

A close-up, high-contrast portrait of a man's face. He has intense, glowing purple eyes and a well-groomed goatee. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of his skin and the intensity of his gaze. The background is dark, making the subject stand out.

***PG FORTE***

**Spanish  
Love Song**

*A Children of Night Story*

# Spanish Love Song

PG Forte

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*“If you can’t comprehend, read it in my eyes.  
If you don’t understand it’s love in a thin disguise.  
And what it takes to move you, each time that you resist,  
is more than just a pretty face to prove that I exist.”*

*A Word in Spanish ~ Elton John and Bernie Taupin*

## Chapter One

*Alcázares Reales de Sevilla, España*

*Late Fifteenth Century*

The evening was balmy and warm. The air, already thick and sweet with the fragrance of a thousand blossoms, was made even more so by the guitars of the *Sevillanas*. The courtyard of the royal palace was crowded tonight and in the flickering torchlight, the jewels and glittering raiment worn by those in attendance threatened to outshine the stars.

Truly, if the world had an epicenter, Sevilla was its name. Of that Damian Ysidro Esposito-Montoya, Vizconde de Castile was absolutely certain; and he was one of the privileged few lucky enough to live here, at the very heart of all that was cultured and elegant, beautiful and refined. As he glanced around appreciatively, he was aware of an almost unbearable excitement welling inside him. The night was young and filled with infinite possibilities.

“Well, *amigo*, it appears your beauty has caught someone’s eyes,” the voice of the duke, his patron, murmured in Damian’s ear. “Did you know of this?”

Damian inclined his head and smiled back at him, his expression an almost perfect blend of humility, adoration and gratitude. “*Sí. Muchísimas gracias, Excelencia*. I am flattered. You honor me, as always, with your kind regard.”

“You misunderstand me,” the duke replied peevishly. “The eyes to which I’m referring are not my own. They belong to that creature over there, the one lounging against that pillar on the far side of the hall. Who is he? Do we know him?”

Dutifully turning his head in the direction the duke was indicating, Damian cast a desultory glance across the marble floor of the *patio de las Doncellas*, already knowing what he would find. “Ah. *Sí, Excelencia*. He arrived here a fortnight ago in the company of that Italian baron you found so amusing at dinner the other night. His name is...oh, dear, let me see if I cannot recall it for you. Is it *Señor*...Quintano, perhaps? *Sí*. I’m almost certain that is what he is called.”

While the duke processed the information he'd been given, Damian allowed himself a small smile of satisfaction. *Yes, that was very well done.* As the duke's most trusted attendant, he was expected to remember and keep track of the names and status of everyone at court, as well as any other information His Excellency might find useful to know. As his most intimate companion, on the other hand, he was not expected to have eyes, or even the smallest level of interest, for any other man.

It was important, therefore, that he strike the proper tone when attempting to recall the name of the man who, had the duke but known it, had spent most of the past few evenings watching Damian from beside that very same pillar. Damian was confident his answer—calm, disinterested, just hesitant enough—had achieved the desired effect. In truth, however, there had been no “perhaps” about it. By now, he knew the man's name almost as well as he did his own.

His name was Conrad, Conrad Quintano, and those eyes that had been at the center of the duke's complaint, the eyes that Damian could feel trained upon him even now, were surely the most astonishingly mesmerizing orbs the good God had ever created.

In fact, those same adjectives could also be applied to the man himself. Conrad was, perhaps, half a head shorter than Damian, but possessed of so powerful a physique that, just gazing upon it, quite literally stole Damian's breath away. His face was hard, not beautiful in any sense of the word, but strong and so very masculine. His usual expression was dour, grim, the look of a man who had perhaps seen too much of the world. But fierce as Conrad was wont to appear, there was yet a sweetness to his mouth that Damian could almost taste and he wished, oh, how he wished, that he could taste it in truth.

As of yet, they'd exchanged only a few brief smiles and a handful of words in passing, but Damian had spent most of the intervening hours spinning deliciously erotic fantasies in which they did and said so much more. These last few nights in particular, as he rolled about on his cot, quite unable to sleep, those same sweet syllables had repeated themselves endlessly within his head. Conrad Quintano. Conrad Quintano. *Con-rad Quin-ta-no.*

“He looks like a peasant,” the duke observed.

Damian sighed. He did *not* look like a peasant. There was a regal air about the man that showed itself in the way he stood, the way he walked, the way he held himself. “And yet, he seems quite taken with you, my lord.”

“What's that you say?” the duke snapped. “Me? Are you blind, Montoya? It is *you* he's been staring at.”

“*Sí.*” Damian pressed closer to the duke, faking a tremor. “I fear your Excellency is quite right about that. If looks could kill, I know I would be in grave peril. It’s obvious he envies me my position and wishes to replace me by your side. In truth, now that I think it, I’m not sure I should *not* fear for my life. He looks to be extremely dangerous. Do you not think so, *Excellencia*? And more than capable of doing...well, just about anything he might wish to do.”

The last part of his speech was no exaggeration and Damian could not completely suppress an actual shiver of delight as he thought about it. In his fantasies, Conrad had already done a great many things, all of them capably.

The duke frowned. “Has this been going on for some time then? You should have mentioned it to me sooner. Who does the brigand think he is, to threaten you while you are under my protection? It’s insupportable. I shall have those eyes plucked from his head for his presumption. Perhaps I should send a few men over there now, to teach him some manners.”

*Ay, Dios mio.* Damian bit his lip. It was possible he’d overplayed that last hand. “Oh, but surely that’s not necessary? If your Excellency pleases, would you not prefer me to bring him over here, that you might speak with him instead?”

The duke looked affronted. “You forget yourself. Why should I wish to speak to such a one as he? Did you not just hear me say it? The man is a peasant. I am sure of it.”

“*Sí, Excellencia,* I am sure you are correct, as always. But, if you’ll forgive me, that is precisely my point. One would not wish to discount the peasants too quickly, would you not agree? For, upon my honor, I’m convinced they must rank among the world’s most proficient lovers.”

“Montoya! What nonsense is this? Is it your intention to insult me?”

Damian shook his head. “No, no, *Excelencia. Le ruego perdonarme.* Never would I do such a thing. If my lord will but allow me to explain?”

“*Sí.* Do so,” the duke replied, glaring at Damian through narrowed eyes. “Immediately.”

“Well, my lord, if you will but consider their numbers, I’m sure you will agree with me. How can they *not* be prodigiously skillful at the art of lovemaking? There are *so* very many of them in the world. Given the rate at which they’re reproducing, they must be devoting *all* of their time to practice!”

It took a moment for Damian’s thrust to hit home. Eventually, it did however. The duke laughed aloud, clapped Damian on the back and turned immediately to the neighbor on his other side and repeated the joke, giving

himself the credit for having thought of it.

Satisfied the danger had been averted, Damian allowed himself the luxury of glancing once again in Conrad's direction, but the space he had occupied all night beside the pillar was now vacant. Disappointed, Damian scanned the courtyard, hoping for at least another glimpse of the man, but Conrad was nowhere in sight. *Que pena*, Damian thought sighing sadly, his enjoyment of the night severely diminished. *What a pity*.

