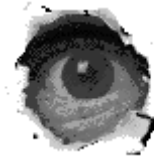


R. Vance



Dead Seed

The revamped “Vampires Don’t Exist”

Dead Seed

“Dead Seed”
(Also “Vampires Don’t Exist”)
by R. Vance

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Contents

Prologue	6
Reflection.....	9
Attempted Suicide.....	16
Familiar Face.....	26
Virgil.....	36
Fear and Punishment.....	49
Proposition	69
Back to the Bedroom.....	83
Water	91
Sadie and Mabel	100
Declaration	111
Briefly Heaven.....	121
Death of the Undead	139
Through Her Eyes	150
Whisper in the Shadows	160
Return	173
A New Face.....	183
The Night Out	192
Feelings Revealed	205
Psycho.....	215
Accusations	227
Betrayal.....	234
Lesson to be Learned.....	243
A Beginning and an End.....	251
Tortured Souls.....	260
Julian	266
The Battle	278
Epilogue.....	286

Dead Seed

*"The strength of the vampire is that people
will not believe in him."* - Van Helsing
(Dracula - 1931)

R. Vance

For my great friend, Scott. Thank you for sticking beside me and pushing me forward all those times I wanted to give up.

Also for Jennifer Lloyd for becoming an instant and supportive fan of my work as well as a new friend.

For my family, especially:

Mom: For taking on the painstaking job as my editor without getting paid. I love ya, mom!

And,

Amanda, my sister: Thank you for being my number one fan and supporting me from day one when I typed the first installment of "VDE." I love you!

And last, but not least, for my Quizilla fans. For giving me the courage to turn "VDE" into a full-length, best selling novel.

Thanks for being so awesome, guys!

Prologue

October 17th
Near Middletown, Rhode Island

The air was chilly and thick with nearly impenetrable fog. In the middle of black night it was almost impossible to see, the smoky beams of the headlights only making a few feet visible in front of the small car. A light mist fell from the heavy clouds above, making the road wet and very dangerous.

In the backseat Aralyn was sleeping peacefully. Her sister was in the passenger seat and on the verge of sleep herself, and their mother commanded the steering wheel. The three were returning from a day at the girls' grandmothers, who only lived a few hours away. After spending the day helping her paint her small kitchen, they ate dinner and chatted with her until realizing it had gotten so late. They would have stayed the night but the girls had school the next morning.

In one terrifying moment Aralyn was jolted awake by the frightened screams of her sister and the violent swerving of the car. The tires screeched along the slick pavement. Her mother was trying to correct the mistake, swirling the steering wheel around as the car fishtailed. She hadn't seen the sign that indicated a sharp curve ahead and lost control of the car. Despite her attempts to right the vehicle's path, it careened off the road, sliding into the prison bars of the dark forest that lined the highway.

It sounded like an explosion when the car hit the tree. Aralyn flew forward, the seatbelt digging into her neck and chest but keeping her from slamming into the seat in front of her. When she fell back, her head hit the window hard. She felt a burning sensation above her right eye and then warm blood trickled down her face, the gooey substance flooding

her vision. Her head felt heavy and she was drowsy. Before she could check on her mother and sister and make sure they were okay, she blacked out.

When she woke up again, it was to a dragging sound. Like something heavy was being pulled from the seat in front of her. She struggled not to fall asleep again. The air reeked of blood. She had to find out if her family was okay. But she had no strength left in her body, she couldn't even lift an arm. Her eyes fluttered open and closed as she fought unconsciousness.

As she started to give in, she sensed someone. Or something. It was staring at her with striking eyes; ice blue and cruel. It touched her face, tracing her cheek slowly as if enthralled.

Sirens sounded in the distance and it dropped its chilly hand from her face. The dragging sound continued for a few seconds and then it was gone. Everything was gone.

* * *

Aralyn found herself in a hospital bed the next morning with her father sitting beside her, waiting for her to wake up. She knew by the grief in his expression that there wasn't good news on the way.

The blood she had smelled the night before belonged to her mother. Upon impact the windshield had shattered and one of the larger pieces had been thrust into her mother's neck. She died before the ambulance arrived.

