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# Death's Mistress



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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurDorina Basarab is a dhampir - half-human, half-vampire - and the only way she can stay sane is by unleashing her sometimes uncontrollable rage on demons and vampires that deserve killing.After the fortunate demise of her insane uncle Dracula, Dory is back home in Brooklyn, hoping that life will calm down for a while. But then two visitors arrive: her friend Claire, asking for Dory's help in finding a magical Fey relic, and the gorgeous master vampire Louis-Cesare, desperate to find his former mistress, a vampire named Christine.Dory and Louis-Cesare soon discover their problems may be connected: the same master vampire Christine is bound to is also rumored to be in possession of the relic. But they soon realize there's more at stake when Christine's master turns up dead. Someone is killing

vampire Senate members, and if Dory and Louis-Cesare can't stop the murderer, they may be next . . .

.ExtraitChapter One There was no sign on the abandoned church, but someone had scribbled "Let us Prey" above the main doors. As a Catholic, I didn't approve. As someone bent on doing exactly that, it seemed oddly appropriate. I pushed open the heavy wooden doors and went in. It looked like I'd guessed right in going with office chic when I'd gotten ready for the evening. There were a minority of Goths and some tourist types in the church-turned-nightclub, but most of the crowd seemed to be composed of those recently released from corporate hell. I fit in well enough, in a blue silk tank top I sweated through within five minutes and a short black skirt. The tank matched the new streaks in my short brown hair; the skirt matched my eyes. I got a beer at the bar and wandered around, looking for trouble. It didn't take long to find it. The club was populated mostly by humans, but it was owned by a vampire. A group of the fashionable undead showed up every night for the all-you-can-eat buffet, and from the look of things, the owner was dining early. He had a pretty brunette in a corner, his hand up her skirt and his fangs in her throat. That was frowned upon by the Vampire Senate, the ruling body for North American vampires, who preferred feedings to be kept nice and subtle. But then, this guy had already proven he wasn't too concerned about the Senate's point of view about a lot of things. That was why I was here. They intended to teach a lesson, and to make it memorable. The woman was facing out toward the crowd, and by the time I reached them, he'd managed to get her dress open all the way down. She wasn't wearing much underneath, unless you counted the scrap of black lace he had his hand inside. He did something that caused a quick, indrawn breath and a helpless shift of her hips. One of the bystanders laughed. There were a dozen of them, all vampires, and at least a few were masters. I'd hoped to catch him alone, or at worst with two or three others. I hadn't planned on the show, and it complicated things. He pulled the dress off her shoulders and it slithered to the floor, over skin already so sensitized that every tiny movement was torture. She began to breathe heavily through her nose, trembling like a fever had gripped her. He hadn't bothered to fog her mind, because it's no fun if they aren't terrified. And because his wife wanted to play. Vampires have a limited ability to project thoughts, and because of my heritage, I pick them up better than most. She wouldn't meet their eyes, wouldn't raise her head. But she knew what they saw by the images they thoughtfully kept sending. From a dozen perspectives, she was bombarded with images of her body, slick and shining under the lights, of the rivulets sweat had carved through the goose bumps on her skin, of her last piece of clothing being jerked down her thighs. And the pictures came in stereo, with every sound that was ripped from her throat magnified a dozen times and sent back to her. The watchers' emotions leaked through, too: arousal, anticipation and, most of all, rising bloodlust. That was especially true of the monster draining her, yet still she writhed back against him. And when his hands roamed over her sweat-slick skin, she moaned desperately. She was trapped in the feedback loop of sensation that went with the feeding process. It was better than a drug as it coursed through her veins, tightening her nipples, shortening her breath and siphoning out her life. I'd assumed that, with so many available donors, he wouldn't choose to drain her. Body disposal was messy and time-consuming, and prompted investigations that he had every reason to avoid. But he must have liked her taste, because even as her legs gave out and she collapsed, he followed her down. It's crazy to interrupt a vampire when he's feeding, when he's at his most vulnerable and his most deadly. But then, I haven't been sane in centuries. The toe of my boot caught his wrist, tossing it away from the girl. "You want to dance with me," I told him clearly, as he rounded on me with a snarl. Odds were that no human had treated him that cavalierly before, and he clearly didn't like it. He liked even less that some of his vamps had seen me do it. But it intrigued him, too. I was suddenly a tastier dish than the one who lay gasping like a fish out of water, the velvet of her dress crushed beneath her. "You know, I think you're right," he said, flashing me a winning smile with more than a hint of power behind it. I ignored it and tangled a fist in his shirt so I wouldn't have to touch him. I dragged him onto the dance floor and he didn't try to get away. He just followed me with a glint in his eye that promised pain to come. He had no idea. He grinned, and his eyes dropped to my hips as I followed the beat. "You look hot." Unfortunately, I couldn't say the same. His eyes were glued to my chest, maybe because it was directly in his line of sight. I'm five foot two inches, and the boots added another three inches, but that still meant he was missing a crucial element of the tall, dark and handsome stereotype. It didn't matter, since he was missing the rest, too. Not that he appeared to know it. "Thanks," I said. He laughed. "I meant, you look like you could use a drink." "If we can have it in private." A blond eyebrow rose. "That can be arranged." He took my hand, towing me across the sticky dance floor, scattering the crowd like peasants before royalty. The analogy amused me, considering that he'd been born the bastard son of a pig farmer. Not that I was in any position to talk. I was the illegitimate daughter of a serving wench and a vampire. It didn't