Never, in all his life, had Damian known anyone who affected him in the way Conrad did. Next to him, all other men dwindled into insignificance. They left him cold, whereas Conrad fired his blood.

He wanted him as he had never wanted anyone. His body ached to have him in all the most unholy ways. There had to be some means by which he might satisfy the lust that raged within him or it would surely drive him mad.

All he needed was a small space of time in which to indulge his desires, just a few short hours, perhaps a single night, if he were lucky. If he could but contrive a way in which the two of them might be alone together, undisturbed—was that really so much to ask? Ah, if only fate would smile upon him.

## Chapter Two

Conrad stalked, ghost-like, through the castle's deserted upstairs hallway, while the laughter of imbeciles rang in his ears and a fire raged in his heart. Nearly six hundred years he had roamed the earth, visiting destruction wherever he wished, withholding it at his pleasure, and they dared make mock? They dared make *him* the butt of their jokes? His fangs throbbed. The beast within him demanded he seek retribution.

By now, he should be beyond caring what mere men thought of him. They and their lies and their petty, insubstantial little lives should be beneath his notice. But this, he supposed, was what came of his futile attempts to live, once again, among them. He'd tried to turn his back on his own kind; tried to forget what he'd become, all that he'd lost. He should have known better.

*A peasant am I?* At one time that may have been true, but that was at least several lifetimes ago. In the centuries since he'd been turned to the dark, he'd fought and murdered his way up through the ranks of the undead. He was now accounted practically a prince among his own kind, the undisputed lord and master of his own unruly nation. Just because he had never felt the slightest inclination to actually rule over his people, that did not mean they were not still his to command should he ever wish to do so.

Perhaps, after tonight, he would. Perhaps he would take up the reins of power and transform his clan into a fierce and fearsome tribe such as the world had never before seen. Then his name would be one to cause even the wisest and most powerful of men to tremble—and not just those who were simpering, witless fools!

Such glory would have to wait for another time, however, because tonight, he had a small score to settle with two of the fools.

Arriving at his destination—the suite of rooms reserved for the baron with whom he was traveling—Conrad let himself into the baron's bedchamber. It did not take long to find what he sought. The baron was in the habit of taking a mild soporific to help him sleep. A few grains of the substance would also suffice to

put *el Duque* into a long and heavy slumber, granting Conrad the space and time he needed to exact his revenge.

After pocketing the potion, Conrad left the baron's chambers and retraced his steps down the hallway. He smiled grimly as he considered what lay ahead. There were many other punishments he could have contrived for the duke. Few would have been as entertaining. None would have provided him the same level of enjoyment.

How better to humble the pompous, arrogant duke than by seducing away his favorite plaything? And, if it so happened that the plaything in question must also suffer—from the ruining of all his prospects and the blighting of his future—well, what of it? It was surely no more than the young man deserved.

Ever since his arrival in Sevilla, Conrad had been almost painfully aware of the oh-so-charming Viscount Montoya. As was clear to him now, the admiring glances and shy-seeming smiles Damian had been wont to cast in his direction had unbalanced Conrad's mind and seriously clouded his judgment. It was one thing, after all, to appreciate a young man's good looks, anyone might be excused for doing so, but he had allowed himself to fall victim to the ridiculous fiction that the spoiled, pampered object of his infatuation actually returned his feelings. It was a fantasy. A dream. One he could neither excuse nor forgive.

*I should have made a quick meal of him the very first night and put an end to the craving.* He was still not sure why he had not done so. It had not been from fear of discovery. Over the years, he had become so adept at his feeding, so subtle in his technique, that his prey rarely even realized they'd been caught, unless he wished them to. Damian wouldn't have even known what had happened to him. He could have gone his own way afterwards, just as Conrad—his hunger pleasantly sated—would have gone his, and no one need ever be the wiser.

But, it had been such a very long time since anyone had gazed at Conrad in so adoring a fashion, if, in fact, anyone ever had. His wife may have done so once, he supposed, but that good woman had been dust for so very long now Conrad could no longer recall her features. He still retained a vague impression of dark eyes and dark hair, but it was possible he was wrong even about that, and it certainly didn't help his recollections any that when he closed his own eyes now and tried to think back and remember the only face that came to mind was Damian's!

It had felt good to bask in the young man's apparent regard. It had felt too good—like warm, spring sunshine after a too-long, too-bitter winter. Conrad should have realized that anything that reminded him of sunshine could never be

a good thing. Not for him. Not anymore. Not for a very long time.

With the sins of six centuries weighing heavy on his soul, he had supposed himself immune to all the more tender emotions. Love, devotion, compassion, remorse—he had assumed his ability to feel such things had been lost along with the rest of his humanity. Yet, Damian, clever fool that he was, had found a way to slip his blade past Conrad's defenses, to pierce the heart he hadn't even known he still possessed.

Perhaps the boy had not even meant to do so. Perhaps the touch had been completely unintentional. Intentional or not, Conrad could not allow such an attack to go uncountered.

*He looks to be extremely dangerous...*

Out of all the nonsense Damian had spouted this evening that was the one bit of sense. Tonight, he would find that out. Tonight, he would learn, to his sorrow, just how dangerous Conrad really was.

## Chapter Three

Skulking unseen in the upstairs corridor, Conrad watched as Damian rounded the corner and headed his way. It had taken very little time for the duke to succumb to the drugs Conrad had slipped into his wine; but it appeared to have taken Damian even less time to settle the seemingly inebriated duke in his bedchamber. Now, as he hurried along the hallway, he had the look about him of a man who'd just been let off on holiday, the look of a man speeding toward his lover's bed, rather than away from it. Conrad wondered briefly where Damian thought he was going. Wherever it was, he was almost certainly not going to reach his destination tonight.

Conrad stepped from the shadows and placed himself in the nobleman's path. "My lord. I would have a word with you, sir."

Damian stopped short, surprise giving way to delight—or so it would have appeared, if the gleam in his eyes or the sudden smile that wreathed his lips had been something in which Conrad still believed. He had to stop himself from scowling. No one should be allowed to smile in such a fashion and not have it mean something.

"Why, my dear *Señor Quintano*," Damian purred as he gracefully essayed a deep bow. "But of course you may. *El placer es mío*. I am at your complete disposal. Only, please, tell me, in what way might I be of assistance to your esteemed self this evening?"

"You are too kind," Conrad replied, pleased to note the boy had finally resolved his doubts as to Conrad's identity. That was good. After all, where would be the lesson learned if Damian could not properly recall the name of the man who was about to ruin him? "But, on the contrary, it is I who wish to be of assistance to you."

"Do you?" A small smile played over Damian's lips. "Well, then I am indeed honored. Pray, do continue."

"I'm afraid I could not help but overhear part of your conversation this evening, with His Excellency, the duke," Conrad said as he moved closer. Close enough that Damian was all but caged within one of the deep doorways that lined the corridor. Close enough that the boy's heartbeat was clearly audible and the scent of his blood an almost overpowering lure. "You appear to be laboring under a small but rather grave misconception and I thought, if you would but allow it, I might be able to correct your thinking?"

"*Sí*. By all means." Damian's eyes gleamed and Conrad could all but feel his

anticipation. "I look forward to your correction."

