone.

Sarah and one of her men ran up, dirty-faced and panting. Forkface grabbed Tomas, yanked the ax out of his back and threw him over a shoulder. Then they ran.

The doorway collapsed behind them, dust billowing into the air while rocks and gravel nipped at their heels. The entire tunnel system was buckling, floor heaving, ceiling threatening to crush them at any moment. His helper lost his footing and they both went down, Tomas managing to catch himself on arms that, while unsteady, actually seemed to work again.

He grabbed Sarah, attempting to shield her, at the same time that she grabbed for him. And amid stones falling and dust clouds choking them, they braced together, Sara saying things that Tomas couldn’t hear over the roaring in his ears. But their small patch of ceiling held, and after they limped across the boundary from the caves to the old temple, the rumbling gradually petered off.

They emerged at last into the jungle, where a mass of dazed people huddled together in small groups under the dark, star-dusted sky. Forkface dumped Tomas unceremoniously beside a small pool just inside the temple, where people were scooping up water in hats, hands or flasks. It was a green and it stunk, with slimy ropes of algae clinging to sides, and nobody seemed to mind. Some were hugging, more were crying and one, amazingly, was laughing. Tomas blinked at them, disbelieving, seeing for the first time in four hundred years the Day of the Dead celebrated in this place by the living.
Jason brought him some water in an old canteen, and while Tomas didn’t particularly need it, he drank it anyway. The fanatic came over to join them after a moment. It seemed he’d been delegated to lead the way out while Sarah and her remaining associate remained behind to rescue Tomas. He seemed perturbed that they hadn’t brought him any bones, and eyed Tomas speculatively for a moment before moving off, muttering.

Tomas’s whole body hurt and he was ravenously hungry, but he was alive. It didn’t seem quite real. ‘How did you do it?’ he finally asked Jason.

‘I didn’t. I only woke them up.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘The Incan kings were believed to watch over their people, even after death, and to demand good behavior of the living. Any who defied them soon learned that they also had within their power to reward or to punish.’

‘That’s a myth.’

Jason smiled, an odd, lopsided effort. ‘Really. It seems strange, not to mention expensive, to tie up most of the revenues of the state in the care of creatures who have no ability to hurt you.’ He shook his head. ‘The ancient priests prepared the royal dead well. I only had to give them a nudge.’

‘You mean – ’

His eyes went soft and dreamy. ‘They said they had been watching Alejandro for a long time. And they were hungry.’

‘Well, they’ll have the whole court to snack on now, once they finish with him,’ Sarah commented, stopping by after locating enough local people to serve as guides for everyone else. Tomas had a sudden image of vengeful Incan monarchs pursuing Alejandro’s vampires through the halls where they had once done the same to humans. He smiled.

Attacking that thing on your own was insane,’ Sarah said bluntly. ‘I like that in a person. Want a job?’

Tomas just looked at her for a moment. He was a first-level master, one of only a handful in the world. The rest at his rank were either sitting in governing positions over his kind, or were powerful masters with their own courts. They were emphatically not running around with a motley crew of mercenaries carrying out jobs so crazy no one else would touch them.

He’d killed Alejandro, or close enough by vampire law. He could assume his position, round up whatever vampires had made it out before the cave-in, and claim to be the new head of the Latin American Senate. That would put him beyond the jurisdiction of the North American version – which wanted him dead – and his master – who wanted him back in slavery. He could rebuild Alejandro’s empire and walk these halls once more, this time as their master. He would be rich, powerful and feared ...

And, in time, just like Alejandro.

‘Well?’

Sarah didn’t seem to be the patient type. It was something else they were going to have to work on. They weren’t touching, but she was standing so close that he could smell the vestiges of her perfume mingled with gunpowder and sweat. It was strangely comforting, like the lingering warmth of a touch even after it’s gone. Tomas looked up at her face, surrounded by stars, and for the first time in longer than he could remember, he saw a future.

‘Where do I sign?’

The End