get much trashier than that. Of course, we'd both come a long way from our inauspicious beginnings. These days, he went by the name of Hugo Vleck and operated a successful club when he wasn't selling illegal fey narcotics. And as for meWell, I solve problems of the vampire kind, and Vleck was making my employer very unhappy. My job was to cheer him up. The fact that I was going to enjoy it was just a bonus. The crowd was five thick around the bar, but we didn't have any trouble getting served. That wasn't too surprising since my date owned the club, but he shot me a look over his shoulder, checking to see if I was suitably impressed. I smiled and he put a hand on my ass. "Cristal for the lady," he told the young vamp bartender, giving me a little squeeze. "Will you be drinking, too, sir?" Vleck grinned, showing off his fangs. "Later." He and the bartender exchanged a look, while I tried to appear like someone who didn't know that a lot of vamps prefer their alcohol straight from a victim's veins. They say it increases the high they get from feeding, and is the only way to feel the burn with their metabolism. Vleck was clearly calculating how much more it would take to get me all the way to drunk. I could have told him there wasn't that much booze in the world, but why spoil his evening? He had so little of it left. The bartender sat a champagne flute on the bar but Vleck shook his head. "I'll take the bottle. Wrap it up." "Where are we going?" I asked. "My place. It isn't far." Wow. He must have really planned to get nasty. I draped an arm around his waist, and rested my chin on his shoulder. "I don't feel like waiting. Isn't there somewhere we could go here?" "Naw. The office is too small you can barely turn around in that thing." "So? You're the boss. Make some space," I said, smiling seductively and pulling him away from the bar. Like with most crappy clubs, the bathrooms were down a dark hallway. I dragged him into the men's room and tugged his shirt off. He chuckled and disengaged long enough to haul a couple of guys out of a stall and throw them out the door, one with his trousers still around his knees. I leaned against a sink while he instructed one of the vamps acting as bouncers to tell everyone that the facilities were out of order. Then he turned and grabbed me by the waistband. "Let's see what you got." "Thought you'd never ask." I smiled and shut the door with my foot. Five minutes later, I emerged, a little out of breath but not too bad, all things considered. The bouncer caught my eye on the way out. He seemed surprised, maybe because I was still alive. But then he grinned. "Have fun?" "Loved him to pieces." I stopped by vamp central, aka the East Coast Office of the North American Vampire Senate, to get my check. The vamps usually took care of fungus like Vleck themselves, holding each master responsible for his own servants' behavior. But the system wasn't as perfect as they liked people to believe. Vampires could be emancipated from their masters' control when they reached a certain power level, freeing them from forced obedience. Others were under the control of senior-level masters on other Senates, who didn't always care about the rules laid down by their North American counterpart. And then there were the revenants, who had had something go wrong in the Change, and ended up answering to nobody but their own twisted minds. When any of these types started causing trouble, the Senate stepped in. And luckily for me, the current war in the supernatural community had stretched their resources. It had gotten so bad lately that they were even willing to employ a dhampir that hated cross between a vampire and a human on the cleanup crew. But I always got the impression that they disinfected the office after I left. The elevator opened onto a scene of old-world elegance. Shiny cherrywood pillars surrounded a polished table set with exotic flowers, dappled by the light of an exquisite crystal chandelier. Underfoot, an inlaid marble floor in a sunburst pattern in warm shades of gold and amber anchored the scene. It would have been an attractive room, if not for the strokes of too-white meanness propping up the walls. One of them peeled off to block my path. Waspish and fine-boned, he was wearing a close-fitting coat and knee pants of midnight blue velvet and heels an inch higher than mine. His long, pin-straight blond hair was pulled back into a queue, and he had an honest-to-God cravat. He looked like he'd stepped out of a period movie the kind where they don't stint on the costumes and his expression said he smelled something bad. "Who let you in?" he demanded. Every time they changed the guards, it was the same story. And it was always worse with the older ones. They recalled the good old days when dhampirs were killed on sight, preferably slowly. Their attitude pissed me off, considering that I'd been working here for over a month now, and the nightclub scene had left me spoiling for a fight. Vleck hadn't been nearly enough of a challenge. But damn it, I'd promised a certain someone to be on my best behavior. "I'm here to see Mircea," I told him, instead of punching the vamp through the pretty brocaded wallpaper. "Lord Mircea." "Whatever. I have a delivery," I said, pushing past. And found my arm seized in a bruising grip. "You can wait in the alley with the rest of the garbage until sent for." "I'm tired, I'm hungry and I have a head in a bag," I warned him. "Do not fuck with me." He slapped me, hard enough to rock my head back, so I nailed his hand to the wall with a knife. He pulled it out, the slice through his palm healing instantly, and lunged. And ended up dangling off the floor like an errant puppy. "Best behavior?" someone

