

The background of the cover is a close-up photograph of a man and a woman. The woman, on the left, has long, wavy brown hair and is looking slightly to her right with a serious expression. The man, on the right, is shirtless and has dark hair; he is leaning in towards the woman, his face partially visible in profile. The background behind them is a rough, textured wall, possibly made of stone or brick.

Kallysten

The Vampire's Concubine

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Alinar Publishing

www.alinarpublishing.com

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First Published May 2009

First Edition

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Edited by Mary S.

ISBN

1-906023-64-6

978-1-906023-64-5

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As soon as Meriel passed the guards standing on either side of the grand entrance, she saw him. She kept her face impassive despite the grimace that wanted to come forth. Wonderful. He was as handsome as she'd been told. It would have been too much to hope he'd be a runt.

Her sire's hand tightened on her elbow. Meriel looked at her.

"Smile," Leean murmured, no louder than a breath, her own lips curving as though to demonstrate. "You look like you're about to challenge someone to a duel."

Refraining from rolling her eyes, Meriel smiled and answered just as quietly. The band playing on the left side of the ballroom was loud, but the music wouldn't stop anyone from eavesdropping. The guests were all vampires, after all.

"A duel would be faster. And there'd be more honor to it than—"

Leean's smile did not waver, but the icy flames in her blue eyes gave it an entirely different meaning.

"I hope you'll hold your tongue when you talk to Master Aidan. I'd hate to have to cut it out if you don't."

Meriel's only reaction was a blink. She knew better than to show she was scared when surrounded by members of a dozen different clans. She couldn't control her scent as well, unfortunately. Leean sniffed and her gaze hardened even more.

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"Go and do what you're supposed to, childe. Or I swear I will give you a real reason to be afraid."

Meriel bowed her head. She gritted her teeth but did as she was told and went to stand by the dais in the back of the room, joining the loose circle of candidates. She didn't think Leean would stake her in front of a room full of other clans, but then again, who knew what her sire was capable of?

A server weaving his way through the crowd presented her with a tray of drinks. The darker glasses caught her eyes and nose; she was famished. She wasn't allowed to feed, though, and so she took a long flute of champagne. She had to hide her surprise as she watched the waiter move on to another guest. At the man's throat, a series of healed marks were clearly visible. So, Master Aidan truly kept human pets. Interesting.

Sipping on the champagne, she let her eyes wander around the room. All men wore tuxedos, and the women paraded in extravagant dresses, even those who didn't appear to be candidates. Coming to the mansion, Meriel had felt terribly uncomfortable in her low-cut, deep purple satin cocktail dress. She couldn't deny it was pretty; Leean had a good eye for fashion. It wasn't cut for a fight, though, and the tight fit would both curb her combat abilities and prevent her from hiding weapons on herself. Leean had laughed at her when she had pointed it out. Supposedly, fights didn't happen on such occasions. It was hard to relax, however, when she could spot members from at least four clans she had fought in the past. If it came to that, the wooden heels of her stiletto

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shoes would make fine stakes. That was why she had chosen them, after all.

From the corner of her eye, she saw the candidate who had been sitting next to Master Aidan stand and bow so low that her breasts practically fell from her dress. As though the display had not been enough, she took his hand and brushed her lips to it. Meriel hid a snort in her glass. She wouldn't play those games, LEEAN's threats be damned. Her sire had volunteered her for this charade; that didn't mean she had to make a fool of herself.

The candidate walked off the dais holding up the train of her crimson dress. Half the women in the room were dressed in various shades of red; most of the rest wore black, their pale skin gleaming all the more for it. Sheep, Meriel thought, amused, before realizing that Master Aidan was dressed in red and black, too. Maybe the colors were meant to please him? If they were, it was too late for her to do anything about her dress—not that she would have.

A man stepped in front of her, tall and broad-shouldered. His eyes roamed over her body with no hint of pretense or appreciation.

"Your shoes," he said, holding out his hand.

She stared at him. "I beg—"

"Master Aidan will talk to you now. But I'm not letting you anywhere near him with those heels. Take them off."

The closest candidates turned smirks toward her. Meriel's anger flashed through her veins like quicksilver.

"Just about all of those," she jerked her head to the women, "could have a stake up their skirts. And you're giving me grief about my shoes?"

His expression remained impassive. His hand didn't waver. "I'm not letting you near him unless—"

"Stephen."

The man looked up at the dais at the name, and Meriel followed his eyes. Master Aidan nodded once.

"Go ahead," Stephen said, sounding unhappy. "But I'm keeping an eye on you."

Ignoring his warning, Meriel held out her almost-empty glass to him. He gave her a sour look but took it. She climbed onto the dais and approached Master Aidan. He sat very stiffly on the throne-like chair, but his left foot tapped the floor impatiently, belying the formality of the setting. He wasn't as broad of shoulders as his bodyguard, and his tight shirt and pants hinted at a lean but muscled body. Meriel made a small bow—just low enough to be respectful—and introduced herself.

"My name is Meriel, from Mistress Leean's clan."

He inclined his head and indicated the seat on his left with a ringed finger. His brown eyes sparkled with amusement, though it didn't touch his thin smile.

"Welcome, Meriel. Are you enjoying the soiree?"

She sat down, her body at an angle so she could both see him and the people in front of the dais. True to his words, Stephen was glaring at her, his arms crossed over his chest.

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"I only arrived a few minutes ago," she replied, unwilling to start their chat with the admission that she hated shindigs such as this one.

Master Aidan seemed to see right through her, and his amusement flared anew. "I've asked that question a dozen times tonight. You're the first who didn't start gushing about what good parties I throw."

Meriel managed not to flinch. This wasn't starting well at all. She didn't doubt that Leean was closeby, observing the proceedings, and if Meriel didn't at least make a token effort, there would be hell to pay.

"Tell me," Master Aidan said. "Why are you here?"

Could he have asked a more inane question? Why not talk about the weather, while he was at it?

"I want to be your concubine," Meriel replied with a forced smile, mentally punctuating the sentence with a 'duh.'

Aidan leaned toward her minutely, his eyebrows tightening for an instant. "Do you, really?"

"Of course. Why else would I be here?"

He shrugged. "Some of the other candidates were thrall'd by their sires so that they would throw themselves at me. A few think they'll get more power being my concubine than they ever could by remaining with their clan. I think a couple of them are genuinely attracted to me. But you ... I can't read you."

A wave of panic slid over Meriel. She tried to push it back before he could notice.

"Read me?" she asked, the words catching in her throat. "You mean, read my mind?"

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If he could do that, if he could see what Leean had planned—

He chuckled. "So that rumor is still running around? No, I'm afraid I can't read minds any more than you can. I wish I could. All of this would go much faster."

With a casual gesture, he encompassed the dais and the women in front of it.

"So what do you mean by 'read' me?" Meriel insisted.

"You know what. You do it, too, I'm sure. I've just had a lot more time to practice."

He stopped and arched an eyebrow at her, waiting for her to figure it out. She knew, of course, and she felt silly for lending credit to the mind-reading rumors.

"My scent."

He nodded. "And your body language, yes. Though yours are much too jumbled for me to make much sense of them. I don't like that."

A wave of relief washed over Meriel. She hid her reaction as well as she could; the last thing she needed was for Aidan to wonder why she was relieved he couldn't figure her out.

"Sorry?"

Her meek tone did not seem to fool Aidan. "Somehow, I don't believe you are sorry. And I don't think you really want to be my concubine."

Meriel's foot tapped impatiently a couple of times before she remembered to rein herself in. Her eyes swept over the crowd, pausing only briefly on Leean. She was standing on one side of the room with two other vampires, a glass in hand and a polite smile on her lips as she appeared to listen to her

companions. Meriel did not doubt for a second that her sire's attention was on her and Aidan. From where she stood, Leean could probably read their lips. Meriel had to be careful about what she said.

"I'm here because my sire asked me to be." She gave him a smile, trying to lighten the mood. "It's not like I'm trying to hide that."

Leaning his elbow on the arm of his throne, Aidan rested his cheek against his closed fist and considered Meriel carefully. His eyes gleamed as they plunged into hers.

"She didn't thrall you."

Meriel wasn't sure whether it was a question or statement. "She didn't have to. She raised me well."

He laughed, the sound earnest and unexpected. "Did she? Respect for your elders mustn't have been one of the lessons."

Despite her fear of angering her sire, Meriel couldn't stop annoyance from flaring in her. More and more, he seemed to be mocking her.

"Forgive me if I'm not thrilled at the idea of being enslaved," she said sharply.

His amused smile faded, and his widening eyes betrayed his shock. "Is that what you think this is?"

"Isn't it? I'm currency in exchange for the right of my clan to hunt in this city. Call me concubine or whore, it doesn't change a thing."

