

Excerpt: Seduce the Darkness

Aleaha's wonderful smell was so strong now, she discerned two scents wrapped together, both somehow familiar. . . she was almost upon the source. . . but there was no longer any women in sight. Was Aleaha guised as a male? Where could she -- Bride crashed into a solid, unmoving wall of muscle, air gushing from her parted lips. She stumbled backward, hit someone else and bounced forward, nailing the wall of muscle and brawn yet again.

That second time, her knees gave out and she tumbled to her ass. As she sat there, panting, she realized Aleaha's scent was now all over her. Had she truly found her? Bride's excitement became as hot as fire in her veins.

The man -- Aleaha? -- turned, his lips curled into an annoyed frown. Down, down he gazed, a lock of dark hair falling over his forehead. When he spotted her, his eyes widened and his frown lifted into a what-have-we-here grin. Bride's excitement drained, as did the burning. There was no recognition in that gaze, no ethereal outline of Aleaha beneath that face. But what a beautiful face it was.

Bride, always a lover of art, experienced a wave of feminine appreciation. His eyes were bright amber, honey mixed in cinnamon and fused by fire, surrounded by decadent black lashes. His skin looked as if it had been dipped in a pot of opalescent glitter. That glittery skin should have made him appear weak, girly. It didn't. It somehow added to his I'll-kill-anyone-anytime-anywhere-and-laugh-while-doing-it air.

Clearly, he was an otherworlder. Though which race, she didn't know. Whichever one, she had to wonder if they were all like him: perfection wrapped in dazzling and sprinkled with every woman's fantasy. What would his blood taste like? Would she be able to keep him down? Her mouth watered, and her fangs elongated.

He had a wonderfully sloped nose, sharp cheekbones and a stubborn jaw. His dark brows were slashes of menace yet tempting all the same. His lips. . . a portal to heaven, surely. They were lush and pink and promised unimaginable pleasures without saying a word. He knew it, too. He radiated utter confidence, absolute strength, and that I'll-do-anything wildness.

As she stared up at him, his smile took on a wicked edge, knowing and sure. He was nothing like shy but horny Tom, the boy-man she'd just abandoned. Dressed completely in black, this man seemed every inch the night warrior. Ready to slash your throat without a moment's notice.

In his case, looks were not deceiving. Without a doubt, he was dangerous.

"Well, well. Aren't you a pretty thing?" he said, offering her a hand. That voice. . . deep and raspy and just roused from bed, as perfect as his face and body.

As people buzzed beside them -- the females staring at him in open-mouthed wonder, the males giving him a wide berth -- Bride tentatively accepted his aid. His warm fingers curled around her wrist, and he easily hefted her up.

When she gained her bearings, she realized he'd tugged her forward so that they were only a few inches apart. He did not release her hand. Her smaller height placed her gaze right at the steady pulse in his neck, and her mouth once again watered.

Concentrate. Bride raised her chin and forced herself to look him in the eye. "You smell like my friend Aleaha Love. Do you know her?" Wait. What if she'd changed her name? He could have been with her and not even known it.

"I smell like a woman, hmm?"

At least he didn't sound insulted. Merely amused. "Yes."

"Well, *you* smell like sex." He leaned down as if he intended to share a secret with her, moonlight caressing him as though it couldn't help itself. Maybe it couldn't. "The dirtiest kind of sex, at that. Which just happens to be my favorite." His thumb traced her palm.

A shiver slid the length of her spine. He was flirting with her, and wickedly so. Though she had no desire to flirt back -- really -- she forced herself to say, "Wow. Already we have something in common." One thing she knew about men. They were more likely to help a woman if they thought they'd get something in return. "That's my favorite kind, too."

That put a surprised sparkle in his amber eyes. "Isn't this just my lucky day, then?"

"You never answered my question. Do you know Aleaha Love?"

"I know many women, but their names escape me right now. I so want to solve this mystery and become your hero. Perhaps your friend and I use the same perfume."

"She doesn't wear perfume and I doubt you do, either." Even though so much time had passed since Bride had seen Aleaha, she knew her friend would never douse herself in any kind of body spray. Aleaha had to be as desperate to find Bride as Bride was to find Aleaha. She couldn't believe otherwise. Aleaha was the one person who would never have walked away from her willingly. They'd become family, relied on each other.

"Perhaps, then, it's a coincidence that we smell the same."

"Perhaps." Her shoulders slumped. He could very well be a shape-shifter like Aleaha, and all shape-shifters could very well produce the same fragrance.

"I didn't expect you to agree. Darling, coincidences don't just happen. We need to put our heads together and think up some kind of explanation for this extraordinary occurrence. I do my best thinking in bed. You?"