asked. I looked up to see the pleasant goateed face, curly dark hair and gleaming brown eyes of Senator Kit Marlowe. His agreeable expression didn't stop him from squeezing the guy's neck hard enough to make his eyes pop. Since Marlowe hates me only marginally less than, say, bubonic plague, the smile made me nervous. I suspected that was why he did it, but it worked every time. I shrugged. "I didn't stick it in his heart." "Perhaps you should have," he said mildly, and opened his hand. The vamp hit the floor, jumped to his feet and went for me again in a blur of speed. So I grabbed him by the neck and punched his head through the pretty brocaded wallpaper. "Bring her in, Mikhail," someone called from off to the right. Mikhail must have been the one with his head in the plaster, because nobody moved. I released him and he pulled out, pale eyes glittering with hate. I smiled. It's always so much easier when the vamps I deal with despise me. It's the ones who profess anything else that confuse the hell out of me. Mikhail and I understood each other; he'd kill me if he got the chance, and I'd make sure he never did. Easy. "I'll take her," Marlowe said, while Mikhail stared at him. "My lord. She attacked me!" "If you are foolish enough to assault Lord Mircea's daughter while he is on the premises, then you deserve what you get," Marlowe told him shortly. I raised an eyebrow. "While he's on the premises?" I repeated. That disturbing grin widened. I followed him through the open doorway. We passed through a sitting room and into an office with more of the same, decor-wise: hand-carved moldings, a soaring ceiling and a mural of fat cherubs that gazed down on visitors with smug superiority. There was also a desk. It was a massive old mahogany masterpiece with carved this and original that, but it didn't draw the eye nearly as much as the man seated behind it. Unlike Vleck, Senator Mircea Basarab knew how to rock the tall, dark and handsome thing, and tonight he'd gone all out in full white-tie regalia. He gleamed, from the top of his burnished head to the toes of his perfectly shined shoes. "All you need is a red-lined cape," I told him sourly, dropping my duffel bag onto the desk. It squelched a little. He winced. "Your word is really quite good enough, Dorina," he informed me, as I fished out the remains. "I do not require a physical specimen unless I wish to question him." "I'll keep it in mind." Vleck was dripping onto the nice marble floor, so I set him on the desk. But that didn't work either. He rolled and Marlowe had to jump to rescue some papers before they were ruined. I glanced around, but there were no handy baskets. So I stuck him onto the dagger-shaped memo holder. There was still some dripping, but at least he wasn't going anywhere. I looked up to find two unhappy vamps looking at me. "Okay," I said, "it's all the same to me. I just want my check." Mircea took out a leather-covered check book and started writing, while Marlowe regarded Vleck thoughtfully. "I've always wondered, how do you get out?" "What?" "Of the club or the house or what have you." He waved a hand. "As soon as a master-level vampire dies, every one of his children knows it. Even if they are old enough and powerful enough to have been emancipated, they feel it here" he tapped his chest "like a blow. Yet you regularly kill such vampires and escape the premises without your own head ending up on a pike. So I ask again, how do you get out?" "I walk." He frowned. "I am serious. I would like to know." "I'm sure you would," I said sarcastically, as Mircea tore off the check. Marlowe ran the Senate's intelligence organization, and he'd probably vastly prefer to keep matters like Vleck in the hands of his own deadly little hit squad. But he couldn't afford to risk them in wartime on nonessential missions. The conflict between the Silver Circle of light mages and their dark counterpart had been going on for a while now, and just to confuse the hell out of everyone, the vamps had decided to ally with the light. But it stretched their manpower, and they seemed to have more trouble taking care of the Vlecks of this world than I did. I intended to keep it that way. This was the best money I'd made in years. "Every vampire in that nightclub knew the moment their master died, yet you simply walked out," he said resentfully, refusing to let it go. I put on my innocent face, which seems to annoy him about as much as those damn smiles do me. "Yeah. I guess I got lucky." "You do it every time!" "Really lucky," I amended, trying to take the check. But Mircea held on to the other end. "Have you by any chance seen Louis-Cesare recently?" "Why?" He sighed. "Why can you never answer a simple question?" "Maybe because you never ask any. And what would the darling of the European Senate want with me?" We'd met only recently, despite being members of the same dysfunctional clan. It wasn't too surprising since we came from opposite ends of the vampire world. I was the dhampir daughter of the family patriarch, the little-known stain on an otherwise immaculate record. Dhampirs are feared and loathed by vampires for obvious reasons, and most families who accidentally end up with one quickly bury the error. Why Mircea hadn't done so was still something of a mystery. Maybe because I was sometimes useful, unlike tonight. Louis-Cesare, on the other hand, was vamp royalty. The only made Child of Mircea's younger and far stranger brother, Radu, he had been breaking records almost since birth. He'd become a master, a rank many vamps never reached, before he'd been dead half a century. Another century had elevated him to first-level status, on par with the top