He blinked and leaned back in his chair, considering her in silence for a few seconds. She'd blown it, Meriel realized when he dismissed her with a gesture. Damn it, Leean wasn't going

to be happy. She stood and gave a small bow before descending from the dais, acutely aware that Aidan's stare remained on her even as another candidate joined him.

Picking another champagne flute from a passing tray, Meriel made her way through the crowd toward the band, but Leean soon intercepted her. Her fingers were so tight on her glass of blood that it was a wonder the crystal wasn't breaking.

"Was that the best you could do?" she asked sotto voce, her thin smile icy as summer back in their clan's barren land.

Meriel met her gaze, refusing to appear guilty. She hadn't wanted to do this in the first place, and Leean knew it. "You know I've never been a very good liar," she pointed out before taking a sip of champagne.

"Who said anything about lying?" Leean hissed. "Don't tell me you don't find him attractive! All you had to do—"

After not having been allowed to feed for seven nights, the alcohol was making Meriel a little lightheaded. It also made her dare to interrupt Leean. "Sire, from the start I asked you to pick someone else."

"And I told you," Leean shot back in a angry whisper, "*this* is why I made you. I've watched him for a long time. I *know* what he likes. And if you had even tried—"

She fell silent along with the rest of the room when the band stopped playing abruptly. At once, all vampires turned toward the dais, where Aidan was standing, his hands clasped behind him. As he announced he had made his decision, Meriel was torn. She was glad the whole thing was over, but at the same time she knew she'd be punished for failing her

sire. What would Leean invent to punish her? She had a cruel streak at times, and—

"Childe!" Leean murmured. "What are you waiting for?"

Meriel looked at her dumbfounded. Why was she radiating smugness all of a sudden? And why was everyone around them looking at her?

"Meriel?" Aidan said from the dais, and by the tone of his voice, he had called her name before. "Will you join me so we can finish the ceremony?"

Leean took her glass and gave her a light push forward. Meriel continued walking toward the dais, stunned, and a single thought running through her mind.

Oh, fuck. What mess did I get myself into now?

* * * *

Aidan had played this game more than a dozen times in the past. He'd been certain he'd received every possible flattering line, heard all possible arguments as to why he ought to select one woman rather than another. No one, however, had ever seemed as reluctant as Meriel. When the candidates were less than willing, their sires thrall them before throwing them at him. He'd never met Meriel's sire in person, but he knew of her. She wasn't the type to hesitate about thralling anyone, let alone her own childe. And after soliciting the right to present a candidate from her clan for forty years, she wasn't the type to let her chance go to waste by choosing such a reluctant woman. Something was going on, there. It had been a long time since Aidan had been intrigued, and in the end, it was what made up his mind.

That, and Meriel was as beautiful as she was mysterious. Even now that another candidate chatted at him with honey dripping from each of her words, Aidan couldn't take his eyes off Meriel. He liked all sorts of women, but he did have a weakness for curvaceous bodies and long, curly hair. It didn't hurt that she seemed to have a sharp mind—and an even sharper tongue.

He endured the inane chatter of the candidate a few more moments before thanking her. Stephen gave him a questioning look from the foot of the dais. Trust his childe to have noticed he was ready to announce his choice. He gave a simple nod before standing. Already, Stephen was signaling the band. Silence fell on the room even as eyes turned to him. Thank the gods, it was almost over.

"Thank you all for coming tonight," he said with a pleasant smile. "And thank you to all the candidates whom I had the pleasure to meet. As always, the choice was a difficult one, but it had to be made. Meriel, will you join me on the dais?"

A murmur of disappointment ran over the crowd, and Aidan even thought he heard someone cry out. He didn't let that affect him, and kept his eyes on Meriel. She wasn't moving. Curious eyes followed his, wondering why no one was stepping forward, and Meriel's sire hissed a few words.

"Meriel?" he called again, a little impatient now. "Will you join me so we can finish the ceremony?"

She finally came forward. The look of surprise on her face was unmistakable. Aidan resisted the urge to chuckle. This was going to be fun, even if Stephen was looking at her with clear disapproval. She finally reached the dais and stood next

to him, her eyes still wide in shock. Aidan held out his left hand, palm up, and after a second of hesitation, she placed her trembling right hand in it.

"Two hundred and eighty years ago," Aidan intoned the familiar speech, "I was entrusted with the care of a city. I protected it from bloodthirsty errant vampires and nearby clans who would have slaughtered its citizens. I gained their trust and, in exchange, the right for me and mine to hunt amongst them. This right, I now share with you and your clan, Meriel. May you grow strong from freely offered blood, and never go thirsty for another day."

Allowing his fangs to extend, he slashed them across his right wrist. Blood welled up at the wounds at once, and he presented his wrist to Meriel. Her nostrils flared even as her pupils dilated, black drowning the dark brown of her eyes. She gripped his arm with her free hand and led it to her mouth, closing her eyes in anticipated pleasure before she started drinking. She pulled hard on his blood. Aidan pinched his lips tight so he wouldn't gasp. The last few candidates he had chosen had lapped at his blood meekly during the ceremony. Meriel's aggressiveness as she drank from him was something else altogether—and judging by the abrupt hardening of his cock, his body did not mind at all.

When she let go of his wrist, his blood stained her mouth, and her eyes burned with a fierce fire. Aidan's cock leaped almost painfully inside his too-tight trousers. She was beautiful. She wiped at a drop of blood rolling down her chin, only smearing it a little more, then cleared her throat and

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pronounced, a little shakily, the vows all candidates were asked to memorize.

"My clan and I thank you for your gifts, and we pledge not to abuse your generosity. For ten years, my presence at your side will be a symbol of our promise, and as your concubine I will share my blood with you, as you share your city with us."

Aidan only needed to take a whiff of Meriel's scent to know she was scared. Few vampires liked to let anyone near their throat, let alone someone they barely knew. Regardless, she tilted her head to the side, offering him access to her neck and blood. Aidan barely remembered to turn to the vampires standing in front of the dais; he'd almost forgotten they were there.

"Guests, be our witnesses as, from this moment and for ten years, Meriel's clan and mine join, as she and I join."

Looking at Meriel again, he noticed how she had closed her eyes once more—this time as she waited for pain, not pleasure. Determined to end the ceremony quickly, he leaned in and, his right hand resting lightly on her hip, bit down at her pulse point. He only drew a mouthful of her blood before pulling back. After a week without feeding, any drop of blood he took from her would be painful. A quiet little moan escaped her and her hand tightened on his, her nails digging into his skin. She sighed when he pulled back.

Polite clapping accompanied the end of the ceremony. Still holding Meriel's hand, Aidan guided her off the dais, where Stephen opened a way for them to the marble staircase that led to the second floor. The band resumed playing. The

candidate had been chosen, but the party would continue for most of the night.

As they climbed the staircase, Aidan caught a glimpse of Meriel's sire leaving. She glanced back at the room before heading out. Aidan didn't like her satisfied, almost possessive smile at all.

Meriel didn't say a word until he had closed the master suite door, shutting out the party so that only a rumbling echo of the music still reached them. She stood, immobile, and looked at the bed for a moment before turning accusing eyes at him.

"It's not fair," she said, her voice shaking the tiniest bit. "You demand that the candidates not feed for a week, and then you bite me and give me only a taste ... All that so I'll be too weak to defend myself!"

Surprised by the resentment in her words, Aidan stared at her for a couple of seconds before laughter bubbled to his lips. "Not my idea," he said simply.

Walking over to the sitting area and the low table in the far corner of the room, he poured blood from the jar that had been left on an electric warmer.

"None of this was my idea," he explained. "But when you get as old as I am, you'll see that traditions and rites can take heavy meanings for the people who put their lives in your hands. Trying to put an end to these games is like trying to feed from a child. It may be easy, but it's not worth the aggravation of the protests that follow."

He held the glass out for Meriel. "Sit with me," he said when she came to him.

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She gave him a suspicious look but took the glass from him with a slight nod of thanks before giving it a tentative sniff.

"It's human," he said as he sat in the armchair.

He rested his cheek against his fist and watched her gulp down the blood. At her questioning look, he gestured to the jar. Her hands shaking a little in her haste, she helped herself to more blood before finally sitting down on the armchair facing him. This time, she sipped on the glass as though it were fine wine.

"Is it from your servants?" she asked in between sips.

Aidan couldn't remember the last time someone had inquired where the blood came from. "No. We buy what we rehear. The servants will offer if you ask, though. Just try not to kill them. Good service is a pain to find."

She observed him thoughtfully. Aidan's eyes trailed from the fresh bite mark on her neck down her satin-clad body. She had toed off her shoes, and as he watched her she tucked her legs beneath her on the sofa.