Since she had been unconscious for most of the post-wreck, Aralyn and her father had to rely on the authorities' report:

Claire, her sister, had used her cell phone to call 911. Barely conscious herself, she reported the accident and just after she gave the location, her voice cut off. By the time the police and ambulance arrived, she was gone, nowhere to be found. All that was left of Aralyn's sister was a crimson trail leading from the passenger seat into the forest.

Dead Seed

Over the next several weeks investigators speculated Claire had been delirious from blood loss and crawled out of the car. After searching the woods and not finding her, they concluded she had been carried off by wild animals.

Aralyn knew better. How could Claire have been delirious when she had been able to call the police? They didn't find her because she was still alive, Aralyn was sure of it. As she recalled the eyes she had seen, she realized they had been human. Whoever was in the car that night had kidnapped Claire. The police were either lazy or covering something up.

But what they might be hiding, she didn't know.

Chapter One

Reflection

The sun was shining brightly, breaking into the window of Aralyn's small bedroom in Middletown Rhode Island. The lightweight rose-colored curtains didn't even attempt to armor the pane and welcomed the light inside, filling the room with warmth. Aralyn had just come from the shower, dressed in khakis and a long-sleeved dress shirt.

Placing the prongs of a black cord into the electrical socket in the wall, she sat at the vanity and began blow-drying her long raven hair.

Her features on her pale face lacked emotion as she stared at the reflection in the mirror, watching as the hot air made her hair billow. As usual her mind was on that night. Memories of the blood in the car, the missing body of her sister, the mangled metal of the hood and the shattered windshield. The screech of the tires and Claire's screams. Her mind constantly reminded her, showing these scenes—night and day; asleep and awake.

Aralyn had escaped the crash with only a concussion and a cut on her forehead that was fixed with a butterfly stitch. Often she felt guilty for surviving, especially with such minor injuries. She wondered why she had lived and her mother hadn't. Why Claire had disappeared and she was left to go home.

She had tried pleading with the police, begging them to further their investigation. Claire was alive, she knew it. Numerous times she recounted to them the pair of eyes she had seen and the fingers she had felt on her face. She was convinced that the kidnapper was nearby and doing God knew what to her sister.

They hadn't believed her. They kept telling her she hadn't really seen anyone, that she had also been delirious from the

concussion. They said the eyes had just been her imagination and, soon, she had been forced to give up her desperate search, not knowing what else to do, who else to turn to. At first her father believed her and joined in pleading with the authorities, but shortly he, too, was convinced Aralyn's mind had played tricks on her. She herself was even starting to believe it; perhaps she had imagined that someone else was in the car that night. She doubted it, though. But still, even if she was right, she didn't think Claire would have been kept alive this long by a kidnapper. If Claire hadn't been dead before, she probably was now. It had been almost a year since the crash.

The blow-dryer slowly died as she switched it off and then unplugged the cord. She ran a brush through her hair a few times to calm the wild strands and then stood up. Today she had a job interview at a local restaurant as a waitress. It was only a few days until the one year anniversary of that night and she wanted to stay busy. A bustling waitress job would help to alleviate some of the depression she already felt.

She had lost two jobs that year, both on the grounds that she wasn't enthusiastic enough about her work and that several customers had complained she wasn't polite to them. Not that she had been rude; she never talked to any of them. She had also missed several days of work, sleeping too late and missing half her shift before realizing the time.

As she started towards the door an oddly shaped silhouette caught her eye, hiding on the other side of her curtains. Not again. Her stomach dropped as she walked to the window and pulled back the curtains, confirming her suspicions; she thought he (or she) had given up on her. Lying on the outside of her windowsill was a single blue violet. Another gift from her stalker.

About nine months ago she started receiving gifts like these from a mysterious giver. Sometimes they were violets, other times lavenders. One time, in early spring, her admirer had even written her an anonymous note in elegant

handwriting that told her to bundle up that night because a snow storm was on its way. Sure enough, it had snowed ten inches and Aralyn needed the extra blankets in her closet to keep warm.

Her admirer liked to play with her. Sometimes he would leave her flowers every day for a week, stop for two weeks and then come back every other day with a new flower. He was unpredictable.