Holding his own anticipation in check, Conrad shrugged. "Perhaps not, my friend. For I am afraid what I have to say to you will not come as a happy surprise. Speaking as one who has had a great deal of experience with...certain elements of society, I must tell you that most of the peasants with whom I've been acquainted have been sadly lacking in skill when it comes to the subtle art of pleasuring a man, and not nearly as proficient as you seem to think."

At that, Damian's smile flickered and went out. Color suffused his face. "You read lips," he said, his voice dull. "I had not realized you numbered that among your talents. What a very...useful skill to possess."

Conrad sighed. "Alas, no. I fear you are once again mistaken. I do not read lips. I do, however, possess very excellent hearing. Right now, for example, I can hear the pounding of your heart. It is kicking so fiercely against your ribs that it calls to mind a young buck that's been pulled down by wolves and knows it's about to have its throat ripped out."

Damian had gone altogether still. He cleared his throat with obvious difficulty. "How exceptionally...vivid," he murmured, lips curling in disgust. "It is a wonderfully descriptive image your words have painted for me. *Muchas gracias, Señor*. I'm sure I shall treasure the memory of it always."

"I am sure you shall." Once again Conrad shortened the distance between them. "In fact, I am confident I shall give you sufficient cause to remember this evening for a very long time indeed." He stretched out a hand as he spoke, laying his palm against the center of Damian's chest. Damian's eyes widened in alarm. His heart lurched. Conrad smiled. "There it goes again. My apologies, my lord, I fear I must be frightening you."

Damian shook his head. "No, *Señor*. This time it is *you* who are mistaken."

"Do you really think so?" As he took in the stubborn set of Damian's jaw, the rebellious gleam in his eyes, Conrad could not help but smile. The hunter in him was unexpectedly pleased with this sudden show of boldness. Where was the fun, after all, in a chase that was over too soon? "Myself, I do not see how that could be possible. For, as it happens, I am rarely mistaken."

Damian swallowed hard. "I do not doubt it." His chin lifted infinitesimally. "But I, on the other hand, am hardly *ever* frightened." And, suddenly, he was in motion. Leaning in, he erased the gap between them, cupped his hands around Conrad's face and kissed him—hard.

The move took Conrad by surprise. Damian seized the advantage and pressed closer. He slanted his head to the side in a bid to deepen the kiss, which Conrad

allowed, giving in to his own, almost overpowering, curiosity. *What is he up to? How far will he take this?*

An instant later, however, even his curiosity deserted him under the weight of a momentous discovery. Damian's lips seemed to fit Conrad's mouth so perfectly it was as though they'd been divinely crafted for just that purpose. *Made for me.* The thought was so alien it would have shocked Conrad had he still been able to think clearly, but Damian's tongue darted between Conrad's lips and hunger churned anew. His fangs pulsed with their need. Thinking clearly was no longer a possibility. *He was made for me.*

Growling now, Conrad took a grip on Damian's shoulders and forced him back against the door. Damian went willingly, arching against him, thrusting his hips into Conrad's, leaving him with no doubt as to what Damian wanted from him tonight: the very same thing he wanted from Damian—wanted, and fully intended to have, with no thought to the consequences. Afterwards, they could both die on the spot, and he'd be content.

"Careful, young one," Conrad warned as he pressed his lips to Damian's throat and let his tongue trace over the veins that flowed beneath the surface, searching for just the right place to begin the feast. "You're playing with fire." As close as he was to losing control, the same could be said of himself.

A wild laugh escaped Damian's lips. "Ah, but this old castle can be so dreadfully drafty at times. Do you not find it to be so? How else is one to stay warm?"

How, indeed? Conrad couldn't help but agree. A moment later, his mouth found what it had been seeking. He sank his fangs into Damian's neck, shuddering with the bliss of that first, sweet taste. *Made for me.* Unbidden, the thought came again. *For me and for me alone.*

"*Dios,*" Damian gasped as the venom hit. He clutched Conrad tighter, legs shaking as though they were about to give way.

Conrad pressed him harder against the door, using the weight of his own body to keep Damian from falling. His actions had unintended results. Damian's erection rubbed against his own, reminding Conrad that there were other needs to be met, other desires to be fulfilled. He wrenched his mouth away from Damian's throat.

"Your chambers," he demanded hoarsely. "Where are they?"

Damian frowned, as though struggling for comprehension. In the silence, Conrad could hear the approach of footsteps ascending the stairs at the far end of the hallway.

“Quickly. Someone is climbing the stairs. If you’ve any wish to avoid being discovered, you must take me to your room. Now, *hidalgo*.”

Damian’s eyes flickered briefly in the direction of the stairs, then back to lock with Conrad’s. Still he hesitated, as though weighing his decision.

“Now,” Conrad repeated impatiently. “I swear, if you do not, I will have you right here in this corridor, in plain sight of anyone who passes, whether it results in your ruination or not.”

At that, Damian’s chin lifted. “I thought, perhaps, that might be a part of your plan?” He spared another quick glance in the direction of the stairs then whispered urgently. “Have I misunderstood? Was it not your intention to humiliate me as punishment for my having insulted you?”

Conrad stared at him in disbelief as he struggled to restrain his inner beast. It appeared Damian was less a fool than he’d originally thought him—not that he was exhibiting much intelligence by baiting him in this fashion. Conrad’s hunger was so far from satisfied he might very conceivably kill anyone who attempted to take Damian from him right now. He might kill Damian, as well, if he didn’t stop thwarting him like this. “Plans can change,” he growled quietly.

A wicked smile broke over Damian’s lips. “I am delighted to hear it.” He reached behind him, his hand scrabbling briefly, finally making contact with the door’s handle. He shoved the door open and practically fell backward into the room, pulling Conrad in with him.

*Where are we now?* Conrad glanced around the empty bedchamber as Damian secured the door behind them. *Whose room is this?* He scented the air, searching for clues to the room’s owner. Only one scent lingered on the still air, however, and it was a scent with which he’d become intimately acquainted in the last few minutes—Damian’s.

Snarling in disbelief, Conrad turned and pinned the younger man against the door. “What are you playing at tonight?” he demanded in furious tones. “This is *your* room.”

Conrad could think of only one reason why the boy would risk being caught with him in the hallway when he was this close to safety. *It must amuse him to tease the poor, besotted peasant with his kisses. He must be planning on laughing about it tomorrow with his royal patrón.* Conrad swore silently as he struggled to hold his beast in check. If what he suspected was true, then ruining Damian might not be punishment enough. This might well become the very last night of his reckless young life.



## Chapter Four

Damian had no sooner finished bolting the door to his room when he found himself seized by the shoulders and spun roughly around. “What are you playing at tonight?” Conrad snarled, shoving him hard against the door. “This is *your* room.”

Confused and severely annoyed—his head was still ringing from its impact with the heavy, oaken door, damn it—Damian glared back at him. “*Sí*. My room. As requested.”

*What is wrong with the heavens this evening? Can they not simply make up their minds?* Did the powers above really intend to grant him his heart’s desire, or had he been hoping for too much? Perhaps it was their plan merely to punish him for his presumption.

To be fair, he had not immediately seen the Hand of Providence at work in the night’s events. When the duke first expressed a desire to retire early Damian had assumed His Excellency was in an amorous mood. He expected he’d be spending the rest of the night sequestered with the duke in his chambers, attending to his every need.