"Is that it?" she asked, sounding a little wary. "No other rules?"

He laughed again. She just kept surprising him. He hadn't thought it was possible anymore after so many concubines.

"Why, do you want rules?" he teased.

"No," she said quickly. "I just thought..."

She didn't finish. Her eyes turned to the bed fleetingly before settling on the jar of blood on the table.

"You just thought I'd keep you locked up at the foot of my bed, never to see the night again for ten years. Is that it?"

She grimaced. "Something like that."

That didn't surprise him. It seemed all his concubines came to him with the same preconceptions. At least, now he knew why Meriel had been such a reluctant candidate.

"The cars are in the garage," he said with a slight shake of his head. "Keys are in the ignition. You're free to take your pick and go to town as often as you want. The remote for the gate is in the top drawer of that dresser, as are several credit cards. Again, take your pick."

Her expression wavered between incredulity and astonishment.

"You can redecorate the house if you want," he continued. "Not my office, though. And be warned that if I don't like it, I'll have it fixed. I'd leave my childer's rooms alone too if I were you. Some of them can be ... territorial."

She mulled over the words for a moment. Aidan didn't mind. She could look for the trap as much as she wanted; there wasn't one. He had long ago moved past word games. She, on the other hand ... He detailed her features as she thought. She started nervously biting her bottom lip before realizing what she was doing and stopping. Such a simple gesture, and yet it told him a lot. She was still a young vampire; it was impolite to ask how long ago a vampire had been sired, but Aidan would have bet she hadn't had her fangs for more than five or six years. She had learned a lot in those few years, though. Aidan knew her sire's reputation. The fact that Meriel was alive was proof enough that she could learn fast.

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"Can I invite friends over?" she asked at last, her eyes giving no indication to how interested she was in the answer.

"Provided that they remain on the first floor."

She didn't react, and fired another question. "Can I travel?"

They rarely asked so fast...

"I can't leave the city," he reminded her.

She frowned. "Is that a no?"

"You remember your vows, don't you?"

"My presence at your side," she quoted, nodding to herself. Her eyes narrowed and she added, "In your bed, I presume."

Again, she briefly looked at the bed. She took her bottom lip between her teeth for a second before finishing her glass in one long swallow.

"There's a second master suite next door," he said, keeping his voice neutral. "I'll sleep there until you invite me to join you in here."

She had been leaning to place her glass on the table, and froze mid-movement at his words. This time, the incredulity was all Aidan could see.

"You and I are bound not to take other lovers," he said as he stood. "The next ten years are going to be really long if you are not attracted to me."

The glass made a soft clanking noise on the wooden table. "You could force me," she pointed out, standing as well and crossing her arms beneath her chest. Her hardened nipples were pushing against the fabric of her dress.

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"Where would be the fun in that?" He grinned and walked around the table. Standing by her side, he ran his fingertips against the curve of her neck. "Plus, you *are* attracted to me."

Her skin erupted into goosebumps beneath his fingers. "And you to me," she retorted.

He was glad she didn't try to deny her attraction, and saw no reason to lie about his own. "I am, yes. I like your lips."

She chuckled, though her amusement sounded a little strained. "Is that all you like about me?"

His fingers trailed up over her jaw and to her mouth. He traced her lips with the tip of his index finger. "I like how you bite them when you're uncertain. It makes me want to have a taste, too."

She blinked and swallowed hard. The wariness in her scent had all but disappeared, replaced by timid desire. Curious as to how she'd react, he cupped her face in his hand, leaned in and kissed her.

* * * *

Meriel's sire had warned her about many things, but not that Aidan kissed like this.

The first seconds were just a touch of cool, soft lips against her own, merely pressing, nothing more, as though testing her. When she didn't protest, he parted his lips and ran the tip of his tongue against the seam of her mouth. A shiver ran through Meriel, sending electricity through every inch of her body. Her eyelids fluttered closed, and she opened her mouth to invite him in. He didn't take the hint and instead caught her bottom lip between delicate, blunt teeth. Pressing a hand

to the back of his head, Meriel traced his lips with her tongue. He let go and she could feel him smile against her.

"Delicious," he murmured. "Just as I thought."

And then he was kissing her again, this time without reservation or tentativeness. His tongue invaded her mouth and danced with hers, pressing and pushing and stealing every coherent thought from her. His hand slid from her jaw down to her shoulder then along her arm before settling at her waist. He pulled her closer to his body, and a pang of desire twisted her belly when she felt his erection press against her. Kissing him back frantically, she slipped her hands beneath his jacket and pushed it off his shoulders and to the floor. Next she attacked the buttons of his shirt, and couldn't manage to care when a couple of them popped loose beneath her hurried touch. She pushed it off him too, baring his chest to her touch.

He broke off the kiss, only to caress her neck and shoulder with his mouth. Hands resting over his chest, Meriel realized that he was leading them toward the bed. She took a sharp breath before seeking his lips again.

There was no reason for her to be worried, she thought as, hands shaking slightly, she tugged his belt undone before fumbling with the fastening of his pants. Everything was going according to her sire's plan.

She felt the edge of the bed at the back of her legs just a second before Aidan lowered her to it. Capturing her hands, he pulled both of them above her head as he pressed his body against hers, once again plunging to her neck and worrying the bite marks with the flat of his tongue, though

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without reopening them. His thigh was pressing rhythmically against the apex of her legs, making her crave much more than this simple touch and pulling a breathless moan from her throat.

Abruptly, Aidan rolled their bodies so that he lay beneath her. He let go of her hands, and she resumed her exploration of his skin.

"When are you going to do it?" he asked in a low voice.

She stilled and looked up at him, frightened for a second. She was being silly, she told herself. He couldn't possibly know. Panting, she asked, "Do what?"

Aidan didn't even bat an eyelash. "Try to kill me."

Shocked, she scrambled off of him, reminding herself once again that, no, he wasn't reading her mind. He couldn't. But then how did he know, she wondered as she stared at him, too stunned to even think of denying the accusation.

"I'm not an idiot," he continued, the calm of his voice belying the passion he had been expressing just moments before. "I know that's why your sire threw you at me. You hide it pretty well, but she let me read her like an open book."

As she shuffled back to the foot of the bed, Meriel kept her eyes on him, expecting him to strike any moment now. He couldn't possibly be this calm when he knew she was supposed to kill him.

"Did she tell you how many concubines I have had?" he asked, almost casual.

She answered his question, hoping to gain some time. "A dozen?"

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Reclining back on the pillows, he clasped his hands at the back of his head, a perfect image of relaxation. "Fifteen. Do you know how many tried to kill me?"

"No."

"Eleven. The four who didn't try all stayed ten years as agreed, became strong masters in their own right, and went on to create their own clans. The eleven who tried..."

His voice trailed off even as his features hardened.

Meriel swallowed hard, fisting her hands. "You killed them?"

He shook his head, meeting her eyes squarely. "I would never kill a concubine. They stayed locked in their room for ten years."

It sounded too easy. Meriel waited a few seconds, and when he didn't add anything, she asked, "And then you let them go?"

"And then," Aidan said, cool and calm, "they weren't my concubines anymore."

The sentence was innocuous. The threat behind it, however, was all too clear. A shiver ran down Meriel's spine.

"Think about it," he continued, still as calmly. "Is it worth trying to kill me? Your sire can't hurt you anymore. Nothing forces you to go back to her when the ten years are over."

Laughter rose to Meriel's lips, though it was anything but joyous. He didn't know Leean if he thought Meriel could escape so easily. Standing, she took a few steps away from the bed and passed her fingers through her hair. The wall on the right of the bed was made of exposed bricks. They looked ancient and beautiful, but strong, unyielding—just like Aidan.

She had known from the start that she had been thrust in the middle of a dangerous game. She hadn't realized she would be caught in between two death threats.

"She's in town," she said, turning back to look at him. "She'll be in town for the next ten years. How many occasions will she have to kill me if I don't do what she wants?"

Aidan's blank features finally let through puzzlement. He slid off the bed and came to her, hands in his pockets. "You think I'd let her?"

Arms wrapped around herself, Meriel shrugged. "Why would you want to protect me if you think I'm going to kill you?"

He raised his eyes to the ceiling, letting out a little sigh. "Honestly, Meriel, I thought you were paying attention." Resting a hand on the brick wall behind her, he leaned in very close to talk in her ear. "You're my concubine."

He said the last word slowly, detaching each syllable as though to make sure she'd hear some hidden truth behind the word. Meriel frowned at him, confused. Shouldn't he be upset that she was planning to kill him? Why would he offer to protect her if he believed she was dangerous to him?

Aidan's fingertips ran up and down her arm, electrifying her skin. "Think about it," he said softly. "I'll retire and leave you be. It's been a long night."