Today was the first time she had received a gift in six weeks; the longest span to go by. She hadn't told anyone about her admirer because she thought they would just brush off her concerns like they did before. She didn't want to appear paranoid or crazy. He seemed harmless, only giving her flowers and warnings about the weather. If he was going to try anything else, she would have thought he would have done it by now. Still, the occasional gifts gave her the creeps because it meant someone was watching her.

Sighing, she closed the curtains and left her bedroom, passing through the messy house and to the front door. She went around to the side yard where her bedroom window was and snatched the flower off the painted wood. She glanced around the yard, peering into the jumbled forest of orange, red, and yellow trees that fenced the property. Scurrying up one of the trees was a red squirrel. A Sparrow chatted nearby.

As always, she saw nothing suspicious. No sign of the admirer.

Just in case he was watching she made a show of tearing the petals off the flower and then depositing the remains on the ground. As she walked away, she desecrated it once more by stepping on the felled bits of green and blue and twisting them into the grass with the heel of her shoe.

She went back inside to grab her car keys off the kitchen counter and then drove the ten minutes to the restaurant in silence.

A little while later she was sitting in a crowded office behind the kitchen of Larry's Diner. Larry wasn't the

interviewer. Mildred was; an older woman with a snotty attitude.

“Do you have any waitress experience?” she asked in a rigid voice.

“No. I would have put it on my application if I had.” Aralyn’s voice was probably too curt in responding, but the woman’s bad attitude was rubbing off on her already melancholic mood.

The woman gave her a look of reprimand and then glanced through the thin framed glasses that rested at the bottom of her nose, searching the paper she was holding in her wrinkled hands.

“You’ve had two jobs in the last six months: Dollar Saver and We Do Brakes. What were your responsibilities?”

“I was a cashier at Dollar Saver and a receptionist at We Do Brakes.”

“Mhm.” Another scornful look. “And why are you no longer working at those places?”

Aralyn shrugged. “They didn’t work out.”

“And what makes you think this job will ‘work out?’”

“I don’t know, it’s different?” She knew that her sarcastic responses weren’t helping her, but it didn’t matter. She caught bad vibes when she first walked into the small establishment; she had the feeling she wouldn’t get the job anyway. Plus, she was pretty sure she had bombed already.

The woman put on a fake smile and held a hand out for Aralyn to shake. “Well, Miss Montgomery, I think that will be it. We’ll call you in a few days.”

Translation: We never want to see you again. Thanks for wasting your time and ours.

“Right,” Aralyn mumbled, briefly obliging the hand shake and then standing from the old metal chair she had been sitting in for the last five minutes.

She didn’t give the woman another look as she escaped the foul restaurant.

Aralyn had never been much of a talker. It was kind of funny, ironic even: Claire had always been more outgoing

than she was. Always the one to approach people with confidence and strike up a conversation about anything. Sometimes it seemed Aralyn was the younger one. Claire had even been protective of her when they were children, threatening to beat up anyone who tried to hurt her even though Aralyn was more tomboyish than Claire.

Before the crash, nothing traumatic had ever happened to Aralyn; she was just naturally shy. A dreamer. There wasn't much room for reality in the mind of an artist. And that's what she was: she played the violin and liked to write poems and songs, she had even considered taking up painting. By her own choice she didn't have many friends and the ones she did have had first been Claire's; people she had become accustomed to hanging out with and then became close with herself.

Of course she didn't have those friends now. After Claire supposedly died, they tried to be there for Aralyn but she had become distant and now barely spoke to any of them.

She drove home and changed her clothes, slipping into a pair of blue sweats before she crawled into bed and closed her eyes.

The sun was setting when the front door slammed, jolting her awake. Once again the day had been wasted. She slept more hours than a cat.

"Aralyn!" her father's slurred voice called. Drunk again. Every day after work at the local lumber store he would stop at the bar and have a few drinks before coming home and yelling at her for not doing anything "productive." Like he could talk.

He had changed since the accident, too. First, he started drinking away his depression and then lost his comfy office job for coming into work intoxicated one too many times. He had to settle with his new low paying job, which added to his misery. He was always in a bad mood these days.

They had always been so close before. Claire used to tease her, all in fun of course, for being a 'daddy's girl.' Aralyn and her father used to go fishing, watch football, and drive into

town for ice cream while Claire and their mother went shopping and got their hair and nails done. It wasn't that one parent had each chosen a favorite daughter and ignored the other. Aralyn got along with her mother just fine and Claire sometimes did things with their dad, too. Not to mention, they all did things together as a family should.

