

**Crouching Vampire, Hidden Fang**

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## Chapter One

Crash!

“Sorry! I have a cart with a wonky wheel,” I said by way of an apology to the woman whose shopping cart I had just bumped into while trying to maneuver my own out the door of the grocery store.

My victim reclaimed the package of toilet paper that bounced out of her cart at the impact, and waved away my apology with a gentle, “That happens. Light be with you.”

“You called me up to tell me you have a wonky shopping cart?” An amused voice laughed softly in my ear as I swore under my breath, struggling one-handed to make my cart behave.

“No, I called you up because you left a message telling me to call you. Dammit! I’m so sorry, sir. It has a mind of its own. Are you hurt? Oh good. I’ll back up so you can get your shoe from the maw of the beastly thing.”

A pleasant faced young man gave me a somewhat weak smile as he knelt down to wrestle his shoe from the wheel of the cart, his voice somewhat muffled by his position and the noise of the busy parking lot. “It’s no problem. Light bless you.”

“Oh, Pia,” Magda laughed even more vigorously, her voice spilling out of the cell phone I clamped between my cheek and shoulder as I fought to shove the cart the few remaining feet to my car. “Only you could find such comical happenings at a grocery store.”

“Well, it’s partially your fault,” I grumbled, giving in as the cart made a sudden swerve and seemed hell bent on slamming into a sleek crimson Porsche sitting next to my somewhat battlescarred Hyundai. I hauled the cart backwards to my car. “The second you called the cart went wild on me, and it’s impossible to control such a thing with one hand. But it is nice to hear from you.”

“Likewise. And for the record, I was responding to your message when I called you. Are you stocking up on my behalf?”

“Yup. Per your request, I have purchased suitable amounts of animal flesh and seafood for my new grill. I promise you’re going to go wild over my ginger garlic scallops.”

“Oh, Pia, about that...”

“Ma’am?” I turned at the tug on my arm. The man whose shoe my cart had tried to consume held out a bright blue package. “I think these fell out of your cart. I don’t use this brand.”

“...original plan was for me to stay with you for a week, and see my sister in Vancouver for a week, but...”

I made a face as I took the industrial-sized package of sanitary pads he shoved toward me. “Life seems to be bent on discomposing me today. Thank you.”

He laughed. “Don’t let it bother you. I have a wife, so I’m hip to all sorts of feminine products. Although I don’t believe I’ve ever seen this particular product before. Does ‘effusive flow’ mean what I think it does?”

“...and Ray managed to get away, so I thought I’d just switch to two weeks, if you don’t mind...”

I shoved the pads into the car and tried to will away the blush that was sweeping upwards. “Thank you, I think I’ll just die of embarrassment now.”

He laughed again and sauntered away, waving a friendly hand. "I wouldn't want to diminish any light in the world, least of all yours, so I'll be on my way."

"Pia? Pia? Are you listening to me?"

"Sorry, was wanting a hole to open up and swallow me...." I paused, looking back at the man as he hopped into a blue minivan. "Did he say what I think he said?"

"I don't know, I couldn't hear him, I was too busy telling you about the change in plans. Boy, you really *are* having a day, aren't you?" Magda's voice was choked with laughter.

"You have no idea..." I thought for a moment, then shook my head. "I must have misheard. My day, as you said, has been interesting." I flung the rest of the groceries into the car, manhandled the cart over to a designated holding area, and returned to my car, cranking the air conditioning on high as I slumped against the hot seat. "Hang on a sec while I plug in the headset...much better. Now, where were we? Oh! You said something about a change in plans? Don't tell me you're not coming to visit after all?"

"Would I do that to my favorite Zorya?"

I grimaced at the word. "You know full well I'm an ex-Zorya. There nearest Brotherhood group is in Southern California, and I'm not about to offer my services to them."

"We can talk about your future when we get up there."

"We?" I pulled out of the parking lot and drove slowly through the tiny town perched high in the mountains, located about an hour's drive out of Seattle. My house, modest as it was, sat near the edges of the town, nestled between tall fir trees and a sheer rocky wall. "Who's we?"

"Ray is coming with me. If you don't mind, that is."