The sensual touch slid up her shoulder and neck until he cupped her face. She closed her eyes and let him draw her in for a kiss as delicate and passionate as the first one. Not really aware of what she was doing, she reached out and pressed her palms against his bare chest. His skin felt smooth

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as marble. Her desire sparked back to life, all talks of killing and dying forgotten. She wanted more of this, more of him—and before she knew it, he was leaving.

Her chest heaving, she watched Aidan walk out and close the door behind him. She stood still for a few minutes, conflicting thoughts overwhelming her. She wanted to go after him, but if she did, she wasn't sure whether it would be to fuck him or kill him. She doubted either option was a good idea at that moment. In the end, she went to the door and locked it before curling up on the bed. She didn't know whether she could trust Aidan. She didn't know either whether she could afford not to trust him. Either way, she'd be lucky to still be alive before the week was over, let alone ten years.

* * * *

In the early afternoon, Meriel stepped out of her room to explore the mansion. Upon waking up, she had found the ensuite bathroom and walk-in closet. The latter was filled with an assortment of women's clothes in different sizes and styles. Her instinct had been to slip into comfortable jeans and a t-shirt. It was what she was used to wearing in her clan's lair, what she had worn, more often than not, as a human. Her sire's stern features popping into her mind, however, had made her reach for a skin-tight, strapless white tube dress. Her mission was clear. Aidan's words had seeded doubt in her mind, but after thinking about all of it, she had realized she didn't really have a choice.

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She came out of her room with her head high and what she hoped was a relaxed demeanor. The truth was, she was wary. Other than Aidan, she had only met his bodyguard Stephen the previous night, and he had made it clear that he didn't trust her. After Aidan's talk of his previous concubines, she could easily understand why—just like she could guess that Stephen's suspiciousness toward her wouldn't disappear any time soon.

She could hear voices behind closed doors as she walked down the hallway, but did not meet anyone until she descended the staircase. The ballroom had been cleared of its dais and refreshment tables, leaving it oddly empty. She looked around her, unsure which way to go. She counted six doors and two hallways around the room; she only knew which one led to the front door. She wished she could leave, but of course it wasn't that easy.

"Can I help you, my lady?"

She almost started at the quiet words. Lost in her thoughts, she hadn't noticed the petite woman approaching. Meriel studied the human as she answered. With graying hair and an austere black robe, she held herself with confidence even in front of a vampire she didn't know. It said a lot about her, and about the household she served in.

"I hope so," Meriel replied with a tight smile. "Could you show me to Master Aidan's office?"

The maid nodded. "Of course, my lady. It's the third door over here. Although he's not there at this time. He's swimming."

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Keeping her surprise to herself, Meriel asked for directions to the pool. The maid led her through two corridors and three doors to a room as large as the ballroom, entirely tiled in large, irregular stones that felt strangely warm beneath her bare feet. In the center of the room, a few café tables and lounge chairs surrounded a square swimming pool about a hundred feet long. Bright lights on a very high-domed ceiling, which was painted sky blue, gave the illusion of natural light.

Meriel approached the edge of the pool and watched Aidan. He was almost at the other end and swimming back toward her in long, powerful strokes that showcased his shoulders and arms.

"Why don't you join me?" he offered when he reached her end of the pool and stopped to tread water in front of her.

She tilted her head to one side and smiled coyly. "I didn't bring a suit."

Laughing, he crossed the last couple of yards to the ladder and pulled himself out. Only then did Meriel understand what had amused him: he had been swimming in the nude. Humming to herself, she turned away to pick up the terrycloth robe on the lounge chair behind her. When she turned back, holding out the robe to him, she wasn't shy about letting her eyes trail over his body.

Decades as a vampire had not robbed him of the tan skin-color that had to have been his since birth. The muscled chest she had discovered the previous night was even more attractive with droplets of water sliding over his skin, begging for a gentle hand to dry them off. Her gaze dropped a little

lower. Aidan chuckled, and she realized she had been humming again.

"Thank you," he said, amusement tinting his words. He slipped into the robe and tied the belt loosely at the waist. Head tilted to one side, he considered her with sparkling eyes. "Should I be wondering whether you have a stake handy?"

She returned his look evenly. "You think stakes are my only weapon?"

"I'm not that stupid. I just figure stakes are what I should be worried about now since you already used your feminine wiles on me."

Meriel let out a little snort. "Yes, and it worked so well that you went to sleep in a different room."

He reached over and traced the curve of her jaw with his fingertip. "If you wanted me to stay, all you had to do was say so."

Repressing a shiver at his touch, Meriel pushed a smile to her lips. She hated playing with him like this. She consoled herself with the thought that at least, her attraction to him was genuine. "Say so?" She captured his hand in hers and narrowed the distance between them. "What if I did this?"

She leaned in, crossing the last few inches between them and pressing her mouth to his. At the same moment, her free hand slid inside his robe and around his waist to rest on his ass. She gave it a gentle squeeze.

"You might want to be more explicit," he said, tongue in cheek, when her lips trailed over his chin and jaw. "I'd hate to understand you wrong."

Taking a step back, she rolled her eyes at him. She pulled the zipper down the side of her dress and let it fall to the tiled floor, standing nude in front of Aidan. She met his eyes for a moment before stepping aside and jumping straight down into the water. It felt warm against her cool skin. When she emerged again, she slicked her hair back and looked up at him.

"Is that explicit enough for you?"

He dropped the robe and plunged in, arms extended in front of him and barely splashing any water at all. Swimming under the water, he approached her and pulled up close enough that their bodies brushed against each other when he broke the surface. Meriel rested her arms on his shoulders. Her puckered nipples brushed against his chest every time she kicked the water beneath her. His hands settled on her waist, so light that she could have broken free without effort.

"At least," he said with a slight grin, "now I'm pretty sure you don't have a stake on you."

"Only pretty sure?"

"Well, I can think of a couple of places still where you could have stashed a stake."

Her burst of laughter reverberated over the water and filled the room. "I'm not into toys," she informed him, still laughing.

"Really?" He waggled his eyebrows at her. His hands still held her waist loosely, his thumbs now tracing circles over her skin that felt like fire. "Toys can be fun."

"Let me correct that. I'm not into toys when I can put my hands on something like this."

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She punctuated her words by taking hold of his cock. It grew harder in her hand, and she gave it a lazy stroke. A low humming sound rose from his chest. Using the hold of her hand on his shoulder, she raised herself a little in the water, just enough to be able to wrap her legs around his hips. At once, she started guiding his cock to her folds. After all, he had asked her to be explicit...

He stopped her with a shake of his head. "Not here," he said, his hands firming on her waist and holding her far enough that he couldn't slip inside her. "You're not into toys; I'm not into exhibitionism."

Disappointed, she let go of his cock after giving it a last small squeeze, but kept her arm on his shoulder and her legs around him. "Funny coming from someone who swims in the nude."

He shrugged and they bobbed up and down in the water. "Swimming is one thing. Making love to my concubine is something else."

She refused to take the bait. He could call it making love if he wanted. For her, it would be fucking. She wanted this—wanted him—but she also remembered he would soon be dead.

"Shall we take this elsewhere, then?" he asked when a few seconds had passed in silence.

Meriel nodded curtly and they separated. He swam ahead of her and climbed out of the water first. When she stepped up the ladder, he had his robe open and ready for her to slip into. She heard voices behind him, and realized he was

shielding her body from view of two vampires who had just stepped in the room.

"We'll have to find you a suit for next time," he said, a little too casual.

Tying up the belt at her waist, she watched him wrap the towel that had been lying on the chair around his waist. It did very little to hide his erection.

"We'll have to find one for you too, then," she said dryly. "I'm not into sharing my lovers, not even the sight of them."

A low, rich chuckle rose from his throat when he picked her up, one arm behind her knees and the other at her back. He dipped his head and pressed a peck to her lips before starting toward the staircase. Closing her eyes, Meriel rested her face against the crook of his neck. Her right hand was in his hair, tugging lightly at the strands. This felt comfortable, she thought. Much more than she would have expected when she had only met Aidan the previous night. For now, she could let herself forget why she was there.

She opened her eyes again when she heard a door close behind them. He had brought them to her room. He set her down next to the bed, and she watched his eyes as he tugged on the robe's belt and undressed her. Earlier, they had been sparkling and playful. Now, they shone with unmistakable lust.

He brushed back wet strands of hair and rested his hands on either side of her face, brushing his thumbs lightly over her cheeks. He caressed her mouth with his, pulling away when she expected him to deepen the kiss. His lips pressed against cheek, the tip of her nose, her eyelids, her brow, each

touch so light that Meriel wasn't sure whether she imagined it.