She missed that feeling of innocence, that closeness, that picture perfect family that used to be a big part of her life.

Her father called her name again and she somehow managed to force her body to move. She ran her hands through her mussed hair and kicked aside a dirty shirt in the hallway on her way to the living room where her father was.

"What?"

"Didja get a job?"

"I doubt it."

"All you did was sleep again, didn't ya?"

"What else is there to do?"

"You could clean up this pig sty! Hell I come home every night and nothin's been done. There's trash layin' everywhere, the dishes are piled up. You don't do anything..."

Aralyn turned away, mumbling, "whatever" as she left her father to his angry ramblings. He would pass out soon enough, he always did. She thought about going back to her room but she could still hear his voice coming from the living room; he hadn't noticed she left.

Slipping into a pair of shoes, not bothering to tie the laces, she grabbed a coat and stepped outside into the cool air. The sun was almost completely drowned by the trees now, the sky darkening.

There was a little park just a five-minute walk from the house so she went there to get away. The tips of her shoes ruthlessly kicked the small pebbles confined in the large box of play equipment and she sat down on one of the swings. The cool chains caressed her fingers as she barely twisted in the seat, drawing letters and small pictures in the rocks with her shoes.

She was starting to think she would never feel better. She had no motivation, every day and every night was exactly like this. She had no control over anything anymore, not even her own thoughts because no matter what she tried, they would always go back to that night.

A cold chill ran up her spine, making her aware of her surroundings. The wind had picked up, a typical autumn change. But there was a figure in the trees. A silhouette. And the light from the almost full moon reflected off of something. A pair of eyes. The menacing orbs glowed and she felt the fear of being watched. Was this her admirer? Was she think looking at her now even human? There were wild animals in the forests, she knew that. But the eyes were too far off the ground for a four legged animal. Unless it was in a tree.

She stood, glowering at whatever it was. If it was an animal, she knew it would be intimidated by her size and confronting it. Or so she hoped anyway.

Her heart jumped and another chill numbed her back when the thing flashed its white teeth in a sardonic smile before it turned and was gone. She stood there in a stupor, gazing hard into the foliage. She could have sworn the teeth were elongated as fangs at the corners of the creature's mouth. But it had been as tall as a human.

Whatever it was ran away, crunching over the leaves that had already fallen, headed deeper into the forest.

Aralyn didn't wait around to find out if it would come back. She returned to her room, still feeling the chills on her spine.

Chapter Two

Attempted Suicide

It was three nights later. The anniversary of the wreck. As if trying to choke her more than the constriction she already felt, thick fog rose from the ground and a light drizzle dripped from the skies, mimicking the weather of a year ago. Her father hadn't come home from work yet; probably still sitting at the bar having another three or more rounds in recognition of the date. She hadn't seen him at all that day.

She was in her car now, driving too fast with the radio blaring an angry female rock song. The windows were rolled down, adding to the noise as the wind shot over and through the car, whipping her hair around her face. She was driving beside a rocky gray cliff that climbed the dark sky. The black ocean was to her right, white caps rolling and folding into each other the closer they got to shore. Tears blurred her vision.

She drove until she came to the cliff walk then steadily eased off the gas pedal until she found a place to park the car. For a moment, she just sat in it, contemplating her decision for what seemed like the thousandth time that night, and then she started walking, following the ancient path with the sea crashing into the wall beneath her. Lights from old Victorian mansions glowed just off the path. This was a tourist area and normally full of people but on a night like this it was a ghost town. She was utterly alone. Free to do as she chose.

Drops of water collected on the metal railing of the walking path. She ran her hands on it, allowing the moisture to collect on her fingers before wiping them off on her jeans and pulling her jacket tighter around her chilled body.

All was quiet except for the ocean and the light dripping of the rain. Her hair was damp and stuck to the sides of her face and her fingers were numb from the cold. But she didn't

care. Her discomfort with the weather didn't matter. Nothing mattered anymore, as long as the hurt would go away.