With thoughts of Conrad filling his head, and the man himself nowhere in sight, it had not seemed altogether the worst option. At the very least, Damian hoped to take refuge in fantasy. If he were to pretend it was Conrad he was bedding rather than the duke, he might find some small measure of relief from the seething tension that had been making sleep impossible.

But His Excellency had begun to snore before his servants had even finished undressing him, which was when it occurred to Damian that perhaps his prayers had *not* gone unheard after all. As soundly as the duke was sleeping, it seemed highly doubtful he could have any further need for Damian’s services until mid-morning, at the very earliest.

Suddenly, the night was his own and Damian knew just how he hoped to spend it.

He’d been going in search of Conrad when, miraculously, Conrad found him—right outside his own chamber door. It was then Damian knew for a certainty that Heaven must indeed be smiling down upon him; until a moment later, when his faith was once again shaken by Conrad’s anger. But only temporarily. Because, what reason could there be for Conrad’s fury, save that he wanted Damian and felt himself scorned?

If that was the case, then *bueno*, they were of one mind, for Damian wanted Conrad as well. Kissing him had seemed the quickest way of getting that point

across and, *Dios mio*, the man could kiss! As far as Damian was concerned, in that single moment they had both as good as declared themselves. The rest was merely a matter of working out the details.

So then, why was Conrad *still* so angry? “Tell me,” he demanded. “If you were this close to safety all the while, why would you have risked exposure by dallying with me in the hallway for as long as you did?”

Damian shrugged. “I did not think you would be amenable to the idea of changing locations.” He was surprised it needed to be said. “As I told you, I assumed your plan was to use the threat of discovery to try and frighten me. Since privacy would have removed the greater part of the danger, I had to also assume any place more secluded would not appeal to you.”

“So, you risked exposure in order to indulge my wishes?” A cold smile curled Conrad’s lips. “How extraordinarily accommodating. I suppose I should thank you.”

Damian sighed. In truth, he had not judged the risk to be all that great. As the younger son of a very minor nobleman, he might not rank terribly high in the scheme of things, still he was not completely without privilege. In addition, as Conrad was no doubt well aware, he was under the duke’s protection. Of the two of them, it was Conrad who would likely suffer the most were they to be caught. Or had Conrad not overheard His Excellency’s threat to put his eyes out if he did not stop staring at Damian? “If I had urged you to come to my room before you suggested it, would you have accepted my invitation?”

The smile faded slowly from Conrad’s face, leaving it watchful. “I don’t know.”

“I thought it unlikely.”

“Another assumption? Dear me, it appears your thoughts are filled with such things tonight.” Relaxing the iron grip he’d held on Damian’s shoulders, Conrad lightly traced his fingers over Damian’s throat. Desire whispered along Damian’s nerves and his eyes very nearly closed of their own volition. He had to swallow hard to keep himself from sighing with longing. “You should take care, *hidalgo*,” Conrad murmured. His voice, so cool, so quiet, so steely-edged, seemed to chill even the air around them. “Assumptions can be very dangerous things. Acting too rashly on what one only *suspects* is true has led many a man into grave peril. But, then, I’m forgetting. You’re not one who is easily frightened, are you?”

Damian met Conrad’s gaze. “No,” he answered, as coolly as he could. “I am not.”

Taking advantage of Conrad’s lessened hold on him, Damian shoved away from the door. He crossed to the dresser where he kept his decanter of port and

poured himself some wine. The last thing he wanted was for Conrad to realize how very frightened he'd suddenly become. There was another assumption he'd been making. He'd assumed Conrad had been as much affected by the kiss they'd shared as he had been; that when Conrad said his plans had changed, it meant he'd given up his quest for vengeance. What if Damian had been wrong about that? What if their kiss meant nothing at all to Conrad? What if he was *still* seeking revenge?

"I am not often surprised anymore," Conrad said, his voice still quietly reflective. "Yet you have managed to do so more than once tonight."

Damian sipped at his wine. "Well, that is gratifying to know. After all, one can but *try* not to be too predictable. But, now, my dear sir, if your honor has been satisfied and you've nothing more to gain here, perhaps you might employ your very excellent hearing to determine if it would be possible for you to safely leave?"

"Did you think to be rid of me so easily?" Conrad came away from the door. He moved silently across the floor but, even facing in the other direction, Damian could sense him draw near. "I do not intend to leave this room until I've gotten everything for which I've come."

Steeling himself, Damian turned to face him. He braced his hands on the edge of the dresser behind him and schooled his features into an expression of polite inquiry. "Indeed, *Señor*? So then, enlighten me, *por favor*. What is it you've come here for?"

"I think you already know the answer to that," Conrad replied, his gaze focused on Damian's mouth. "At least in part."

The force of his gaze was so intense Damian could practically feel its touch upon his skin. His lips tingled under Conrad's scrutiny. He had to resist the urge to lick them. He widened his eyes and stared at Conrad in mock surprise. "Oh, but surely I've misunderstood? Did not you just warn me against making too many assumptions? You cannot *possibly* be suggesting I make yet another one?"

"They do seem difficult to avoid, do they not?" Conrad replied, sounding almost conversational. "I will admit that I, too, may have been led astray by some of the assumptions I've made tonight. For instance, I had assumed this duke of yours was not the sort of man who would find enjoyment in sharing those he considers his."

"It is a reasonable thought, surely? After all, what man would?"

"I've known a few in my time."

Feeling not at all reassured by *that* remark, or by the very dark gleam in Conrad's eyes, Damian turned away again and refilled his glass. "Have you really? How very fascinating."

“And you, my young friend,” Conrad continued musingly, as though Damian had not even spoken, “I had assumed you to be a man of more than average intelligence. Never would I have imagined you would be so reckless, so careless for your own well-being, that you would rush headlong into a situation such as this; one so clearly guaranteed to alienate the affections of your *patrón* were he to discover your...indiscretion, do you think he’d term it?”

*More like treason.* Damian lifted his glass in a small salute to his own stupidity. “It is true. I do not often act as foolishly as I have tonight.”

“It was you who kissed me. Do you deny it?”

Damian shook his head. He had no wish to deny anything. He’d kissed him—*sí*. And he’d gladly do so again, if the opportunity arose. Even now, he had to fight the urge to throw himself at Conrad once more. Instead, he swallowed more wine.

“Why?” Conrad demanded, so abruptly Damian jumped and very nearly spilled his drink. “What would possess you to do such a thing? It cannot have been merely to satisfy an impulse. Did you hope to distract me from my anger? Or do you simply take pleasure in being reckless?”

“I did it for me,” Damian snapped, his hand clenching on his glass, barely able to stop himself from hurling its contents into Conrad’s face. Color flooded his cheeks and he cursed himself for losing control. “Is that so hard to understand? Why should I not—just this once—consider my own desires paramount? All my life, I have been forced to concern myself with the wishes of others. Always have I done what was expected of me, first by my father, now by the duke. What have I to show for it?”

A wry smile curved Conrad’s lips. “Such a petulant little bird,” he said as his gaze swept the room. “Could it be he’s grown tired of his pretty, gilded cage? Has your life here become so dreary you long to escape it? Shall I oblige you in this? I could, you know.”