His lips slid over her skin and to the crook of her neck. Ignoring her uneasiness, she tilted her head to the side, granting him better access. She sighed softly when he sucked at the marks he had left on her the previous night and tingles shot through her body, arousing her further. She could feel a slick wetness between her thighs, and it had nothing to do with the pool anymore. Her hands clenched at his back, her nails drawing lines onto his skin. She tensed at the light pricking of his fangs, just a second before they reopened the bite, and closed her eyes in anticipation of the inextricably mixed pain and pleasure of sharing blood. Aidan teased the marks with the tip of his tongue before drawing a mouthful of blood. Her head feeling suddenly very light, Meriel moaned quietly.

"Can I?" she asked, trying and failing not to sound as though she were pleading.

He stilled and pulled back until she could see his eyes again. His features revealed nothing. "Do you plan to try to kill me anytime soon?"

She hesitated for a couple of seconds before replying, "No."

A corner of his lips curved, though the result couldn't really have been called a smile. "Another time, maybe. When you don't hesitate anymore."

He drew her onto the bed and kneeled over her closed legs. His cock pressed into her thigh when he leaned over her and, capturing both her hands in his left hand, drew them

above her head. His right hand, meanwhile, was skimming over her skin, barely touching her. Meriel tried to arch into his touch, but trapped as she was beneath him, she couldn't do much. She could have thrown him off her if she tried, but it would ruin the mood.

For long minutes, Aidan explored her body with no more than his fingertips, setting her skin ablaze and making her crave more contact. He caressed every inch of her with his fingers, then proceeded to do the same thing with his lips and tongue. When she moaned or bucked against him, Meriel realized after a while, he remained on the same spot a little longer, drawing out the sensations. He was figuring out what parts of her were most sensitive, she understood at last, feeling a little silly for not understanding it faster. Although why he would want to map out the erogenous zones of her body, she couldn't fathom. Hadn't he said himself that he knew what she was supposed to do? Did he hope to convince her not to kill him by fucking her well enough?

The thought annoyed her. She wasn't so weak that a round or two of sex would make her forget everything, and Aidan was an idiot if he thought she was.

"My turn."

She freed her hands and pushed lightly against his shoulders. Aidan rolled off her and onto his back. She followed his movement and lay on her side next to him, letting her hand ghost over his chest.

A jagged white line on his tanned skin over his ribs caught her attention and she followed it with a finger.

"Knife," he said simply.

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She glanced up at his face before looking at the scar again. To be so neat on his skin, it was either only a few years old, or he had received it as a human. She wanted to ask which it was, but she didn't dare. Getting to know him better wouldn't help her accomplish her mission, far from it.

Abandoning the small line, she looked for more on his smooth, silky skin, and was surprised by how many she found. She touched each of them with a gentle finger before pressing her lips against each faded scar. As she did, she wondered how many times he had needed to defend himself since becoming a master. Many more times than she had fought, she imagined. Even so, she didn't doubt her chances when it would come to it. Her sire had trained her well, and what better way to get through Aidan's defenses than to lure him to sleep in her arms?

After allowing her free rein for a few minutes, Aidan clutched her forearms and drew her up to lie on top of him. Hyperaware of every inch where her body touched his, she sought his mouth and pushed her tongue inside to stroke his. She could feel his cock trapped between their bodies, hard and wet, but not as wet as she was. His hand slipped to it; she raised herself up to allow him access, ending the kiss. With her hands resting on the bed on either side of him, she looked down to where he was fisting his cock. The sight entranced her, and for a moment she forgot everything that wasn't him or her. The only thing that mattered anymore was for her to have him, his beautiful cock, inside her body.

She looked up at him and could see the question in his eyes. She nodded. He smiled as the tip of his cock brushed

against her folds, teasing and spreading the slick wetness around. On the next passage, she lowered herself abruptly, forcing him inside her. They gasped, and for a moment were still, eyes locked together and savoring this first union of their bodies.

Her hands now resting on his chest for leverage, Meriel took a few rocking strokes up and down his body, driving him a little further on each push down. His hands on her hips reinforced her rhythm while his eyes roamed over her, caressing her with as much intensity as his hands and mouth had moments earlier.

All of a sudden, he wrapped his arms around her back and pulled her flush down against him. He then rolled them to their sides. His hand slid to her thigh, silently requesting. She heard him and raised her leg to rest it over his and open herself more to him.

As he set a slow rhythm of thrusting and drawing back, his hand on her thigh traveled over her to caress her ass, her back, her neck and chest. Meriel contented herself with being passive for a little while, but as his rhythm intensified, she just had to touch him. Her fingertips played over his lips and he kissed them. Her fingers were wet by the time she flicked them over his flat nipples, making them grow taut for her.

He made a sound, low in his throat, and a shiver coursed through Meriel. The next instant, he had pushed her onto her back and was thrusting faster into her. His left hand cupped the side of her head, his thumb stroking her cheek, while the right had snuck between them for his fingers to press against her clit in between each of his strokes. A fire was burning

inside Meriel, growing brighter and warmer with each touch from Aidan.

She wanted to caress him, return the pleasure he was giving her, but she couldn't find it in her to move. She could only watch the play of sensations on his face, could only listen for his accelerating breathing and moans, could only feel his growing need with his now-erratic thrusts as he sought to push the two of them a little closer to orgasm.

When it struck Meriel, it was like lightning spreading through her and blinding her for a second. Her body arched against his, drawing him into her pleasure, and she felt him shake against her and inside her.

Aidan rested over her body for a few moments, and rather than being heavy or stifling, his weight felt almost comfortable. When he rolled off her and laid by her side, she quickly missed his body and turned to him, pressing her legs and lower body against his.

"Wow," she said, still breathless.

"Wow?" he repeated, looking at her with a raised eyebrow.

"Ten years don't seem so long anymore."

His eyes widened in delight. His rich laugh sent a shudder down Meriel's spine. He reached and touched her face with her fingertips, caressing. Without thinking, Meriel leaned into his touch.

"Did you feed yet?" he asked after a little while.

"No. I was going to go in to town tonight."

"Would you like company?"

As earlier, she hesitated, though for a very different reason. When he had asked if she intended to kill him, she

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had needed to lie and had worried that he would be able to tell. Now, she could tell him the truth—yes, she did want him to come with her—and it was how easily this answer came to her that stilled her tongue, puzzling her.

"Another time, maybe," he said with a small, lopsided smile.

Meriel shook her head. "No. I mean, yes, I do want company. Come with me?"

His smile widened, becoming more natural—and more beautiful. Part of her hoped she'd be able to make him smile again. She doubted she would have many occasions before she had to kill him.

* * * *

Meriel had only stepped into the shower moments before, but already a fine mist filled the bathroom. Rather than joining her immediately, Aidan rested his back against the door and watched her through the fogged-up shower door. The curves of her body seemed to call to him, for his hands to run over them, for his mouth to explore them again. He wasn't able to resist the call very long.

Drawing the shower door open, he slipped inside behind Meriel. Her back tensed, no doubt in wariness, but relaxed again when he laid his hands on her shoulders and kneaded lightly.

"I thought you were getting ready in your room," she said, her tone making the words a question.

Aidan brushed her hair aside, baring her shoulders and neck. He pressed a single kiss to the back of her neck. She

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shivered against his gentle touch. "I changed my mind," he said, his lips caressing her skin with each word. He picked up the soap and worked up a thick, lavender-scented lather in his hands before washing her shoulders and back. He followed the cascading water and slowly made his way to her ass where he spent maybe a little more time than necessary.

Meriel turned to face him. Water clung to her eyelashes, and the heat of the shower had colored her pale skin pink. Shiny and wet, her mouth was nothing if not kissable.

With a gentle hand, she took the soap from him and ran it over his chest, letting her hand follow to chase away the suds.

"Changed your mind about hunting, too?" she asked in a throaty voice.

"No, we will go. Soon."

He trailed a series of soft kisses along her collarbone. Her right hand stilled on his back, then came to rest at the back of his head, accompanying his movement without pushing him in any way. The way she shifted against him, however, gave him a clear idea of what she wanted, and he kissed his way down the center of her chest and along the curve of her right breast.

He licked a path to her nipple and teased it with his lips and tongue, adding only a hint of blunt teeth when Meriel's hand at the back of his head pushed him tighter against her breast. Leaving a hard and peaking nipple behind, he turned to her other breast and inflicted the same delicious torture on it until she was moaning quietly and pressing her hips forward to rub against his hardened cock.

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Satisfied that he had lavished enough attention on her breasts, Aidan trailed kisses lower and lower down her body, crouching then kneeling down, his hands guiding him as they slid down her stomach, her hip and then to her thighs.