"Mind? No, I like him." I had to work a little to bring up my mental image of the man Magda had met on the single's tour we'd taken some two months before. All I could really remember of him was that he was tall and rather skinny, balding, with mild eyes, and an innocuous manner. To be honest, he seemed to fade to near invisibility when Magda was around, but she had that effect on a lot of people. She was full of life and color, with snapping black eyes, and a joy of life that was infectious. "So you guys are still going strong, eh?"

"More than ever," she cooed. "He rearranged his schedule so that he'd have a month to spend with me before he has to go back to Denver. Isn't that sweet? So I hoped you wouldn't mind if he came with me to visit you. I swear he's housebroken, and he's promised he'll be happy to just sit and read or watch movies if we want to have some girl time together."

"Sounds perfect," I said, parking my car in the tiny carport attached to my equally tiny house. I puffed a little as I hauled all the groceries inside.

"You OK?" Magda asked when I grunted with relief as I dropped the heavy bags on the kitchen table.

"Yeah, just out of shape. And before you ask, no, I haven't found time to go to the ladies' gym like I said I was going to."

Magda giggled. "Plump is in, sweetie. I keep telling you that."

"Uh huh. Maybe your plump is in, but mine is spilling out all over the place. Whoever said that pining for a man would make you waste away to nothing was full of bull. I've gained ten pounds since I came back from Iceland!"

“Judging by the way you and Kristoff went at it while you were there, I’d say he was a man who appreciated a woman with abundant curves, and you have nothing to worry about.”

The vision rose in my mind of a midnight tryst in a barn, my body suffused with heat as I remembered the sensation of Kristoff’s mouth caressing the flesh of my neck and breasts. But with that memory came another one, that of Kristoff silently withdrawing his mind from mine.

I didn’t doubt that despite my physical flaws he desired me sexually...but a Beloved was supposed to be so much more than that.

How could I be anything to a man who didn’t want me?

“Pia, you still there?”

“Yes,” I said, clearing my throat and trying not to sound like I was on the verge of tears.

Instantly, her voice was filled with sympathy. “Oh, honey, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have brought up the subject of Kristoff.”

“No, it’s OK. It’s just that I had this strange dream this morning. That’s what I was calling about. You remember the messenger I told you the vampires were going to send me? I dreamt he came, and somehow, you were here, and so was Kristoff and his brother, and it seemed so real until I woke up.”

“That’s how dreams are.”

“I know, but this was...well, different. Oh hell, someone’s at my door. I really don’t want to see anyone.” I snatched up a box of Kleenex and dabbed at my eyes as I moved through to the living room. I hesitated for a moment at the door, then scooted to the side to peek out of the window at the front porch.

“I’ll go, then.”

“No, it’s OK, it’s just a couple of religious people,” I said, watching as a woman and a man slid a small pamphlet into the screen door before leaving.

“Bah. I usually tell them I’m a cannibal and they leave me alone.”

“I tried that once. I told them I was an anarchist, and they just visited me every week to try to save me,” I said, opening the door just enough to snatch up the religious newsletter, closing it quickly before slumping down on the couch next to the window. “So how long will you and Ray be able to stay? The whole week that we planned, or will you guys want to go off on your own and make smoochy faces at each other?”

I didn’t want to admit how much I’d been looking forward to Magda’s visit. Although my job at a no-kill animal shelter specializing in elderly pets was satisfying, ever since I’d returned from my adventures in Iceland, life seemed to be...empty. It was as if a part of me was missing, something that I used to have was now gone, leaving me a shell of a person. I didn’t expect Magda would change that, but she had become a very good friend, and I was cheered no end by the thought of her visit.

“No! That’s the good part. Because Ray is taking a whole month off, I managed to talk my manager into giving me an extra week, so I’ll have two weeks with you, and then one with my sister before we have to come back to San Francisco. That is, if you can stand us that long. Ray, hand me the basil, would you? No, the fresh stuff. Could you chop that onion for me? Sorry, Pia, we’re making spaghetti.”

“Sounds yummy. And stand you?” I laughed somewhat grimly. “I may never let you guys go home!”