She laughed; she just couldn't help herself. The man was incorrigible. "Another thing we have in common. Thinking in bed. Alone." Letting him assume a little some-some was possible was one thing. Outright agreeing to it was another.

"Alone." He tsked under his tongue. "Now that's just silly." His gaze fell to her mouth, and his pupils dilated. "What race are you, darling?"

She felt what little warmth resided in her cheeks drain away and finally tugged her hand from his. Had he seen her staring at his pulse? Had he sensed the growing hunger in her? "I'm human. What race are you?"

"Targon." He chuckled, the most erotic chuckle she'd ever heard. "But seriously, pet. What race are you?"

"I'm human," she insisted, then returned to the only subject that mattered. "My friend. You smell like her." Bride had heard of Targons. They were a warrior race – big surprise – and all of them possessed brown hair and eyes. Or so she'd heard. If that was true, Aleaha wasn't a Targon. She had green eyes. "Why?"

One of his brows arched, and she feared he meant to rebuke her again. Then he shrugged as though he didn't care what they discussed. "I've just left a female's bed. Two females, actually. But neither used the name Aleaha, I don't think. Someone shouted 'oh God' several times, but that's not helpful to you, is it? Anyway, I digress. I'm ninety percent certain I'd remember your name, if you were so inclined to give it."

She wondered how she'd laughed at his flirtation a moment ago. The man was frustration incarnate. "Think back. Are you sure you didn't cry out their names in the heat of passion?"

"I'm sure. But I can describe their birthmarks and wax preferences. Hair and eye color would be a bit harder since I wasn't paying attention to that area."

Disappointed, Bride shook her head. Having him describe his partners wouldn't do any good since Aleaha could look like a thousand different people. "Did you stop and eat anywhere afterward? Maybe rub up against the person sitting next to you?"

"No and no. Now, your name," he continued smoothly. "I hinted before, but you didn't give it to me. I guess I'll have to be direct. Tell me."

"I'm Bride." Damn it. Why had she given him her real name? Why hadn't she told him Amy, her new identity? "Can you take me to the women? I'd like to see them for myself."

"So persistent. I like that. By the way, my name is Devyn. Not that you asked." His lips edged into a frown, but another spark ignited in his eyes. This one, if she wasn't mistaken, was of curiosity. "Why didn't you ask for it?"

"Because I didn't care to know it." _So much for flirting for the info. "Now. Can you. Take me. To the. Women?" *Careful or your irritation with him will drive him away.*

His frown intensified, but then, so did his curiosity. "Yes. I can. Will I? No. I won't. So let's discuss something else. Like why you didn't care to know my name. In case you haven't noticed, I'm gorgeous. Everyone wants to know my name. Everyone."

Great. He was one of *those*. Conceited, narcissistic. Too bad he'd already used up her patience. There'd be no pandering to his ego.

She reached up and fisted his shirt. It was soft, almost as if it were made from cotton rather than the synthetic blends most people were now forced to wear. He must be wealthy.

"Take me to the women," she said. "I need to see them."

"Are you jealous of them?" he asked hopefully. "Do you want to kill them for having a go at me? Darling, we just met. That's silly. It's the girls after you that you should want to slay." He brushed a strand of her hair behind her ear, leaving a trail of fire. "Not that I'll be able to find one as lovely as you."

Frustrating man. "Of course you won't find anyone as lovely as me," she said, adding dryly, "no one compares to me. I'm all you'll be able to think about for the rest of your life. You'll be heartbroken that you let me get away, and perhaps you won't ever recover. Now that we've got that established, let's talk about those women you were with. If you won't take me to them, fine. At least tell me where you left them. I'll check them out myself."

One corner of those gorgeous lips twitched, as though he were fighting a grin. Of course, he ignored her demand. "You forgot to mention that all the women I've been with were merely practice for the day I met you."

"That's so obvious I wasn't sure it needed to be stated. Now. Where did you leave the women?"

His head tilted to the side as he studied her, those lips still twitching. "You don't desire me, do you?"

"No." Truth. He was gorgeous, as he'd said, the egotistical bastard, but his attitude grated.

Of its own accord, her gaze dropped once more to his neck. Well, maybe she desired his blood. He wasn't human but he was equipped like one, his vein fluttering faster than before. The hunger she'd battled all day increased exponentially. *You can't drink him here. Too public. Besides, you're with him for a reason, remember?*

Perhaps she could force him to tell her where the women were. Even if they were gone, their scents would have lingered. For a while, at least. And if Leah *had* been there, and the scent still remained, Bride could follow her trail.

"I've lost you, darling," Devyn said, his amusement intensified for some reason.

"What? Oh, sorry." When she pulled herself from her musings and focused on him, a gasp escaped her. No longer did the night sky and golden moon frame his erotic face. Somehow he'd moved them both to an empty side street. To her knowledge, they'd never taken a step. Silver stone stretched all around them, lines of gang graffiti warning them away.