He licked the delicate groove where her thigh met her hip and drew an appreciative murmur from her. Very gently, he pushed at her hips until she was leaning back against the tiles.

"Steady, now," he murmured against the soft skin of her leg. Without further warning, he gently took her ankle and raised it. He guided her leg up until her thigh rested on his shoulder, offering her folds to his eyes, mouth and fingers.

He leaned forward, and her fingers raked through his hair, accompanying his movements and even pulling him a little faster toward her. He let her guide him to her core and traced her labia with the tip of his tongue. Her fingers tightened almost painfully, demanding more. He complied and this time pressed the flat of his tongue to her opening, dipping in briefly before sliding up to curl around her clit.

"Yes," she hissed. "Right there."

Drawing back, he pressed a series of small kisses against her thigh. She trembled and groaned in frustration, her hands trying to lead him back to where she needed him most. When he figured he had teased her as much as she could endure, he slid his mouth back to her folds, this time settling directly over her clit. He flicked it with his tongue a few times, and Meriel's hips bucked against him to accentuate the contact. He pressed his left hand against her side to try to still her. Then, delicately, he took her clit between his teeth and

sucked. Meriel was moaning continuously now, quiet sounds that went straight to Aidan's balls.

Without ever stopping to suck on her clit, he let go of her thigh and brought his right hand to her cunt. He pushed a finger past her folds. She was so wet that his finger slid in easily, and he quickly added a second one, curling both of them up in search of that sweet spot that would—

"Aidan! Gods! Please!"

He smiled against her trembling flesh; he seemed to have found it. Lifting his face up to look at her, Aidan used his thumb to press rhythmically against her clit.

"So beautiful like this," he murmured.

Her hands had fallen away from his head and were now clutching at her breasts. Her head was tilted to the side, mouth open and eyes closed. Her chest heaved with each panting breath she took, and her body trembled under the warm water as her orgasm approached.

"Beautiful," he said again. The musk of her sex was making him lightheaded. "Won't you come for me, Meriel?"

A third finger joined the first two into pumping in and out of her, always returning to apply pressure to the spot that made her writhe beneath his touch. Suddenly, Meriel's body went rigid, even as her slick flesh clenched over his fingers. Not daring to blink for fear of losing even an instant of her pleasure, Aidan drank in the sight of her, her breathless moan and the shaking of her body.

Gently lifting her thigh from his shoulder, he set her foot down and stood again, resting his body alongside hers so that his aching cock pressed against her hip. He made sure she

had opened her eyes before he brought his fingers, drenched in her wetness, to his mouth. The taste of her pleasure burst on his tongue. Another small tremor rocked her body.

"Can I..." Her voice was deep and raw. "Do you want me..."

Although she didn't finish voicing her offer, Aidan understood it. He was tempted, but gave a small shake of head and, taking her hand, led it to his cock. When she first put her mouth on him, he wanted it to last more than a few seconds.

And seconds of her hand stroking his needy cock were all it took to bring him to completion with a gasp that Meriel muffled with a kiss.

He should have known better, he thought a little hazily, but come morning, if she was so inclined, he just might go to sleep in her bed.

* * * *

Every time the convertible's engine purred, responding to the smallest pressure of Aidan's foot on the accelerator, he couldn't help but think of the way Meriel had purred in his arms, responding to his every touch. Adjusting his hardening cock in his jeans, he glanced at her by his side. She had done little more than pass a brush through her hair after she came out of the shower, and it was curling as the wind dried it, making Aidan long to run his fingers through the strands.

While he had gone to put on dark jeans and a shirt in his room, she had found a dress in her closet. They had shared a grin when they had met again in the hallway and realized her

long, silky spaghetti-strapped dress matched his red shirt in color and fabric. The dress clung to her curves, emphasizing them and making Aidan yearn to touch her again. He rested his hand on her thigh, annoyed that the small purse on her lap blocked his way to a more intimate touch. It was going to be a long night until they returned home.

"Where do you like to hunt?" he asked just as they were nearing the center of the city.

"Dance clubs, usually."

He mulled over that, factored in her sexy dress, and took a turn toward a posh bar near the financial district. "I know just the place."

He parked the car just a street past the bar, and she took his arm as they walked to it. The bouncer took one look at Aidan and pulled off the ropes to let him and Meriel through. Aidan noticed that Meriel glanced at the line of people waiting to get in, but she didn't say a word.

A long bar lined with high stools stretched along the left side of the establishment, with a half-dozen bartenders serving customers. In the back of the room, a few low tables and sofas waited for tired dancers, but at this hour the crowd was in the middle of the room, dancing to the slow beat of a jazz quartet in the corner of the room.

Aidan's lips brushed against Meriel's earlobe when he murmured, "I'll be at the bar. Show me how you hunt."

She flashed him a smile and stepped through the crowd, arms raised on either side of her and already stepping in tune to the music. Sitting at the bar, Aidan watched her dance, her demeanor flirtatious but her eyes cool and gauging. She

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ignored couples and women dancing alone, instead setting her sight on a tall man who had been watching the dancers from the edge of the dance floor. Crooking a finger at him, she drew him to her almost too easily.

Aidan turned away to order a shot of vodka. When he looked for Meriel again, her mouth was at her prey's throat. His head was thrown back in obvious pleasure. His arms were around her, one of his hands at the back of her head, fingers tangled in her hair, and the other one groping her ass.

A white-hot flash burst over Aidan, blinding him to everything that wasn't Meriel. It took him a few moments to realize what he was feeling, and when he did, surprise filled him. It had been a long time since he had experienced jealousy. The emotion was almost foreign to him now, and he didn't like it much. As long as she remained within the bonds of a concubine, Meriel was free to dance with or feed from anyone she pleased. So why was Aidan's blood boiling at the sight of her lips on that man's neck, of his hands caressing her, touching what had been Aidan's to explore only hours earlier?

Stifling the growl that was trying to rise in his throat, Aidan pushed away from the bar and stalked to the dance floor. Meriel had her back to him now, but her prey was looking straight at him. His face must have been enough of a warning because the man's eyes widened and he swallowed hard, his hands already leaving her. When Aidan reached them, the man took a stumbling step back and away from Meriel. She turned around, and her face lit up with an amused smile when she saw him standing there.

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She sashayed to him and threw her arms around his neck, moving her body next to his to the slow tempo of the music. He rested his hands at her waist and pulled her closer.

"Jealous?" she said, teasing.

He struggled not to tighten his hold on her. "Sometimes, yes," he admitted. "Do you mind?"

Her fingers traced sensual patterns over his shoulders. "Not particularly. It's been a long time—"

He cocked his head to one side and searched her face when she cut herself short. "A long time?" he repeated.

She shrugged and gave him a little smile. "A long time since anyone cared enough to be jealous."

Aidan's first instinct was to ask questions that started with 'who' and 'how long,' but he only murmured a quiet, "I find that hard to believe."

Without adding a word, she rested her cheek against his shoulder. Aidan's mind was suddenly filled by a hundred questions, none of which he dared ask now. Meriel was his concubine and lover, but they had only known each other for a day. There would be a time for personal questions, but it hadn't come yet. All Aidan could hope for was enough time.

He wasn't sure he would get it.

Of their own accord, his arms wrapped around Meriel. He tried to keep his annoyance out of his voice when he turned his face toward her and said against her temple, "Your sire is here."

She tensed against him and pulled away, her eyes immediately searching the room. He tilted his head in Leean's direction. He watched Meriel's features as she followed his

gesture and found her sire. Her face was now void of all expression. Aidan didn't like this at all, nor did he like seeing Leean approach them with a deceptively wide smile.

"Master Aidan," she said, her voice like thick honey. "Meriel dearest. I didn't have a chance to congratulate you last night."

Aidan nodded curtly, even as Meriel murmured a word of thanks.

The two women looked at each other. Leean raised her eyebrows, and Aidan could have sworn he felt Meriel flinch against his side.

Meriel turned a tense smile to him. "All this dancing made me thirsty," she said, almost apologetic. "Would you mind?"

Aidan did mind. The last thing he wanted was to leave Meriel alone with her sire to be reminded of what he knew she had been asked to do—or to be punished for not having done it yet. However, as he was about to suggest they all go to the bar, her hand clenched on his forearm and she said, "Please?" in a very quiet voice.

Gritting his teeth, Aidan nodded again. He threw a warning glance at Leean before threading his way through the crowd toward the bar. He ordered two glasses of wine and turned to look at Meriel and Leean as he was being served. With the music pulsating through the club, he couldn't hear a word of what they were saying, and too many people were breaking his line of sight for him to be able to read their lips. He could interpret their body language, though. Leean, her upper body angled toward Meriel, rested a hand on Meriel's shoulder and seemed to try to draw her forward. Meriel resisted, looking

around her several times, though never toward the bar. She did incline her head in the end, her attitude much too submissive for Aidan's liking. Frowning, he didn't wait for his change and picked up the two glasses from the bar.

