

Prologue

In Which Max Faces the Vampiress in Her Den

The lair of the Queen of the Vampires was tucked away in the snowy mountain range of Muntii Făgăraș.

The only reason Maximilian Pesaro had been able to find the hideaway was because of the two bite marks on his neck. Permanent ones left by Lilith herself.

They burnt and tingled as he approached the entrance to the interior chamber. The throbbing never fully went away, but there were times when it ebbed enough that he could forget about the fact that he was permanently linked to the vampire queen.

The back of his neck felt as though a brick of ice rested on it; but it was not because of the winter that blustered outside of the stone-cut chambers in the mountain. The howling winds and blinding

snow that came much too early and stayed too long in these Romanian mountains had nothing to do with the chill that burnt his neck, and everything to do with the fact that there were vampires nearby. As he was a Venator, it was his way of sensing the presence of the undead.

Coming here was foolish and brazen. Max was never foolish, although he had his brazen moments. But after what he'd been through in the last months, he was willing to accept the consequences of this visit. Even if it resulted in his death, he chanced it – because it could also result in his freedom.

The only reason he'd made it so far into the bowels of Lilith's refuge was the fact that he bore her markings. Her branding of him was an obscene protection from the undead that guarded her compound.

Max passed yet another of Lilith's Guardian vampires, ones that had eyes that burnt pale ruby and fangs that released a strong poison at will. She opened the heavy wooden door to Lilith's private chamber and stepped back to allow him in.

'Maximilian.' Lilith's voice was a purr, and her red-ringed blue eyes were avid as she cast her gaze over him. 'I believe this is the first time you have ever come to me of your own accord. What a pleasure.'

Carved in the deepest part of the mountain, Lilith's sanctuary was as far as possible from the sunlight that would peel the skin from her body. Its interior was otherwise like any well-appointed house in the civilised world of London, Rome, or Budapest, with the exception of its lack of windows.

Comfortable furnishings were arranged throughout the large, high-ceilinged room. Tables held lamps and sheaves of parchment; settees were covered with thick pillows and cushions. Thick Persian rugs warmed the cold stone floor. A large tapestry hung on the wall depicted the immortalization of Judas Iscariot, the first true vampire. Another showed him slaying the first vampire hunter, Gardeleus the Venator.

That was the first time a vampire had killed a Venator, and, Max thought grimly, it had not been the last. Fortunately there had been other vampire hunters born from Gardeleus's blood over the ages – arising randomly from far-flung branches of the family tree. And then there had been a very few – like Max himself – who were not of Gardella blood, but had chosen the path of a vampire slayer and had passed the life-or-death test that allowed them to wear the holy empowering amulet of the Venators, the *vis bulla*.

Nor were Venators protected from being turned

by a vampire, although the power of the *vis bulla* made it more difficult for the vampire's blood to take hold in the Venator and to make one undead. Max had always felt that Gardeleus's fate of death was preferable to being turned into a vampire.

The chamber was warm, and the lighting burnt low. A massive blaze roared in the fireplace, taking up the entirety of one long wall and casting black and red shadows into the room.

Lilith herself was arranged casually on a long chaise, her filmy ice-blue gown draping from her hip to the floor, leaving her white feet and arms bare. Her red hair, so shiny and bright that it appeared to burn, poured over her fair skin in sensual coils that reminded Max of the locks of a copper-haired Medusa. Although she had been on the earth for more than a millennium, Lilith had the beautiful elfin face of a thirty-year-old, and a body that matched. Her pose appeared nonchalant, but a fleeting glance at her dangerous eyes told Max a different story.

He was glad for at least the advantage of surprise.

The doors closed behind him, and he stopped in the centre of the room. Wanting to keep what little leverage he had, he waited.

'You're not dead,' Lilith said after the silence stretched. She followed suit and arched her long,

lithe body as she drew herself into a seated position. One of control.

‘Then you’re aware that I’ve destroyed Akvan’s Obelisk. That I’ve kept my part of our agreement to stop your son, Nedas, from using its power.’ Lilith had raised Nedas, who was the son of one of her consorts from the tenth century, from an infant, and had turned him to an undead when he was twenty.

She smiled. Her upper fangs glinted. ‘So that is why you have come.’

Now she stood and moved towards him, bringing with her a renewed burning in the bites on his neck and the scent of roses. Max felt her presence as it seeped into him, cloying and close, and noticed the way his breathing became... heavier...controlled.

Although he kept his eyes averted from hers, he felt the first hint of a muscle tremor deep beneath his skin.

‘You agreed to release me from your thrall if I succeeded.’ He drew in his breath slowly, keeping it steady with effort. ‘You didn’t expect me to.’

Lilith tilted her head, turning her face away while keeping her gaze on him in a sly manner. ‘On the contrary, Maximilian. I was certain that you would succeed. I had no doubts. After all’ – she reached for him, brushing her long-nailed

finger along one of his cheekbones – ‘those very characteristics attract me to you. Your strength, your determination, and your integrity.’