Damian shook his head. “*Muchas gracias, Señor.* Much as I appreciate your kind offer, to what would I escape? I assure you, this ‘little bird’ is quite content with his life in this *cage*, as you choose to call it. If it were up to me, I would never leave. Alas, such is not to be my fate.”

Conrad’s eyebrows rose. “Why is that?”

“Oh, what does it matter?” Wandering over to the window, Damian pulled the drapes aside and looked out. Moonlight illuminated the gardens below. Faint strains of music drifted to him on the sweet-smelling air. And, in the perfect sky above, the stars were shining. *Only a fool would wish to be anywhere else*, he thought as he glanced up at them. *Only a fool would ask for anything more than I’ve been given.*

“In truth, it matters very little,” Conrad replied from behind him. “Yet, I confess, I find myself to be curious. Speak.”

Damian sighed. “It has been decided that the duke should marry,” he explained, with his back still to the room. “And, soon, if the Crown has anything to say about it. Already, negotiations have begun with the families of several prospective brides. I have been a valued member of the royal household since I was little more than a boy. His Excellency has trusted me, relied upon me, made me privy to his every confidence. Not once in the past few years have I even been allowed to so much as stray from his side for more than a couple of hours. And yet, when that happy day arrives and the entire realm rejoices in my lord’s marriage, shall I be here to see it? No. I shall not. Out of deference to his new duchess, whoever she may be, I am to be sent away.”

Turning again, he smiled at Conrad. “I have, of course, no reason to complain about any of this, nor would I ever dream of doing so. It has been decided this course of action is in the best interests of all concerned and who am I to offer protest? Besides, I am to be rewarded most handsomely for my service here. I am to receive a new title and an estate in the country. It is even likely there will be an advantageous marriage arranged for me as well. And so the appearances will be preserved.”

“All the same, it sounds to me as though you *are* complaining,” Conrad pointed out. “And why, exactly? What is it that troubles you? This is hardly a tragedy that you have recounted to me. Are you so in love with him you cannot bear to be parted from your master? You’ll forgive my skepticism, but you do not kiss like a man whose heart belongs to another.”

“I have never claimed that was the case,” Damian replied. “I am at His Excellency’s service, nothing more. He honors me with his attention. But, what, pray tell, am I to find pleasing about this arrangement? I am in no way unhappy with my life here and would much prefer for it to continue unchanged.”

Conrad sighed. “Nothing continues unchanged. It is useless to wish for such a thing. The future you have outlined for yourself is far from unpleasant. Many people would count themselves lucky to be in your place.”

Damian inclined his head. “It is as you say. My options have always been limited by my situation. This is hardly the worst fate that could have befallen me. I am not unmindful of that fact. Indeed, I know many people who will be quite pleased. My father will be made happy because I will have increased the family’s fortunes and will at last have done something to bring honor to our name. My mother will rejoice at the prospect of more grandchildren upon whom she might dote. I’m sure even my future bride will find much with which to be content. Not only will she have escaped from an almost certain life of

spinsterhood, but she will have her own household to run, a staff to oversee and—always assuming we can contrive to produce them, of course—children to raise. His Excellency, too, will have lost little and gained much since I will, as a matter of course, be expected to host several hunting parties for him each year, during which time I may rejoice in, once again, placing myself at his disposal.”

Filling his glass one more time, Damian sighed. “In fact, as it turns out, the only people likely to be at all inconvenienced are my elder brother—who I will have at last eclipsed—and myself. For I do not *wish* to spend the remainder of my years rustivating in bucolic seclusion, barred from society, from Sevilla, from this life to which I’m so well suited. I ask you, sir, what am I to do with myself in the country? What amusements do you suppose I shall find there? Shall I read? Take long walks through the mud? Grow things? And the hunting—*ay, Dios mio*—to go riding for hours through the trees and the weeds, clambering after a pack of yammering dogs! Tell me, what manner of sport is that for any man of sense to pursue?”

This time, when Damian paused, Conrad said nothing. Perhaps he thought such a prospect sounded pleasant. Perhaps the very existence Damian looked forward to with dread was one that Conrad would enjoy—even with the hunting.

Perhaps they were not quite the kindred spirits he had thought them. So be it.

Once again, Damian drained his glass. The sweet thrill of the drink hit his stomach. Warmth blossomed inside him and with it came the courage to speak of that which, up until now, he’d expressed only in his moments of silent prayer.

“I know that to many others, yourself included perhaps, it may seem a trivial thing,” he said as he crossed to Conrad who continued to watch him in brooding silence. “A matter of no great importance. But I cannot help that. This is *my* life and I do not think it too much to ask that I should have some say in how I am to live it. Or, failing that, I would like to have at least *one thing* of my own choosing; one reckless act that is just for me, a single moment of passion, something I can remember always and whose memory will be enough to warm me for the rest of my life. Surely I deserve that much?”

Conrad shook his head. “You may be right, my friend, but life is seldom as fair as we might wish. It seems we are born to suffer. It is rare for even the most deserving of us to get what we feel ourselves entitled to.”

“Then, perhaps, for a change, I shall try being undeserving instead.” His heart racing, Damian leaned in toward Conrad, intending to kiss him again.

Conrad held him off, frowning sternly. “So is that what this is about? Am I to be your reckless act of passion? Why choose me for so great an honor? Should I be flattered to have been so singled out? Or insulted you think me a peasant?”

“No, no, it’s nothing like that. I swear it!” Damian’s heart plummeted. The

thought that, by his own words, he might have ruined his chances, left him sick with disappointment. “*Perdoname*. Please, *señor*, accept my most heartfelt apologies. It seems I have presumed too much. It’s just...these past weeks...I have thought of little else, other than how I might contrive to steal a few precious moments alone with you. I had thought—or rather, I had *hoped*—you might feel the same. If I’ve been mistaken...”

“Enough,” Conrad commanded softly, laying a finger upon Damian’s lips. “No more talk now. The fault is my own. You were not mistaken, *caro mio*. I have longed for you as well.”

*Truly?* Damian gazed back at him almost afraid now to hope it might be so. Until this moment, he hadn’t even realized how much he’d wanted this, counted on it. Needed it. Too overcome to speak, he pursed his lips and kissed the finger pressed against his mouth.

A soft growl emerged from Conrad’s throat. Encouraged, Damian used his tongue to tease the tip of Conrad’s finger. He watched in amazement as Conrad’s eyes appeared to change color. It was a trick of the light, Damian did not doubt it, but he was still astonished by the sight.

Conrad’s eyes glowed like molten gold as he reached for him. Damian melted into his arms, certain that it was exactly where he belonged. It was as though he’d been waiting his entire life for this one man, this single moment, to arrive.

*Sí, mi querido*, he thought, almost giddy with desire as Conrad’s lips found his; as Conrad’s hands molded and shaped themselves to his body; as Conrad pulled him close, with the clear intent of laying claim to whatever he touched. *Take anything you like. Take everything.*

Damian barely noticed as Conrad walked him backward towards the bed, stripping his clothes from him along the way, until he tumbled, nearly naked, upon the mattress. While he hurried to remove the rest of his garments, Damian watched Conrad undress, gradually revealing powerful muscles encased in evenly bronzed skin beneath a light dusting of golden brown hair.