When he reached Meriel again, Leean was nowhere to be found. Meriel took the glass he handed her without meeting his eyes and emptied it in one long swallow. Frowning, Aidan stepped a little closer to her, close enough to get a better idea of her scent. She was scared, he realized with a burst of anger. It was a good thing for Leean that she had left so quickly.

"You have nothing to fear," he said, meeting Meriel's eyes, and laid a hand on her arm. He squeezed gently, hoping to comfort her. "I told you I'd protect you."

She shrugged her shoulders, shaking off his hand, and looked away. "Why would you think I need to be protected?"

Cupping her chin in his palm, he gently pulled her face back toward his. Her eyes were troubled, and she was biting on her bottom lip.

"It's written all over your face, Meriel. When we first met, you were guarding your emotions from me, but now you're not. Anyone could see you're upset and afraid. She threatened you, didn't she?"

Meriel seemed torn, and Aidan could easily guess why. If she confirmed his suspicions, she would betray her sire. By lying to him, however, she was putting herself in danger.

"I don't take well to people threatening me and mine," he said, all too aware when she stared at him that she could interpret his words either as a threat or as another attempt to

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comfort her. In truth, it was up to her to decide. He had always taken his vows to heart, and nothing other than a concubine raising a weapon against him would turn him against her. All he hoped was that Meriel would understand that—understand that she had a choice, that she didn't have to live by her sire's rules anymore—and understand it before she committed a mistake he wouldn't be able to forgive.

* * * *

Meriel could do nothing more than stare at Aidan. He didn't add anything, but his eyes were begging her to believe him: believe that she could betray the person who had held her life in her hands for the past seven years, the person who had made her what she was now, the person who had promised her a painful death if she didn't do as she was told.

She wanted to believe him. She wasn't sure she could. She had only known him for a few hours, during which he had repeatedly tried to convince her she could trust him. The problem was, the last time she had trusted a vampire, she had lost her life.

She didn't have time to hesitate anymore. Leean had given her a deadline. Before the night ended, it would be over, one way or the other. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath. When she opened them again, her decision was made.

"Let's go back to the mansion."

The frost covering her words surprised her. She tried to warm them with a smile, but she was afraid it turned into a grimace when her stomach clenched from nervousness.

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Aidan looked at her with an inscrutable look. His arm remained around her waist as he guided her toward the exit, where they left their glasses on a tray by the door. She had to refrain from hurrying and leaving him to follow.

"Let me drive," she asked, filled with impatience, when they reached the car.

Aidan gave her the keys with no more than a raised eyebrow. She climbed in and started the engine, making it roar to life before he had even closed his door.

She drove fast, faster than he had, faster than she should have. Her focus remained entirely on the road, blocking out everything else. It was easier that way. Aidan, however, she had started to notice, rarely allowed things to be easy for her.

"What's the rush?" he asked after a few minutes of only the rumbling of the engine breaking the silence.

Meriel kept her eyes ahead of her as she answered. "I want you."

He laughed, sounding surprised. "Nice. From wanting to kill me to wanting me, period, in just a day."

She didn't reply. She felt too guilty to dare to say a word. He might pick up on it in her voice, and then what would happen?

She kept quiet until they were only a block from the mansion. "Can you open the gates? I left my remote in the bedroom."

He pulled the slim remote from his pocket and hit the button. Ahead of them, the gates started swinging open. "Be sure to take it when you go out on your own," he advised her. "You'd be stuck outside until someone else returned."

She nodded absently. She knew as much. More than once, she had heard Leean complain that the perimeter around Aidan's mansion was too well protected for an attack without help from the inside.

She slowed down as she drove up the alley to the mansion, but even so the tires screeched lightly when she parked the car in the garage. Aidan was shaking his head as he got out of the car, but he didn't say anything. Meriel hurried out and intercepted him in front of the car. She dropped her purse on the hood to free her hands and immediately started undoing the buttons of his shirt.

"Let's go in," Aidan suggested, capturing her wrists.

"No."

"No?" he repeated, sounding amused.

"I want you," she said darkly. Breaking free from his hold, her right hand slid down to cup his hardening cock, while her left pushed his shirt off his shoulders. "And I want you *now*."

"Meriel, I—"

His voice failed him when she squeezed his cock through his pants. Smirking, she watched him swallow heavily and quickly unbuttoned his jeans. She shoved his pants and boxers down his legs and wrapped both her hands around his cock. Already the tip was leaking precome; she rubbed it along his length.

"Pushy," he commented with a light hiss.

"Do you mind?"

Still stroking him with her right hand, she used her left to catch his hand and lead it to his cock. He picked up her rhythm as she completely let go of him, and for a few

seconds she watched him, mindlessly licking her lips. He was beautiful like this, touching himself but looking at her with an intense gaze. She had to look away. Stepping back until her legs touched the car behind her, she tugged her dress up her thighs and over her hips, exposing her panties. She pushed these down her legs before sitting on the still warm hood of the car, then lying down.

"I don't mind, no," he said after a while, his eyes roaming over her. "Not particularly. It's been a long time since anyone wanted me like this."

She opened her arms to him, beckoning him forward, and finished the exchange with a smile. "I find that hard to believe."

He leaned over her, resting his weight on his forearm, and ran first one finger over her slit, then two. She watched him spread her wetness over his cock and felt a pang of need resonate through her.

"Inside me, please."

There was no teasing or foreplay this time. His eyes burning with desire, he pushed one of her thighs up and entered her in one fast stroke. Meriel cried out, bearing down on him to take him in deeper. Aidan's right hand closed over her breast as he took his first few strokes. After a moment, he growled and tore the thin strap of her dress, baring her chest to his touch. Meriel's fingers dug deep into his shoulder. He groaned. The next snap of his hips was just a little harder, just a little faster, and the slap of his flesh on hers resounded just a little louder.

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If earlier they had made love, this time it was pure fucking. It was violent and carnal and even though Aidan didn't bite her, Meriel thought it said more about them as vampires than anything they had done so far—and she loved every second of it.

With their coupling so intense, it couldn't possibly last long. After a dozen or so more thrusts, Aidan came with a grunt, his entire body jerking against hers. Even then, he kept grinding against her clit, and soon she was following him over the edge.

His body was still shaking against hers when she reached for her purse on the hood next to her. Her hand curled over it. She could feel the shape of the stake inside it. It would take her a second to take it out, and barely any longer than that to push it into Aidan's back and pierce his heart.

It was what she was supposed to do. It was what she had prepared herself to do all evening.

She just couldn't bear the thought of it anymore.

Letting go of the purse, she wrapped her arm over his bare back and held him closer to her.

"Are your childer home?" she asked, her panting words muffled against his neck. "Or do they go out to hunt?"

Aidan's lips caressed her cheek. "Most of them should be here at this hour," he mumbled. "But they wouldn't—"

"Call them," she interrupted him. Her voice sounded weak and a little raspy. "Call them all."

He pulled away from her and stood. Fastening his jeans, he stared at her. She could see slow comprehension dawning

on him. His disappointment made her stomach twist painfully. "What's going on?"

Meriel wished she could stop, but it was too late. She had either said too much or not enough. She had to finish, even if it meant admitting to Aidan that she had been lying to him up to that point.

"Tell them to arm themselves. Because in a few minutes, my—"

She stopped herself before she could say 'sire.' She was about to betray her clan, and, she realized with a shock, she felt no guilt or regret, only a sense that she didn't belong with them anymore. She belonged with Aidan—if he would still have her after this.

"Leean's clan is coming," she finished. "They have the remote to open the gates. They expect you to be dead by the time they come in, and they intend to kill everyone else."

* * * *

For a few seconds, numbness paralyzed Aidan. He had known what to expect from Meriel from the instant he had chosen her as his concubine, and so he wasn't surprised. What did surprise him was how much her betrayal hurt. Did he care about her that much, already? Was it why he had been so jealous at the club?

"Well?" he asked harshly. He spread his arms on either side of him, exposing his bare chest. "What are you waiting for?"

When she did nothing more than drop her gaze to the floor, he turned away and strode out of the garage and into

the house. He hurried to the intercom box near the entry door and jerked it open with an angry gesture.

"Childer," his voice boomed throughout the mansion, amplified by the speakers in each room. "We're about to be attacked. Arm yourselves and come down to the ballroom. Humans, lock yourselves in the safe room until the all clear call."

He felt Meriel walk in behind him as he spoke. His back tense, he turned to her, unsure whether he'd face her only to be staked through the heart. A flash of surprise ran through him when he found her wearing his shirt over her ruined dress, the overly-long sleeves covering her hands as she crossed her arms over her waist.