Max didn’t flinch as the nail, death-sharp, cut a thin line into his skin. His heartbeat was still his own, and though his throat was dry, he was still steady. He wanted to step away, but he didn’t. He’d faced Lilith before; he’d face her this time.

Now her hand had come to rest on one side of his chest, and they stood face-to-face, the vampire as tall as he, the weight of her hand burning through his shirtwaist. ‘Along with...this...’ she added, smoothing her palm over his firm pectoral. With her touch came the strength of her thrall, battling to capture his breathing, the race of his heart, the surge in his veins. His desire.

‘Will you not keep your word and release me?’ Max closed his eyes. He knew it had been foolish to come here, but he’d been willing to try. He had little to lose. He’d even told Victoria he never believed Lilith would release him.

Both of her hands were on him now, flat palmed, sliding up and over his shoulders to cup the bare skin of his neck. Max felt the tiny, warm drip of blood from his cheek where she’d cut him, and the unbearable closeness when she leant forward and pressed an open-mouthed kiss to the edge of his jaw, over the trickle of blood.

The flood of sensation staggered him. Her lips – one cool and firm, the other warm and soft – brushing against his skin set his fingers to trembling against the sides of his trousers. Her teeth were slick and smooth as they slid against his jaw, ending in a tiny nibble. His breath caught, and he drew it in sharply, deeply, and felt the beginnings of response simmering low inside him, behind the weakness in his knees, and his lips parted with a soft puff of air.

When she kissed him he tasted his own blood, and he kissed her back, unwillingly, yet willingly.

Then through the haze of desire that pummelled him, Max remembered who he still was, and managed to slide his hand up between them, brushing against her breasts as they pressed against his shirt. He tore at its ties and at last closed his fingers over the tiny silver cross that hung from his areola.

Strength from the *vis bulla* surged through him, and he drew in his first clear breath since she'd stepped near him. He pulled his face away as she realised what had happened and stepped back. Her fingers tore at his shirt, pulling it open, and with a shriek of surprise, she jerked away.

'So you have come armed.' At first she could not look at him, could not look at the large silver cross that hung on a heavy chain around his neck.

Hidden beneath his shirt, it was the only weapon he'd been able to bring into her presence aside from the tiny *vis bulla*. It wasn't as effective as an ash stake, but it had produced the effect he'd desired.

'I am not so foolish as to come to you unprepared,' Max replied, his voice easier now, although his blood still leapt and his chest was tight. 'A stake would have been preferable, but your Guardians would not allow me to pass with one. I tried.'

'I would expect nothing less from you, Maximilian.' She kept her distance, kept her eyes slightly averted, but was not the crumpled heap of weakness a lesser vampire would have been. The surprise had sent her spinning away, but the mere vision of the cross was not enough to frighten a vampire of her calibre for long. As one's eyes became used to sudden light in darkness, so would she soon be able to look at him again.

But the large cross would keep her from touching him – or touching him much. And the delicate silver *vis bulla* – blessed with holy water and forged of silver from the Holy Land – gave him his Venator speed, strength, and fast-healing capabilities. But neither would damage Lilith in any other way.

Now, as she looked at him again, her eyes narrowed and seemed to focus on his half-bare

chest. 'That is not your *vis bulla*,' she said suddenly, her eyes widening.

Max looked at her.

'You are surprised that I would have noticed. Why should you be, Maximilian? I notice everything about you.' The purr was back in her voice again, and despite the hand-size cross hanging there, she stepped towards him. 'This one is different. It is smaller.'

'But no less powerful.' It was true. He'd given his *vis bulla* to Victoria, then walked away from her on the streets of Roma a month ago. And later, when he'd decided to make this mad trip, he'd replaced it with this one, one that did not belong to him.

'No, I would expect not. But still.' Her eyes narrowed again, and she tried again to catch his gaze, but he would not play. 'Not dead, and wearing someone else's *vis bulla*,' Lilith mused. 'And demanding that I comply with your wishes. Maximilian, you absolutely fascinate me. Are you quite certain you do not wish to remain here with me? Forever?'

'I have no wish for immortality.'

'But you did at one time.'

'I did. Long ago.' There was no glossing over it. Max had learnt to live with his choices.

'Not that long ago. Merely fifteen, perhaps

sixteen years ago. And this last year you spent living among the members of the Tutela did not raise that desire in you again?’

The mark of the Tutela had first been burnt into the back of his shoulder when he was a young, naive man of sixteen and had foolishly joined them and their cause: to protect and serve the vampires in the hopes of attaining immortality and power. Now the tattoo of the writhing dog – for that was really what the Tutela were: mortals who acted as bitches and whores for the undead – seemed to itch on his skin.