“But...you are so beautiful!” Damian gasped, dazzled by the vision of masculine perfection that stood before him. He’d known it would be the case but, all the same, he’d not been expecting *this!* Here was everything a man’s body should be; down to the small white scars that hinted at a life lived hard, of risks taken and battles won.

“Am I?” Conrad smiled as his own gaze traversed Damian’s body. “Well, then I’d say we were well matched.”

Damian opened his arms and Conrad came to him, lowering himself on to the bed, wrapping him in his embrace. The thrill of holding him thus, skin to skin,

stole Damian's breath. He moved against him just to feel the shifting of the muscles in their arms and legs as they intertwined, the stiffness of their cocks rubbing together, all the jostling softness underneath. It made him mad with desire and yet, at the same time, he felt an unaccustomed shyness.

He ran his hands over the rugged contours of Conrad's back, over skin as smooth and slick as polished ivory. He breathed in deeply, inhaling the musky scent of Conrad's flesh, and still he could not keep the odd thought from creeping into his head that it wasn't a man he was bedding tonight at all, but a god.

Then Conrad captured his mouth again and Damian's thoughts spun out of control. It no longer mattered what manner of man he was in bed with. He lost track of time, of space—he lost track of everything. Everything but the taste of Conrad's lips on his, heady and exotic, darkly delicious, like the very finest spiced wine. That was something he didn't think he ever *could* forget. That was one memory he was sure he would keep 'til his dying day.

When Conrad took hold of Damian's hair and tugged his head to the side Damian gave in to the pressure eagerly, wanting only to please. But the loss of Conrad's mouth on his left him bereft. He wanted it back. He *needed* it back. Under normal circumstances, he would have caged his lover's face in his hands and *taken* it back, but not tonight.

Tonight, it was as though Conrad's needs took precedence over anything Damian might want for himself.

Tonight, Damian found he could but give, he could but ache with need and longing, and tremble in breathless anticipation of an almost unimaginable rapture. His entire mind seemed lost to him, its only focus Conrad's lips as they traveled slow and sure along the length of his neck.

"*Dios mio.*" Damian shuddered with pleasure as Conrad's teeth bit softly into his flesh. A flood of luscious heat rushed through him, followed shortly thereafter by a wave of cold terror. Reality intruded. All at once, his mind was once again his own. "No," he gasped, struggling to break free of the thrall that seemed to grip him. This must *not* happen. "*Espere—wait! Don't do that. Stop.*" Pinned as he was to the bed, it was impossible to shove Conrad away. He attempted it all the same, thrashing and bucking as hard as he might in an effort to dislodge him.

An angry growl erupted from Conrad's throat. "Be still," he ordered as Damian squirmed beneath him—to no avail. The strength of the man was overwhelming. It did not even seem as though Conrad were making any particular effort to restrain him, yet Damian was held fast and almost completely immobile..

“Please, *señor*,” he begged. “Don’t do this. Is there no mercy at all within your soul?”

At that, Conrad seemed to freeze in place. His mouth was withdrawn. His head lifted slowly. His eyes, as he met Damian’s gaze, were shuttered, barely visible beneath heavy lids. His expression was suspicious and grim, colder than winter. “What is it that troubles you?”

“What troubles me?” The question caught Damian by surprise. He laughed harshly, furious at them both now. “Oh, why, nothing, *señor*. Nothing at all. What could possibly be amiss?” How could he have been such a fool? Dangerous as he’d known Conrad to be, still he’d imagined himself safe with him. Now he would pay the price for his foolishness. “Excepting, of course, the small fact that—as you are already well aware—I am not free to take a lover to my bed and yet...” He paused, struggling once more for composure. “If you’ve marked me as thoroughly as I fear you must have by now, I don’t know how I am to explain such a thing. Unless I can somehow convince His Excellency it was he who bit me, while too drunk to recall it, my life is as good as ended. Is it still revenge you’re after, *señor*? If so, *felicidades*, I congratulate you for having achieved your goal. It was most cleverly done. I confess I did not even see the blow coming.”

## Chapter Five

Conrad looked briefly startled. His gaze flicked curiously to Damian's neck, then back to his face. A small smile graced his lips. "So. It seems I've frightened the little bird, after all. Calm yourself, my dear, you've naught to fear. Upon my honor, I've left no marks upon you."

"How is that possible? I'm sure I felt your teeth break my skin. There must be a mark."

"You may check your reflection in the glass, if you doubt me," Conrad suggested. "But I have given you my word on it and I do not lie about such things." Straightening up, he released Damian from his grasp. He sat back on his heels between Damian's spread legs and gazed at him thoughtfully. "I won't say it wouldn't give me a good deal of pleasure to mark you for myself, or that I had not thought of doing so, for indeed I have. But I am well aware of the awkwardness of your position and what unpleasantness might ensue were I to indulge myself in such a manner and I no longer have any wish to cause you harm. In truth, I have come to the realization that it would pain me greatly to see you come to grief."

*Thank God for that.* Damian rubbed his hands over his face. He felt positively weak with relief. "*Muchas gracias.*"

Conrad sighed. "*De nada.* But, since we are speaking frankly, you should know, perhaps, that you were not altogether wrong in your initial assumption. I was, indeed, very angry with you earlier this evening. I came here tonight with every intention of exacting retribution—from you as well as from the duke. It was for that very reason that I went to the effort of drugging him. I wished to keep him out of the way while I occupied myself with you."

"You did what?" Startled, Damian propped himself up on his elbows and stared at Conrad. "Drugged? Is that why he sleeps so soundly? But...how? And, by all that's holy, *why?* What madness would prompt you to take such a risk?" The danger Conrad had placed himself in left Damian terrified for him. If he'd ever cared to wonder whether or not Conrad was in fact a peasant, this would have provided proof positive he was not. No one of less than *royal* birth would dare even think of doing such a thing—unless they were hopelessly mad. Such an action spelled death if he were to be found out. Even among the aristocracy, most men would have counted themselves honored were they to be insulted by so exalted a personage as an archduke.

"How is of no importance." Conrad waved the question away. "As for why—did I not just explain that to you? I wanted satisfaction. I wanted to make you

both rue your words, to take what was his, make it my own and then flaunt my conquest in his face. I judged him to be the jealous type, someone easily enraged, likely to fly into a fury over such trivial things. Would you not agree with that assessment?"

Trivial? "*Ah, sí, sí,*" Damian agreed, feeling faint. "Most assuredly." Perhaps he had underestimated the amount of danger he was putting himself in tonight. Perhaps, of the two of them, it was *not* Conrad who had the most to lose, after all.

Conrad nodded. "Then, it is as I thought. It would have been a most effective plan. But, it is no longer of importance." His eyes flickered over Damian's face once again. "I've decided it would be unnecessarily cruel to use you in so heartless a fashion, as well as a tragic waste of such a beautiful mouth. But, if I were ever to find out that you've merely been lying to me—"

"I swear to you I am not," Damian insisted, still shaken by the narrowness of his escape. "My hand to God, it was never my intention to insult you. I said what I did only to distract His Excellency, to keep him from guessing at my attraction for you, and to keep him from attempting to divert your attention away from myself. Even though he believes you to be a peasant, I am sure he would much prefer to see your attention focused on him instead of on me." Dropping his gaze, he confessed, "And I, too, may be jealous of what I consider mine."