She reached a point on the walk where the drop was near hundred feet, blocked off by only the guard rail. This way her death would be guaranteed and over quickly. If she had tried to crash the car it might not have been a success. She didn't want to suffer, she just wanted to die.

Her hands were shaking as she hiked one leg and then the other over the rail, keeping hold of the metal bar as she stared below at the ravenous sea. It almost seemed to be taunting her, egging her on to jump. She licked her dry lips and closed her eyes, taking a brief moment to allow the wind to caress her face one more time before sliding one foot over the edge. She held her arms out at her sides as if they were wings.

In one quick breath she started to fall and then was immediately shoved backwards and lifted over the guardrail, knocked onto the cold ground on the other side. She would have hit her face if she hadn't have held her hands out to brace the fall.

Hot blood flooded her whole face and she narrowed her eyes, briefly glimpsing the black, damp ground beneath her before turning her head to see who had had the nerve to pull her from her moment of victory. Had it not been for the interruption, she would be free from her world of pain.

There was no one behind her so she looked in front of her. No one there, either. Pulling herself up so she sat on her knees she searched all around, cutting through the dense fog as far as she could with her eyes. The wetness on the ground soaked through her jeans, making her knees cold. She stood and continued to search.

Finally, she saw someone. He was standing nonchalantly at the rail a few feet down from her, staring into the depths below, pretending to be unaware of anything around him.

Nice cover.

Whatever.

"What the hell did you that for?" Aralyn said to the man.

He slowly turned his head, bright green eyes flashing into hers.

“Do what?”

“You know what I’m talking about! Why did you pull me from the edge?”

He laughed shortly. “Nope. I don’t know what you’re talking about. I didn’t even know you were there until you fell. I can’t see in the fog. Are you drunk or something?”

“No, I’m not drunk.” Aralyn growled, disgruntled, and ran her fingers through her hair before turning back to look out over the water.

She could try again. She could climb right back over and jump before anyone knew what was happening; she wouldn’t hesitate this time. But would it fair for this stranger to witness such a horrific scene? For all she knew he had never had any serious trouble his whole life. What would witnessing a suicide do to him? Anything? He might not be affected at all. Or he might be affected for the rest of his life. She had no right to do that, to ruin his life on account of her own happiness.

She would have to wait for him to leave or go somewhere else herself.

Opting for the latter, she turned and started walking, ignoring the cold biting into her clothes and licking her skin. If she weren’t so upset, she might have questioned further who had pulled her back; the man or someone else? He had seemed confused. Had he really only just been standing there or was he making it up to avoid being yelled at?

It didn’t matter. If at first you don’t succeed. . . .

“Hey, wait.” The man caught up to her, walking on her left side.

She didn’t say anything.

“You were trying to kill yourself weren’t you?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me. A lot of people have plunged from these cliffs.”

“Could you go away?”

“Not until you say please.”

Aralyn clenched her teeth. “Please?”

“Hm, nah. I think I’ll stick around.”

She sighed, frustrated, and considered running. But he seemed like the annoying, persistent type so it probably wouldn’t do any good.

“Not to sound cliché or whatever, but I’m sure that whatever you’re depressed about, it can be fixed.”

“No it can’t.”

“There’s always a way to fix something...uh, what’s your name?”

“Aralyn.” She didn’t know why she bothered telling him her name.

“Aralyn.” He mulled her name over a moment and then said, “Do you want to talk about it?”

She laughed out a scoff. “I’m not going to confide in a stranger.”

“Exactly.”

Finally, she looked at him, silently questioning him.

“I’m a stranger; that should make it easier for you. You don’t have to worry about me running and telling on you, or judging you because if I were the type of asshole to judge you, you shouldn’t care because we’re not friends. Or enemies. We’re strangers; it’s always easier to tell a stranger your darkest secrets.”

She stared at him. Her faith in God had been lacking lately, but she wondered if this man was an angel in disguise. Sent here to stop her from making a mistake. *She* didn’t think killing herself was a mistake but maybe it was too soon. Maybe she hadn’t given it enough thought. Maybe there was a light among the darkness that enshrouded her.

She doubted that. She had considered killing herself for the last six months or so; she had thought about it long enough. But maybe she would talk to this stranger. What would it hurt if she was going to die anyway? It would shut him up at least and then maybe she could convince him she had changed her mind and he would leave her alone. By the

time he realized she had lied, it would be too late. She would be dead.