This last year when he’d lived among the Tutela again had been Hell on earth. Max had had to pretend not only to be one of them, desiring power and immortality while bowing and scraping to the vampire Nedas, but he had also carried on the charade of being engaged to Sarafina, the daughter of Conte Regalado, who had been the mortal leader of the Tutela.

He replied to Lilith, ‘I did what you asked because of your promise to release me if I succeeded with the task you set me. Now I am here to collect on it.’

‘And what of the woman you love? You left her?’

Max lifted an eyebrow in question, but did not speak.

‘The girl you were to marry? Shall I be jealous

of her? Is that why you wish to be released?’

His breathing smoothed. ‘I would not expect you to be jealous of a mere mortal.’

‘Her father is a vampire now, and he might well sire her in his footsteps.’

‘But she will be young and weak.’

‘True.’ Lilith looked at him, reached out her hand to touch his arm. ‘I cannot let you go, Maximilian, my Venator pet.’

‘You lied, then.’ He’d known it, known she would not release him. ‘I did your bidding and you never intended to do as you promised.’

‘Come, now, Maximilian. You are fully aware that the secrets I gave you, the knowledge you had that enabled you to see to the destruction of Akvan’s Obelisk, were just as much to your benefit – and that of your race – as they were to mine. I would not say you have come out of this so very badly.’

Black bile burnt the back of his throat. Oh, but what he had been forced to do to carry out Lilith’s desires and to save Roma – and the world – from the malevolent power of Akvan’s Obelisk... executing Eustacia, accepting her willing sacrifice by swinging the sword himself in the presence of Nedas. It had been the only way to prove his loyalty to the Tutela, the only way to get close enough to destroy the obelisk.

And Victoria. She'd seen it happen. She'd never forgive him.

Yes, he'd done the right thing, the only thing... but it had been repugnant. Heartbreaking.

And that was why he'd removed his *vis bulla*, walked away from Victoria and the rest of the Venators...and why he'd been reckless enough to come here.

A hero he'd been, true, but a repulsive one at that.

'Ah, Maximilian.' Lilith was speaking again, touching him again. Her fingers wove into the hair that brushed his shoulders, sending little frissons of unease into his scalp. 'I do like your hair long like this. It makes you look so much more...savage. You would be a magnificent vampire.'

He closed his eyes. Waiting. Ignoring the leap in his veins, the obstinate awareness of her pull, the way his fingers trembled. The unbearable smell of roses from the hideous creature in front of him. The way his body responded to hers, and the knowledge that it wasn't only because of the bites.

'I'll never drink your blood.'

Lilith sighed against him, her breath not putrid, as one might expect from an undead... but tinged with the same floral scent that clung to the rest of her. But then, of course, she hadn't just been feeding. 'And that, my pet, is my

greatest disappointment of the century. All right, Maximilian. I will allow you to be released from my thrall. Much as it will annoy me to do so.'

She released him and he opened his eyes. Wary.

Lilith stepped away, suddenly breezy in her demeanour. 'I will release you. There is a salve, a balm you can apply to the bites...my bites,' she added, her blue-red eyes narrowing. 'It will heal them permanently. We will no longer be bound.'

'And?'

Her smile came all the way to her eyes, drawing them tight at the corners and tightening the tops of her cheeks. But it barely touched her lips. 'And... with the dissolution of my markings on you will also be the destruction of your Venatorial powers. The *vis bulla* will be useless to you. You will no longer sense those of my race.'

But he'd chosen to be a Venator; he could choose it again. He'd willingly go through the life-or-death test to regain any powers he lost.

As if reading his mind – perhaps it was as simple as her sensing the change in him – Lilith continued: 'But, of course, since you are not of Gardella blood, my bites that you so disdain have tainted you and your blood. As such, you will not be able to pass the test to regain your lost powers. They would be gone from you forever. But never fear – along with the loss of your strength, you will be relieved of any memory

of our times together, of your time as a Venator. It will all go away.'

'I will recall nothing of the Venators, of the vampires?'

'Nothing. Your ignorance will be your bliss.'

He could forget what had happened. Live a normal life.

'You've done your duty, Maximilian. Beyond your duty. You've done everything that's been asked of you, and more. I would miss you, of course...'

Then he understood. 'And, of course, I would be ripe for your plucking.'

'Oh, no, Maximilian. You would be just like any other mortal man. No longer a challenge. No longer exciting, a mixture of pleasure' – she stroked a hand over his cheek – 'and pain' – and slipped her hand down under his shirt to brush against his *vis bulla*. And then she jerked away with the shock, and a breathless laugh. 'I would have no further interest in you.'

His heart thumped quietly. 'Why?'

Lilith placed both hands on his chest. 'I would no longer have to contend with my greatest threat: you as a Venator.'

He took her wrists – the first time he'd ever touched her of his own volition – and forced them away.

'So what shall it be, Maximilian? A free, ignorant life...or the *vis bulla* and me?'