"How did you do that?" she asked.

"Do what?" He blinked, acting harmless, those long lashes like feathered fans.

"Move us." As if he didn't know.

Rather than try and deny it, he waved his fingers, saying, "Magic. Now, why don't we go somewhere cozy and get to know each other, hmm? We'll have sex and discuss your friend."

Her second offer of the day, though this one was more blatant. She wouldn't run away from this one, however. "How long ago did you leave those women?"

He uttered a long-suffering sigh. "I lied when I told you I liked persistent women. I'm this close," he pinched two of his fingers together, "to spanking you. Would you like that?"

"Enough!" Exasperated, Bride reached up and cupped his jaw, forcing his gaze on hers. "Listen you. You're going to do everything I tell you to do." There was power in her voice now, soft thrums that wafted between them. "You're going to – "

"Wait." He frowned again. Even stiffened. But his eyes didn't glaze over, and his muscles didn't slacken, as was supposed to happen. "Say that again."

Fru-strat-ing. "Stop talking and listen to me. You will – "

"Do everything you tell me to do. Yes, I know. You're a vampire, aren't you?" he asked, and there was disappointment in his tone.

First, why wasn't he obeying her? Second, he knew what she was without seeing her bare her teeth? Disappointment wasn't the usual reaction she received. Terror, yes. Awe, sometimes that, too. Intrigue, even. Third, now would be a good time to beat feet. He knew what she was and could try and stake her.

Bride remained rooted in place, though, fury sprouting, growing, burning through her. She would face him and she would hurt him if necessary, but the bastard was going to tell her what she wanted to know. "Like I told you, I'm human. So just tell me where you left those women, damn it! I mean them no harm. I only want to talk to them."

"I've had a vampire," he said, ignoring her. Again. He wrapped his fingers around her wrists and lowered her arms away from his body. "I'm afraid you'll have to look elsewhere for dinner."

Wait. He'd had a vampire? That meant there were others out there. That meant she wasn't alone.

Her mouth fell open as excitement returned and blended with her fury, this time billowing through her on a cloud of astonishment. Each emotion was so strong, the thorns in her chest sharpened, joining the fire, but she hardly noticed them. There were others out there! Blood drinkers, just like her. People who could tell her why she now sickened when she drank. People who could teach her how to use her powers without weakening.

"You're not going anywhere," she told Devyn, once again grabbing onto his shirt. Her nails cut past the material and into skin. "I have questions and you *are* going to answer them."

"It would have been my pleasure, if you had been what I'd thought. I collect different species of women, you see, and like I said, I've had a vampire. A few of them actually. I don't need another." Again, he jerked from her hold. One step, two, he backed away from her, almost upon the crowd. "A pity. I enjoyed your resistance."

"What do you think you're doing? You're staying here." Jaw clenched, Bride moved toward him. Her voice of compulsion obviously didn't work on him, but she'd grown up on the streets and had had to learn how to defend herself. Taking him down wouldn't be a hardship. "Tell me about the vampires of your own free will or I'll force you. *Then* I'll drain you."

He arched a brow. "I thought you were human?"

"Now I'm just pissed." She kicked out her leg, knocking his ankles together. He stumbled to the side and she reached out and captured the back of his neck, using his momentum to swing and bash him against the brick wall. Breath whooshed from him, his eyes going wide with shock.

"Now you listen to me, you piece of shit." She slapped her hands at his sides, getting right in his face. "I've had enough of your flirting and denials. You will tell me what I --"

"Stay still," he said, and every muscle in her body locked down. "Sorry, darling, but even though you took me unaware and I'm highly impressed, this restaurant is closed. Besides that, you can't force me to do anything I don't want to do."

She couldn't move. Her body couldn't freaking move. "What the hell?" she shouted, trying with all her might to uproot her feet. It was as if her boots had been glued to the pavement. "What did you do to me?"

"It's a little trick of mine. But don't worry." Grinning, he ducked under her arm. "You'll be able to move soon enough."

"I need to talk to you, damn it, and ask you some more questions. Questions you *will* answer."

"I only answer questions when the one doing the asking is naked, and as we won't be getting naked anytime soon . . ." Another of those disappointed sighs. "If I wasn't in a hurry, you might have been able to make me forget I prefer variety. As it is, I'm late and have to go. But do dream of me, darling."

That dirty, rotten bastard! How dare he! "Leave, and I'll come after you. I swear I will."

"Won't do you any good, I'm afraid." And with that, he disappeared amidst the churning crowd.

Bride was unable to follow and all the madder for it. *He's going down*, she thought darkly. *In every possible way.*