Her jaw clenched. Looking somewhere behind his left shoulder, she asked, "Do you want me to leave?"

Aidan moved closer until she had no choice but to meet his eyes. She shivered at what she saw there, but he felt little satisfaction from knowing he scared her.

"You're my concubine," he said in a low, slow voice. "Nine years, three hundred and sixty four more days. Go to your room and stay out of the way. I won't touch you, but I can't pledge my childer will be so lenient."

She nodded once and turned away. He kept his eyes on her as she stepped up the staircase, crossing paths with several of his childer who were hurrying down. They gave her cold looks but didn't throw a word or gesture at her. Even Stephen did nothing more than glare at her. When he came to hand Aidan a sword, he gave him an exasperated look but refrained from voicing the "I told you so" that Aidan had

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expected. He nodded, grateful for both the weapon and his childe's restraint.

Aidan gave his orders quickly, and his childer nodded their understanding. Only a dozen had been in the mansion when he called for them to come down. Leean's clan counted more vampires than his own, but most of them were fledglings, while half his childer could become masters in their own right if they decided to. They knew how to fight. They also knew when not to ask questions. There would be time, later, to explain how he had known the attack was coming—not that it was all that complicated to figure out.

When they came, there were more of them than Aidan had expected. It seemed as though Leean had sired more vampires recently, probably preparing for this very event. It didn't matter. Aidan couldn't begin to conceive that the outcome of the fight would turn against him.

He saw Leean as her clan rushed into the mansion, but too many of her pawns stood between the two of them, and he lost sight of her. Gripping the hilt of his sword in both hands, he raised it and slashed at the neck of the first vampire running at him. He turned to ashes at the moment Aidan severed his head.

Aidan soon lost track of how many vampires he executed. The ashes made the floor slippery and gave the air a heavy smell of earth and death. He tried not to worry about his childer, trusting them to take care of themselves. When it was over, it would be time to count the living and mourn the dead.

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It felt like hours passed before Aidan found himself at the center of a loose circle formed by his childer. Only one enemy was left standing in front of him, the enemy he had demanded his childer leave to him. Leean had been disarmed but she stood with her chin held high, for all the world acting as though she was the one holding a sword, not him.

"Leean," he said coldly. "I don't remember inviting you here tonight."

She crossed her arms over her chest and even had the gall to smile. Didn't she get it? Couldn't she see that her entire clan was ashes at her feet?

"You can't kill me," she said, her voice full of confidence. "Our clans are allied."

The woman was insane. There was no other explanation that Aidan could see.

"Allied, yes. We were allied. Until you attacked me."

He approached her, firming his grip on his sword and raising it until it rested against her neck. For the first time, her calm seemed to crack, and she swallowed heavily. A call sounded behind Aidan.

"Aidan. Wait."

His hand shook as he recognized the voice, and the blade of his sword nicked Leean's neck. Aidan became very still. In front of him, Leean's expression turned into a mix of hope and triumph. Very slowly, he turned toward Meriel. Stephen stood in front of her, his wide shoulders blocking her from Aidan's sight.

"Let her through," Aidan asked, his voice rough.

Stephen's back visibly tensed. He answered without taking his eyes off Meriel. "Sire. You put me in charge of your security—"

"I did. But now I'm saying let her through."

With a low curse, Stephen stepped aside. Meriel walked forward. She had changed into faded jeans and a t-shirt. Ashes stained her clothes, face and hands. Her right hand gripped a stake in that easy hold that spoke of familiarity. Her face was grim and determined as she stopped in front of Aidan and Leean.

"I don't take well to people threatening me and mine," she said in a low voice, her eyes going back and forth between the two of them.

Aidan only had a second to wonder if he had been wrong to let her come closer, wrong to trust one more time that she could take her vows to heart. When her arm and the stake came down, he realized he had known the answer all along.

* * * *

As Aidan slipped inside her, Meriel couldn't stop a small sigh of contentment from passing her lips. Her hand reached over, seeking, and immediately Aidan's hand was there. They clutched each other, their fingers intertwined as their lives had been for many years.

He took shallow, almost lazy thrusts into her body, slowly fanning the flames of their joined desire. Bringing her free hand to his face, Meriel guided his mouth to her lips and kissed him lightly before tilting her head to the side. His

mouth slid over her offered neck, his tongue coming out to place small licks as he went.

Meriel arched into his thrusts, pulling him deeper inside her as she waited for the bite. Aidan mapped her bite marks with his tongue and lips and teased her a few more seconds before finally sliding his fangs into her.

Every nerve in her body thrumming with pleasure, Meriel closed her eyes. Her fingers tightened around his, and she raised her head to nuzzle Aidan's neck. In response, he slowed his thrusting but pulled on her blood a little stronger, drawing a gasp from her lips.

Without a word, she brought her fangs to the bite marks she had left on his skin years earlier and reopened them, completing the circle of blood between them. The taste of him was always pure power sliding on her tongue and warming her until she could have sworn sunlight was shining over her.

One last time, Aidan's cock surged into her. It stayed there, buried to the hilt, and together they drew blood at their hardest yet. An explosion of colors set off behind Meriel's closed eyelids. Her mouth let go of Aidan's neck to let out a deep moan of pleasure. Aidan's hips jerked uncontrollably against hers for a few seconds, then he lay still save for his heavy panting against her neck.

It always pleased her that, even though he had lived as a vampire for centuries longer than she had, she could always make him forget he didn't need to breathe.

As his cock slipped out of her, Aidan rolled to his side to lie next to her. She curled up against him, pressing a kiss to his chest just inches from where her hand rested.

"Our last day," he said softly.

Meriel snorted softly against his shoulder. "You said that ten years ago. Do you think it will be any different this time?"

His fingers played in her hair, carding long, curly strands between them. "You tell me," he murmured, turning his head to press his lips to the crown of her head. "Have you tired of me yet?"

She let out a little hum. Her hand on his chest started rubbing as it slid down over his stomach. "Have you?"

Her fingers reached the base of his resting cock and, light as downy feathers, brushed against the length of it, reawakening it, along with her own desire.

"Not yet," he replied, his words catching in his throat. "I found something else I love about you."

Laughing lightly, she wrapped her hand over his hardening cock and tugged once. "You did? What?"

Aidan rolled their bodies so that he lay over her once more. His eyes looked straight down into hers, full of warmth and love. She had never expected to find these things in him when he had chosen her as his concubine. She also had never expected she'd fall in love with him rather than kill him as she had been supposed to. And above all, she had never dreamed he'd abandon the ritual of choosing a new concubine every ten years just so they could have more time together.

Leaning in, he whispered into her ear even as she guided him inside her. Ten more years in front of them—or, who knew, maybe even eternity.

The End

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About the Author

Kallysten's most exciting accomplishment to date was to cross a few thousand miles and an ocean to pursue (and catch!) the love of her life. She has been writing for fifteen years, and always enjoyed sharing her stories and listening to the readers' reactions. After playing with science fiction, short stories, poetry and fanfiction, she is now trying her hand, heart and words at paranormal romance novels.

To see her other stories, visit: original.kallysten.net

Other stories available at Alinar Publishing:

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In an indistinct future, humans and vampires are allied against the savage demons that relentlessly attack their cities. In the fortified town of Newhaven, a centuries-old vampire, Wilhelm, is slowly losing track of why he fights. Meeting the human child Ariadne and watching her grow up to become a fierce fighter reminds him of his purpose and gives a face to the humans he tries to protect. As years pass, however, and Aria becomes a young woman, then a vampire, his protectiveness slowly turns into love...

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Lilia is a vampire; Vincent hunts vampires. They've each sworn to kill the other, and have battled many times without either of them winning. But when a spell gone wrong links them through bonds of shared blood and sex, the game stops abruptly and with no clear winner.

Trying to stay alive, they learn to guard each other's back against old and new enemies alike. The game takes a new turn as the memories of what they shared under the spell become too hard to ignore and they succumb to lust—or could it be more than that?

Carte Blanche

When a lobbyist opposed to vampires' rights is found drained of her blood, Special Enforcer Grace Alkins investigates the woman's connection to a local BDSM club and its vampire customers. It has been a long time since Grace played on this particular scene, but old habits return easily when she puts on the attire of Mistress Red.

On her first undercover visit at the club, however, she finds herself tricked into playing a scene with Ray, a submissive whose Master left town abruptly. The Dominant in her enjoys the opportunity—while the Special Enforcer is shocked to realize Ray is a vampire, and possibly a suspect for the murder she investigates.

Will Grace manage to keep a cool head and find the killer when every new meeting with Ray cranks up the heat a little more?

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