It took a while to tell the man of her mother's death and her sister's disappearance through the tears that accompanied her story, but she managed. After, he finally seemed to understand why she was having such a hard time with the drastic change in her life. He nodded sincerely as she spoke and let her cry without giving any indication he might be uncomfortable. There was something genuine about him. Something she had never seen or felt with anyone she had ever met before.

For the first time since the crash, she didn't feel so alone.

Not that she had changed her mind, but at least she felt somewhat comforted in her supposed last moments. Had she known that his interference was only the beginning of a new world of terror, she would have jumped off the cliffs without another thought of the mental anguish it might inflict on this stranger.

They walked along the cliffs, listening to the ocean in between their conversation. It was growing colder. She shoved her hands into her coat pockets.

"You know my name, what's yours?" Aralyn asked after telling her story.

"Devin."

"And what's your story, Devin?"

He shrugged, his hands in the pockets of his brown leather coat. He kicked a pebble in the narrow path and then spoke.

"I didn't have great parents like you. Mine kicked me out on the eve of my eighteenth birthday and I've been a drifter ever since. For four years."

"Sorry," she mumbled, regretting making him remember his past.

He shrugged again. "It's alright. And now how about you?"

"What do you mean? I already told you mine."

"I know. Are you okay? I mean, I don't expect you to magically be better or anything, but can I take you home and leave you in confidence that you won't try and kill yourself again?"

She couldn't answer too soon, that would give her away. She looked up at him, her violet eyes bearing deeply into his emerald ones. She smiled.

"For now."

"For now, huh? Does that mean I have to come back tomorrow?"

Laughing softly, she said, "If you want." *I won't be there, though.*

He stopped walking and held out a hand for her to shake. "Does this mean we're friends?"

She hesitated a second before grasping his cold fingers. "Sure."

"Good." He shook her hand and she laughed again. A real laugh.

He chuckled along with her and then stopped, staring into her eyes, and she knew what he meant to do. Both let their arms fall but they didn't release the other's fingers. With his left hand, he touched her face. She didn't flinch away. Maybe this was moving too fast, but she didn't have much time left. Why be moral when you're going to die soon?

Aralyn waited for his lips to touch hers and when they did, softly at first, she dropped his hand so could hold onto his waist. She deepened the kiss, welcoming him into her mouth and felt his fingers curl into her damp hair.

He started chuckling, a low rumble against her lips, echoing in her mouth. She smiled, too, thinking he was overcome with a myriad of feelings as she was. She thought he was happy.

"I knew it," he mumbled.

She pulled away, looking at him with curious eyes.

He was still laughing and she realized the laughter was turning malicious, frightening. Her heart beat faster.

“Fucking slut.” Without warning, he backhanded her across the cheek, his knuckles hitting hard against the bone under her eye. Instinctively, her hand flew up to protect her face from further blows and she backed away, eyes wide.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” she said.

“You women are all the same, you know that?” He was advancing, forcing her to walk backwards. She felt around behind her to grasp the cold rail and started following it, sideways down the path, as he continued to bully her. “You act shy and sincere and, like you, play the ‘poor pitiful me’ card. Oh wahh! My life’s so horrible! I can’t stand living any longer. Let me pretend I’m gonna kill myself so I can have the stranger talk me out of it so I can sleep with him and then when I’ve had my fun, dump his hobo ass and continue to the next victim!”

“No, I’m not like that-”

“Well, let’s get the fun stuff over with, shall we?” He reached out, grasping her around the waist and shoved her back into the rail. She gasped as all the air from her lungs escaped in a riot. She only had a second to replenish the lost oxygen before his mouth crushed down on hers and he forced his tongue into her mouth.

He yelled, pulling back, but kept her locked in place against the rail. “You stupid bitch, you bit my tongue!”

While he was momentarily distracted, Aralyn punched the side of his neck. He yelled again and moved just enough for her to bring a knee up and hit his crotch. He doubled over, holding himself. Intense anger burned in his eyes. Aralyn shoved him aside and ran as fast as her jellied legs allowed. If she could get to her car, she could get away. Her mind was so jumbled with confusion and the desire to survive this maniacal stranger that she temporarily forgot she wanted to kill herself. Ironically, survival instincts kicked in and propelled her forward in a run.