“Oh yes, we’ll just see how long that opinion remains once Kristoff shows up and apologizes for being such a butthead.” Her voice dropped suddenly. “Speaking of that...do you want me to tell Ray? About you being Zorya and Kristoff and the you-know-whats and all the rest?”

I rubbed my forehead. Lately I seemed to always have a nagging, low-grade headache. “I don’t think that’s necessary. I’m not Zorya any more, given this morning, I think I just need to face the fact that Kristoff isn’t ever going to—crap. Someone’s at the door again.”

“Use the cannibal line this time. I guarantee you it’ll work.”

“I’m sorry, but I’m not interested,” I was saying even before I had the door all the way open. My excuse dried up at the sight of the man standing on the steps. “Gark.”

“What?” Magda asked. “What about a park?”

The man raised an eyebrow at me. “You are Pia Thomason?”

“Ack!” I said, and slammed the door shut in his face. “Oh my god, Magda, it’s him!”

“Him? Him who?”

A shivery *déjà vu* sensation washed over me as I leaped over to the couch, shoving aside the curtain on the window just enough to peek out at the man. He knocked at the door again.

“Him the messenger. Good lord, we’ve already done this!”

“We’ve done what?” Magda sounded confused.

“This, we’ve done this! This was the dream I had this morning.”

Muttered conversation was audible on the phone for a moment before Magda uncovered the mouthpiece and said, “Honey, would you go down to the basement and get me that bottle of olive oil? The Italian one. Pia’s having a crisis and this may take a few minutes.”

I heard Ray say something as he moved off to do Magda’s bidding.

“I’m not having a crisis,” I hissed, peeking out at the man on my porch. “I’m just facing the messenger, that’s all. Just a vampire come to do god knows what to me.”

“Ray sends his love, by the way, and says he hopes your crisis isn’t a serious one,” she said in an aside before continuing. “How do you know the man is the messenger? Maybe he’s someone else. Maybe he’s another religious type. Or maybe he’s trying to sell Girl Scout cookies.”

I eyed the stranger again as he raised his hand to knock. “He’s around six feet tall, is wearing a very tailored black sports coat with matching pants, a scarlet shirt that looks like it’s made of raw silk, shoes that probably cost more than my car.”

“That could be anyone,” Magda insisted, the sounds of chopping accompanying the words.

“And a fedora that’s angled to shade his face from the sun. I covered all this in the dream! Although that messenger turned out to be Andreas, and this guy is definitely not Kristoff’s brother.”

Silence followed for a moment. “OK, that description does sound like a you-know-what.”

“Vampire.”

“Yes. Ray, my cherub of delight, that is indeed a bottle of olive oil, but it’s Greek not Italian, and I will not put Greek olive oil in spaghetti. Would you mind...thanks, love. Mwah.” Magda was silent for a moment as faint sounds of footsteps fading away were

audible even on the phone. “All right, he’s gone again. Pia, you’re going to have to let the vamp in.”

“I don’t want to,” I said stubbornly, turning my back on the window, glaring suspiciously at the bedroom. I knew full well Kristoff wasn’t going to walk out of there as he had in the dream, but I couldn’t stop myself from looking. “My life is going really well right now. Kind of. Somewhat. Oh, hell, it’s a nightmare, but that’s only going to be made worse by involvement with the Moravian Council, or whatever it is the vamps call themselves.”

“From what I remember of them, you’re not going to have a choice. They seemed kind of pushy.”

The knocking at my front door got even louder. Obviously the messenger was getting tired of waiting. “I don’t care. I have to get rid of this guy. What is it vamps don’t like? Garlic and holy water? I don’t have any of the latter, but I have garlic bread. You think that will work?”

“Pia, sweetie...” Magda’s voice took a frustrated tinge as I marched out into the kitchen and dug through a bag until I found a loaf of garlic bread. “I really don’t think pretending none of this exists is the answer.”

The vamp on my doorstep stopped knocking and was outright pounding on my door now. “Wish me luck,” I said, setting down the phone in order to peel back the wrapper on the garlic bread. I wielded it like a club as I swung open the door.

Madga’s voice was faint but audible from the phone. “Pia? Pia? What are you...oh, she is so silly sometimes...”

