

Excerpt from Big Demon Energy

Sources speculated that the reason Ezra Cardoso was ridiculously photogenic was because he was a Prime. He never exhibited a wonky eye, an unfortunate double chin, or a flat out “burn it” picture like the rest of us mere mortals. Even so, photos failed to capture how the mere quirk of his lips could express ten thousand words of amusement or how when he leaned in, totally intent on whatever you were saying, he made you feel seen in a way no one else ever had.

I braced myself for the force of him live, but the person who strode through the door was so unlike my first love that it was almost like seeing a stranger.

Any softness in Ezra’s face was gone, replaced by a ruggedness in his straight nose, full lips, and well-defined jawline that better fit the image of a man raised to be heir to a vampire Mafia.

He’d bulked up, his formerly lean frame now a V shape. The jacket of his blue three-piece suit hugged his ripped biceps and broad shoulders like he was a modern-day conqueror and this was his bespoke armor.

The Ezra I’d known wouldn’t have been caught dead in this outfit.

Or undead.

Michael smiled. “Do come in.”

I frowned at the way Ezra studied her like a lion determining a threat or prey, every inch the Crimson Prince, then realized it was Ezra’s silvery-blue eyes under his thick arched eyebrows that made it both easier and a million times harder to look at him. Where once they’d caught the light, rippling and ever changing, they were now hard crystals promising knifelike edges, despite the easy grin he bestowed on my mother.

“Director,” he said.

One word in that smooth, low baritone and my heart exploded against my ribs so hard I was positive it drowned out all other sound in the room.

His gaze lasered on to me and he went stock-still, his eyes never leaving mine.

A shiver ran down my spine. I crossed one leg over the other, blessing the fates for having worn the wine-colored pencil skirt (that I'd bought as an early celebration gift) with my sheer black hose, and high heels with a bright pop of scarlet on the soles. My tailored white shirt with three-quarter sleeves and a teasing hint of cleavage completed the look.

Something flickered in the depths of his gaze, but it was gone in an instant. "Aviva," he said in a bland voice.

I waited for some awkward follow up small talk but got nothing. It was as if he couldn't be bothered to find out how I'd been.

All right. Two could play that game.

"Cardoso," I replied coolly.

I'd have relished his tight expression, but I was busy telling myself his brush-off didn't matter. It was the first exposure and would be the worst. Now, like a virus, I'd been infected and could build my immunity.

He transferred the gift bag he held to his other hand. "Am I interrupting something?"

"Not at all." Michael motioned to a seat.

Ezra took the chair next to mine with no hesitation. My presence didn't disturb him a whit.

I'd have brushed him off just as easily, but I caught a whiff of his cologne with its notes of cardamom, cloves, and bergamot, a spicy orange smell. It was mixed with the fresh, cool scent of a windswept summer breeze that was all him, and I was hurled back to all the times he'd teased me for pressing my nose to his T-shirts to sniff him.

I dug in my skirt pocket for a package of mints, practically huffing the candies before popping one in my mouth.

He raked a wayward lock off his forehead. His black curls had grown out since we were together, now slightly untamed. (Primes could grow their hair, all other vamps were stuck with the length they had at death.) This longer style lent him a rakish air, yet there was a maturity to him that he wore well. Combined with his close-cropped black beard and mustache, he resembled a pirate. Or the physical representation of sin.

Big deal. It had been six years. He changed; I'd changed.

I crunched my mint into dust.

Ezra set his gift bag, with the neck of a wax-sealed wine bottle protruding, on Michael's desk. "I was in the caves of Saint-Marcel for a wine tasting and this one reminded me of you."

"Do tell," she said drolly.

My ex got an impish expression on his face that I recognized from the many "What? Me do something naughty?" pics that kept popping up on my social media feeds despite my best efforts to block them. "Layered and intense."

Michael chuckled.

Ezra didn't wear a tie, that apparently was still a step too far even for him, and the first couple buttons of his crisp white shirt were undone, exposing a triangle of brown skin.

Vamps kept the same skin color they'd had when alive. They looked totally normal in photos, but if you were in the same room and noticed they weren't breathing, or you felt their gaze on your back, your flight response was pinged.

Not that running was a smart idea. Too many of them took it as an invitation.

“It’s a token of my gratitude for accommodating my requests at such short notice,” Ezra said.

I squelched the memory of running through my apartment, laughing, while he play-hunted me, and shifted in my seat to shake off my squirminess. He’d certainly pinged me in ways that my operative training hadn’t prepared me for.

I wasn’t the only one. Whether yachting in Saint-Tropez, diving the Great Barrier Reef, or getting together with celeb pals for a charity hockey game, where Ezra Cardoso went, the paparazzi followed. His antics were the definition of clickbait, and his groupies (Ezraccurriculars) were rabid, fanning themselves over each scandalous venture.