players in the vamp world. And within a decade after that, he'd become the darling of the European Senate, feted for his looks, his wealth and his ability on the dueling field, which had gotten them out of many sticky situations. A month ago, the prince and the pariah had crossed paths because we had one thing in common: we were both very good at killing things. And Mircea's bug-eyed, crazy brother Vlad had needed killing if anyone ever had. But our collaboration had had a rough start. Louis-Cesare didn't like taking orders from a dhampir, and I didn't like having a partner, period. But we eventually sorted things out and got the job done. He'd even learned some manners, before the end. And I had started to think that it was kind of nice, having someone to watch my back for a change. Sometimes I could be really stupid. "Radu mentioned that the two of you had grown close," Mircea said carefully. "Radu was mistaken." "You didn't answer the question," Marlowe observed. "Have you seen or had any contact with him in the last few weeks?" "Why? What's he done?" "Nothing yet." "Okay, what are you afraid he'll do?" Marlowe glanced at Mircea, and they held one of those silent conversations vampires sometimes have, the kind I'm not supposed to know about. "I would merely like to ask him about a family matter," Mircea said, after a moment. "As you're constantly reminding me, I'm family. Tell me and maybe I can help. Or does the family thing only work when you want something?" Mircea took a deep breath, which he didn't need, to show me how much of a pain I was being. "It's about his family, Dorina, and is not my story to tell. Now, have you seen him?" "I haven't heard from him in a month," I said flatly, suddenly tiring of the game. Most vampire clans unlucky enough to end up with a dhampir quickly bury the problems six feet under. I supposed I should be happy that Mircea had taken a somewhat more enlightened view. But as far as my status as family was concerned, it was and always would be second-class. "Should that change, I would appreciate receiving word," he told me. "And I'd appreciate receiving my check, or are you planning to hold it all night?" Mircea raised an eyebrow, but he didn't let go. "I may have another commission for you tomorrow." He pushed a folder across the desk, careful to avoid the blood splatter. "May have?" "It has yet to be decided. Will you be available?" "I'll see what I can do." "And, Dorina, should I choose to go through with it, I will need this one alive." "Will the handy-dandy portable size do?" If I didn't stake the heart, a master vamp could live in pieces anywhere from a week to a month, depending on his power level. And it was a lot easier to sneak out a head in a bag than a whole body. Plus, there was something about decapitation that made even the most obstinate vamp feel chatty. "That will be sufficient," Mircea said, gazing cynically at Vleck. The ex-vamp's mouth had slipped open and his tongue was hanging out. At least he wasn't drooling, I thought, and snatched the check. God, how I loved easy money.

*Présentation de l'auteur* Dorina Basarab is a dhampir - half-human, half-vampire - and the only way she can stay sane is by unleashing her sometimes uncontrollable rage on demons and vampires that deserve killing. After the fortunate demise of her insane uncle Dracula, Dory is back home in Brooklyn, hoping that life will calm down for a while. But then two visitors arrive: her friend Claire, asking for Dory's help in finding a magical Fey relic, and the gorgeous master vampire Louis-Cesare, desperate to find his former mistress, a vampire named Christine. Dory and Louis-Cesare soon discover their problems may be connected: the same master vampire Christine is bound to is also rumored to be in possession of the relic. But they soon realize there's more at stake when Christine's master turns up dead. Someone is killing vampire Senate members, and if Dory and Louis-Cesare can't stop the murderer, they may be next . . .