“I have garlic and I’m not afraid to use it!” I shouted at the vampire, shaking the bread in his face.

He looked at it for a moment, then his gaze shifted to me, a look of stark incredulity on his face. “Garlic bread?” he asked, his voice silky with some European accent.

“It has garlic on it,” I said, pulling open the loaf to show him the tiny bits of garlic smooshed into the butter. “So just stay back!”

He reached out and touched the garlic butter, licking the tip of his finger. “Very tasty.”

“You’re not...garlic isn’t poisonous to you?” I asked taken aback.

He closed his eyes for a moment, a martyred expression on his face. “No, that’s a fallacy created by mortals. I assume you are Pia Thomason? I am—”

“No you don’t,” I said, desperately looking around as he started to enter my house. I snatched up the religious newsletter and shoved it at him.

He didn’t flinch, or shriek, or run madly away at the image of something religious. He just took it, and gave me a long-suffering look. “The Watchtower?”

I slumped against the door. “I should have known it wouldn’t work. Kristoff dragged me to a church to marry me, after all, but it was the only thing I had.”

He took the garlic bread from me, and set it and the newsletter down on the table next to the door. “Pia Thomason, I am here by a directive from the Moravian Council. As you are no doubt aware, you have been ordered to appear before the Council to answer questions which have risen since the events of June this year. For matters of your safety and comfort, I will escort you to Vienna, and am authorized to meet any reasonable financial needs the journey will impose upon you. The plane leaves in four hours. Am I correct in assuming that you are not yet packed for the journey?”

I picked up the cell phone, saying into it, "It's the messenger all right, and he's immune to both garlic and religious things. He wants me to go to Vienna."

"I heard. We can watch your house for you if you like—"

"That won't be necessary. I'll call you later." I hung up the phone and faced the vampire. Like the other males of his species, he would have been home on a fashion show runway. I wondered if it was some rule that all vampires had to be drop-dead sexy. "I told the Council when they sent me the e-mail saying you were coming that I had no intention of letting them do any sort of third degree on me. Christian Dante is the head of the council, isn't he?"

The vampire inclined his head in agreement. "He is executive director, yes."

"He was there in Iceland when all the stuff happened. Well, he was there for most of it. I told him then everything I knew, so I have nothing further to say to any of the Council."

"You are a midnight Zorya in the Brotherhood—"

"I am not," I interrupted, holding up my hand to stop him.

He looked pointedly at the moonstone charm hanging from my wrist.

"Not any more," I said, lowering my hand. "I gave up Zoryaing. If there was someone else I could give the stone to, I would, but there is no Brotherhood group here, for which I am profoundly grateful if you want to know the truth. So you can just go back to your precious council and tell them that I said no."

He was silent for a moment, his dark eyes assessing me in a manner that made me very uncomfortable. Mentally, I ran over any stake-shaped objects I might have in the house. "I should tell you that my orders to bring you before the Council did not take into account your wishes."

I lifted my chin, matching his intense gaze with one that I hoped did not show the fear that suddenly rolled around in my stomach. "Is that a threat?"

"No. It is merely a statement of fact. I am charged with bringing you before the Council, and I will do so."

His arrogant statement was thankfully just what I needed. The fear inside me changed to anger, anger that the vampires were so high handed, anger that the man in front of me thought I was such a pushover, and anger that I was in this position to begin with. Where was Kristoff when I needed him to protect me from the ire of his brother vampires? Why wasn't here like he was supposed to be, suitably grateful that I got back his soul?

The anger grew hot, building and intensifying until it threatened to burst out of me.

"No!" I suddenly shouted, flinging my arms open wide. A brilliant, blinding blue-silver-white light burst forth from my hands, arcing above and below me, surrounding me in a sphere of brilliance.

The vampire yelped as the rays of the light touched him, flinging himself backwards through the open door.

"I will not be used," I shouted at him, the light growing in intensity. "Not by you, your council, or anyone! Do you understand? No one!"

The vampire started to say something, but I slammed shut the door, locking it before I crumpled to the floor, face resting against the cool wood as the light surrounding me slowly faded to nothing.

**Want more? Watch the book video!**