Michael pulled the bottle out of the gift bag and gave an impressed nod. “Thank you. I’ll enjoy a glass tonight. Now, we have much to discuss.”

“I can’t imagine what’s left to work out,” Ezra said. “The terms of my assignment here are fairly straightforward.”

“Actually,” I piped up, meeting his gaze levelly, “it’s not so much a discussion as a directive.” I tapped my finger against my chin. “You’re familiar with those.” I paused. Smiled. “From all your work as a Maccabee, of course. I just learned we were fellow operatives, but what exciting assignments you must have had.”

“And you, the picture of a legacy princess.”

My smile hardened. How dare he throw that at me when I’d shared my fears of never amounting to more than Michael’s daughter in this organization, instead of a damn good operative earning my reputation via intelligence and hard work?

“Though I will say.” He casually crossed one leg over the other. “A directive saves the trouble of time-wasting repetition when the outcome is a predetermined conclusion.”

Sadly, since he was a vamp, I couldn't read him for weakness, and Michael would bitch if I jammed a pen through his throat and messed up her fancy Eames chairs. Not that I would, consummate professional that I was.

"Predetermined conclusions. Right." I picked up her silver pen and danced it over my knuckles. "In that case, it's polite to give the other party a well-reasoned explanation and some processing time." I clicked the pen. "A little tip I've picked up as a clear communicator."

One side of Ezra's mouth quirked up. "You definitely keep talking until your point is conceded. Sometimes, however, people refuse to accept reality, in which case, it's best for one party to lay down the law and move on."

Perhaps my next click of the pen was a bit violent because Michael raised a hand. "Speaking of how it has to be." She shot me a warning look. "You're in my home now, Mr. Cardoso, and regardless of what anyone has led you to believe, you will answer to me."

"I wouldn't have assumed anything else," he said smoothly.

"Good." My mother gave a Cheshire Cat smile. "I'm pleased to put all our chapter resources at your disposal and approve your off-site office rental. In return, you'll work with a team of my choosing."

The vampire draped an arm over the back of the chair. "I'd hate to pull your people away for this. I know how stretched local branches are. I've brought my own man."

I eagerly swung my head back to my mother.

"He's most welcome here," she said, "but the other members are nonnegotiable."

Ezra slid his gaze to me, almost like he was making sure I wouldn't bite before replying. "Having Aviva working for me might distract from the investigation at hand. I'm sure you want to have it resolved as quickly as possible and get me out of your hair."

Michael didn't even blink at his smug look. She nodded at me.

I got to deliver the news? I almost jumped up and punched the air, instead, I tsked Ezra. "You misunderstand. I'm not a team member." I gave him one exquisite moment of relief before driving the knife in. "I'm your co-leader."

He opened his mouth. Closed it. Blinked.

"That was a directive, but I can repeat it if it helps," I said sweetly.

"Sticking me with someone who'll report back to you doesn't surprise me," Ezra said, "but using your own daughter? This misguided motherly payback has no place on a mission."

The director's expression turned to granite, but I calmly set the pen on the desk, chin up and posture immaculate.

"Contrary to your insulting insinuation that I'm a pawn being moved around by her mommy, I chose this assignment."

Ezra Cardoso, my first love and ex-boyfriend, wasn't a virus. Building immunity to him wouldn't save me. I'd been prepared to play nice, but he'd escalated this to a cage match, the two of us locked in combat for the duration of this investigation. Ooh. Maybe I could give him a catchy supervillain/personal nemesis nickname like they had in wrestling.

Piledriver Cardoso. *Ezra, fucking me into the mattress, his eyes wild, one hand pinning my hip down and*— Definitely not that moniker.

"Meanwhile," I said, moving on with steely resolve, "while you apparently have quite the familiarity with murder—"

"You only have murderous impulses?" He tugged nonchalantly on one of his cuffs to straighten it.

I paled, my eyes shooting to Michael, who was thankfully responding to a text she'd received and hadn't paid attention to his allusion to Cherry Bomb.

"That was low, even for a playboy-hitman vampire, or whatever other extracurricular activities you've got going on," I hissed.

"After all these years, I think we're both mature enough to admit that you probably have a voodoo doll in my likeness," he said smoothly.

A knot unwound in my chest. I'd have been grateful, but it was his fault it had cropped up in the first place. "My understanding is that *investigating* murders is not your area of expertise. That would be..."

His eyes flashed in warning at my pause.

"Using your socialite cover to gather intel on rich and powerful shitheads," I said with an innocent expression. "Therefore, you're not more experienced than me, and I have the contacts in Vancouver to be effective. You and I share the same goal of solving this as quickly as possible, so accept the directive and play nice, Cardoso, because this is happening."