At that, Conrad laughed. "If that be true, I should thank you, I suppose, for having saved me from *el Duque's* attentions. For that must be surely a fate worse than death." Taking Damian's chin between his fingers, Conrad forced Damian to once again meet his gaze. "But what is it you are calling *yours*, my little lordling? Surely you do not refer to *me* in this fashion?"

Damian swallowed hard, struggling with his disappointment. Clearly, he had been reaching for something so far above him, it might as well have been the sky itself. "I know it cannot be forever," he murmured humbly. "But, I thought, for a little while, perhaps...could it not be so? *Te quiero para mí*—I want you for myself. I have from the very start."

"And you shall have me," Conrad promised, still holding his gaze. "But, Damian, let us be very clear. I am not yours. I do not belong to anyone—not now, not ever again. It is, rather, *you* who will become *mine* tonight, if I so wish it. Not the other way around. Is that understood?"

Damian was not unmindful of the threat implicit in Conrad's dark, implacable gaze, but what cared he for that? It was balanced by the hint of tenderness in his embrace, by the desire that had hardened his body. And by the hope Damian could not quell, the desperate longing he could never deny. Swallowing was twice as difficult as before, words were nearly impossible. "*Sí,*

*señor*,” he managed at last. “Of-of course. It will all be just as you say.”

“Good.” Conrad’s eyes gleamed gold once again. Releasing Damian’s chin, he grasped him by the back of his neck and pulled him close, taking his lips in yet another mind-melting kiss. Damian settled his hands at either side of Conrad’s waist, needing to anchor himself with the touch because, just like before, it seemed as though the room had begun to spin.

Conrad pressed forward, slowly lowering Damian onto the bed. This time, when his hungry mouth sought Damian’s throat, Damian did not resist. He arched his neck, offering himself willingly, putting all his faith in Conrad’s promise to do him no harm.

It was madness to give so much trust, so much control, to a man about whom he knew so very little; a man who, by his own admission, had come here tonight seeking vengeance; one who would apparently stop at nothing in the pursuit of that or any other passion. But, how could Damian not trust him? And how could he not put everything he had at risk in order to be with him for even a little while? Such a man was everything he’d ever hoped to find.

The pulling sensation at his throat grew stronger, sending another backwash of heat spreading throughout Damian’s body. He was acutely aware of every sensation, no matter how slight, from the thundering of his own pulse to the slick sheen of sweat that limned his skin in all the places where his body met Conrad’s. His cock grew painfully hard. When his arousal became too great to ignore, he slid a hand between their straining bodies, awkwardly trying to grasp both shafts at once, squeezing and stroking them, rubbing each against the other with feverish need.

Growling in approval, Conrad canted his hips forward, pushing himself harder into Damian’s hand. Damian tightened his grip in response, stroking faster, aided now by the leaking fluid that coated his fingers. He worked his other hand between them as well, this time reaching for the tender sacs that held their balls. He tugged and twisted, juggling them in his hand. The scent of arousal grew so thick that Damian could almost taste it on the back of his tongue.

“Now, *querido*. Please,” he murmured, stretching up to briefly test his teeth against the muscle of Conrad’s shoulder. “Take me now.” He was desperate for the feel of Conrad’s hands on his body, for the heat of his shaft as it impaled him again and again, for the strength of his arms as they wrapped around him. It would feel so good—he knew that beyond any possible doubt. It would feel better than anything he had ever yet experienced. Better, perhaps, than anything he could even imagine.

A harsh gasp tore from Conrad’s throat as he released Damian’s neck.

Rearing up on his knees, he loomed over Damian. Skin flushed and glistening, his eyes hooded, Conrad gripped Damian's thighs and bent his legs back, spreading them wide.

"Is this what you've been hoping for, *hidalgo*?" he asked, as he slid the weeping tip of his shaft up and down along the crack of Damian's ass. "Is this what you thought it would be like, to be made love to by a peasant?"

Conrad smiled mockingly, taunting Damian, waiting for his nod, for the strangled whisper of assent to push past his lips before proceeding to press into him with torturous slowness...and then he stopped, waiting again, giving Damian's body a chance to adjust.

Damian had never before been taken in this position, face-to-face. He found it unbearably intimate. He shut his eyes against the intrusion and begged, "More. Put it all the way in now."

"First, open your eyes and look at me," Conrad ordered. "And tell me the truth. What is it that's been in your head these past few nights? I've seen the way you've looked at me, watching me even as I was watching you. What was it you were hoping for?"

Damian stared at Conrad in alarm. Was this a trick? A trap? Was he teasing? But, no. One look at Conrad's face told him it was nothing like that. "Wh-what do you wish me to say?"

"I wish you to tell me why it is you are so eager for me to have you. And, please, do not say it is because you actually believe the ridiculous theory you were putting forth earlier this evening. For, I confess, I shall be most disappointed if that is, in fact, the case."

Whether or not Conrad even understood the power he wielded over him, Damian could not say, but he did not for a single moment believe Conrad was seeking dominion over him now out of cruelty, much less revenge. It seemed, rather, that he needed Damian's capitulation; that he lived for it in much the same way a lesser man might live for air or water.

*He needs this*, Damian realized with a profound sense of shock. And, by extension, Conrad needed *him*. It was a thought both humbling and endearing.

"Answer me," Conrad prompted..

"It is only because I am yours, *Señor Quintano*." It cost Damian nothing to say so. It was true anyway. *Conrad Quintano. Conrad Quintano. Con-rad Quin-ta-no*. It had probably been true all along. "All yours. Always yours. In truth, I can give you nothing—whether eagerly or in any other fashion—that you do not already own."

Triumph blazed in Conrad's eyes; triumph mixed with hunger, turning the amber once again to glistening gold. He thrust home, filling Damian to

perfection; then withdrew and slowly thrust again. Moaning in pleasure, Damian took hold of his own shaft once more. He began pumping it quickly, until Conrad covered his hand with his own and forced him to stop.

“No,” Damian all but whimpered. “Don’t. I need—”

“Shh,” Conrad commanded softly. “I know what it is you need. And I would give you all of that and more. Will you not trust me in this?”

Damian gazed at him doubtfully. His aching cock throbbed and he could not keep his hand from tightening on it, squeezing harder. He *hurt*, damn it. He *needed* this. “Conrad...”

“Let me have you, *caro*. All of you. Give yourself over to me now completely and I promise I will leave you wanting for nothing.”

Reluctantly, Damian relinquished both his hold on his shaft and all his control. His heart pounded fiercely in his chest as Conrad’s hand closed over him. The muscles of his stomach rippled nervously. Never in all his life could he recall a time when he’d felt more open, more vulnerable, or more achingly alive.

Again, Conrad began to move, surging into Damian with the same slow, steady rhythm as before, while his hand kept time, gliding just as slowly over Damian’s flesh. Damian could barely breathe. His nervousness forgotten, he writhed on the bed, eyes closed, hands clawing at the covers. It was like being caught between anvil and hammer. Every stroke of Conrad’s cock, each touch of Conrad’s hand, reverberated through him, edging Damian closer and closer to climax. And he could do nothing to alter either the direction or the speed of his course.

“You are so beautiful,” Conrad murmured, his voice hoarse, breathless with his own need. “I could take you like this for hours. Days. I could spend a lifetime at the task.”

*Hours? Surely, he doesn’t mean it?* Damian doubted he could stand even many more minutes of such sweet torture. He forced his eyes open. The veins stood out starkly on Conrad’s neck. His muscles were taut as bowstrings; and in the savage lines of his face Damian could clearly read the effort he was making to deny himself, to delay his own pleasure in order to give everything he had to Damian.

Whatever Damian had been expecting from him tonight, whatever he’d been hoping for in a lover, it had not been this and something broke apart inside him at that moment. All at once he knew with utter clarity that he could never go back to the life he’d been living, nor ever again feel whole without this man.

“Conrad, *muy querido mio*, please. I want only to bring you pleasure. Take me, *mi amor*,” he gasped, exploding in an ecstatic rush of heat and emotion. “Now and forever, I’m yours.”

He spurted helplessly between Conrad's fingers, felt his body convulse and tighten around Conrad's shaft. With a muffled roar, Conrad abandoned his previous caution and plunged hard into him, again and again, causing Damian to climax a second time, even as he felt Conrad shudder and pulse within him, caught up in his own release.

Afterward, Damian lay still, eyes closed, far too relaxed and sated to move. He gasped in pleasure when Conrad's tongue roved over his belly, lapping up the juices that had spilled there. Conrad's mouth moved slowly north, laving Damian's chest, his throat. Then came the swift, sharp sting of Conrad's teeth once again at his neck. A soft warmth spread through Damian's veins. "I like that," he murmured happily. "It feels...very...nice."

"I've no doubt it does." A hint of amusement warmed Conrad's voice. "Although 'nice' is not exactly the word I myself would have chosen to describe most of tonight's activities." A moment passed—perhaps two or three, for Damian had once again lost all track of time—but, finally, Conrad sighed. "So how does the little bird feel now?" he teased as settled himself beside Damian. "Has the 'nice' flight he's taken cured him of the urge to fly outside his cage?"

"For tonight, perhaps." Damian opened his eyes a slit and peeked at Conrad. "But, might he not hope to take to the sky again on the morrow if, perchance, His Excellency were to once again find himself unaccountably exhausted?"

Conrad smiled back at him. "Indeed, he might. And I would not be in the least surprised were such a thing to occur. For, I am told, it is not at all uncommon for these mysterious malaises to sometimes take several weeks to fully resolve themselves."

"*Bueno.*" Closing his eyes once more, Damian nestled his head against Conrad's shoulder. "It's settled then."

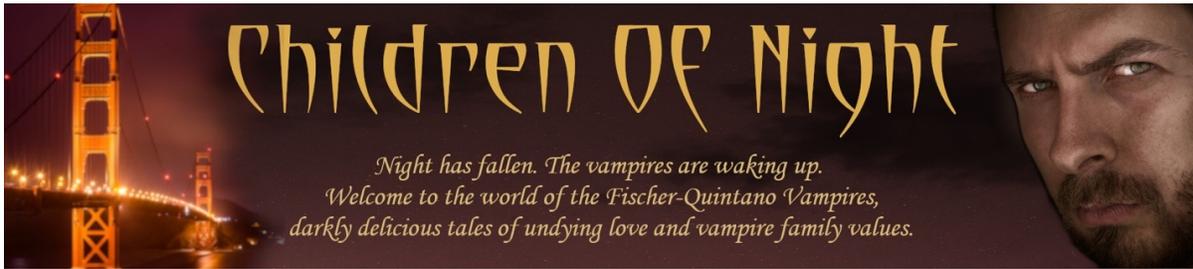
Conrad chuckled. "I'm honored to have met with your approval," he murmured, his voice once again amused. Then he sighed. "But now, I suppose it would be best that I leave you."

Damian nodded sleepily. It *was* for the best, if not at all what he wanted. "Until tomorrow then, my dearest sky."

Conrad had been right, Damian decided as he drifted off to sleep; assumptions were indeed very dangerous things. All along he'd assumed he could never feel so much at home as he did right here, in the *Alcazar*, and that he could never wish to be anywhere else. Now he knew better. He still didn't doubt that Sevilla was the epicenter of the civilized world, but what cared he for that? What business did one such as he have with the world anyway? A bird, after all, was meant to soar above such things and could only ever truly belong to the sky.



## Books in the Children of Night series



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### Ashes of the Day

Damian and Conrad's road has been a rocky one, and Damian is struggling to trust in the relationship he and Conrad now share—what seems like a perfect love. After all, it's fallen apart before, why couldn't it do the same again? Conrad has never been happier, but he lives in fear he'll do something else to drive Damian away—this time permanently. And with everything in chaos around him, his control is slipping.

Julie has learned the interspecies relationships are a disaster. How could a vampire and a human ever be together? But even with another vampire, love isn't easy.

Secrecy and conflict within the nest continues to grow, and Georgia's hold on the deadly secret she carries begins to erode. What she hides threatens their entire species...

## Fallen Embers

Marc Fischer is desperately searching for Elise, determined to find her. But what will happen when he finally has her back in his arms? His single-minded focus on her is just one of the things consuming his thoughts. Unlike his newly single twin, Julie is hooking up with everything that moves—at least, that's how it looks to a jealous Armand.

But the twins' unusual abilities are growing stronger, and Marc makes the mistake of trying to protect Julie from what he's learned about their true nature, unsure of whom he can trust with the knowledge.

Meanwhile, Conrad's relationship with Georgia is about to change yet again. They've both been keeping dangerous secrets. Secrets with the power to destroy. But with Julie's life threatened, the Fischer-Quintano vampires will learn that no lie is hidden forever.

## To Curse the Darkness

Julie has always suspected there was more to her twin brother and her. So when Conrad finally reveals the truth, she's not that surprised. She'd already figured most of it out, anyway. Armand, however, is another story. His shock at learning the twins' secret drives him away in order to gather his thoughts, leaving Julie behind when she needs him most.

When Armand returns, struggling with his own feelings of guilt, inadequacy and betrayal, he finds the Fischer-Quintano house in chaos. Headstrong Julie is determined to go ahead with her plans to save Georgia—losing her would devastate Conrad. But the knowledge she seeks and the ritual she must brave to get it could cause her to lose her mind. If not her life.

## About the Author

PG Forte inhabits a world only slightly less strange than the ones she creates. Filled with serendipity, coincidence, love at first sight and dreams come true.

She wrote her first serialized story when she was still in her teens. The sexy, ongoing adventure tales were very popular at her oh-so-proper, all girls, Catholic High School, where they helped to liven up otherwise dull classes... even if her teachers didn't always think so.

Originally a Jersey girl, PG now resides with her family on the extreme left coast where she writes contemporary and paranormal romance in a variety of sub-genres.

PG loves hearing from readers. She can be reached directly at: [pgforte@pgforte.com](mailto:pgforte@pgforte.com)

Links to reach PG Forte:

[www.PGForte.com](http://www.PGForte.com)

[Facebook.com/AuthorPGForte](https://www.facebook.com/AuthorPGForte)

[Twitter.com/PGForte](https://twitter.com/PGForte)