But she only made it a few yards.

He grabbed her by the back of her jacket and threw her to the ground, straddling her waist. He had a knife, holding the tip of it inches from her face.

"I'm going to filet you for that."

"No, please," she said, eyes wide as she watched the blade fall to her neck and then her breasts as he eyed her in contemplation, trying to decide where to begin.

"But first, we have to get rid of this armor." He tore her arms out of the jacket and then threw the black material to the side. Her arms were exposed since the shirt she wore was sleeveless. He smiled in triumph. "Well that makes it easier. I thought I was going to have to take off your shirt, too. Maybe I will anyway. But not yet."

He raised her arms over her head and lowered himself all the way on top of her. The knife was still in his hands so she stayed still. Survival instincts. If she was going to die, she would be the one to do it. His weight was suffocating. Her chest heaved with the deep breaths she had to take to keep from passing out. He smiled a sickly sweet smile and then kissed her again. He continued kissing her while his hands above their heads worked.

First, she felt the cold steel of the knife lay against the tender flesh of the under part of her arm between the elbow and wrist. It just lay there a moment, like he was only intent on kissing her.

And then the pain came.

While still moving his mouth against hers, his tongue grazing her lips and a hard bulge forming behind his jeans, she felt the sharp edge of the knife slicing into her delicate skin. She yelled into his mouth and that seemed to arouse him more. He kissed her faster, moving his body against hers while the knife sliced more. Warm blood contrasted with the cold. She felt it dripping down her arms and then the sting of the air hitting the wounds.

She tried to roll him off of her while moving her head side to side, attempting to suck in a breath of fresh air so she could scream. She tried kicking her legs, but he had them

pinned, too. She was trapped, forced to lie there and allow him to kiss and assault her while he continued to make small cuts on her arms.

Finally, he stopped cutting her and sat up, once again straddling her and this time pulling her with him. She made a move to punch him but he caught her hand, still holding the knife. He started laughing.

“We’re not done yet,” he said through his chuckles.

He took one of her bleeding arms and raised it to his mouth. She watched in horror, eyes widening and stomach churning, as he began licking away the blood. His hot tongue ran up and down her arm, collecting the crimson drops and swallowing them.

“What the hell are you?” she whispered.

Offense struck his eyes and they narrowed, glaring heavily down at her.

“I’m not a fucking vampire if that’s what you’re thinking.” He smiled, all malice in the world going to his lips. He lowered his mouth to her neck and whispered, “Vampires don’t exist.”

She closed her eyes, clenching her teeth, as he kissed her neck several times. She needed to think of something else to do. He was preoccupied now with her throat. She could take the knife from his hand and turn it on him.

She pretended to be affected by his kisses and turned into his mouth, kissing him back as she brought up her hands and embraced him. She moved them up his back first and then let them fall down his arms until she reached the hand that held the blade.

Just as she went to pry his fingers off the hilt, something heavy hit his back, knocking them both to the ground with him on top of her once more.

Shooting her eyes open, Aralyn gasped in terror, awestruck at the sight and the new weight on top of her. There was another person lying over Devin’s back, pinning them in place. She couldn’t breathe. She gasped for air as she looked at the new threat. The person was attached to Devin’s

neck, making gurgling noises in her ear. She turned her head just barely and found she was staring into the open, terrified eyes of her would-be rapist and murderer. The look on Devin's face implied he wanted her to help him. Begging her with his eyes. But there was nothing she could do. Not that she would have anyway.

"Guess I was wrong," he managed to gurgle just before shutting his eyes.

Aralyn thought she was going to pass out, unable to get a decent amount of air into her lungs. But the new being, or creature, whatever it was, lifted itself and Devin from her. She first pulled in a breath of cold air and then jumped to a sitting position, edging away from the creature as it threw Devin to the ground. There were two punctures on his neck and the last drops of his blood were leaking from the holes.

She had the knife now. Devin's grasp on it had loosed when they were knocked down and it fell into her palm while the creature was still on them. She raised the blade as a warning and the creature laughed a shrill sound before it disappeared.

It wasn't gone for even a second before a heavy fist hit the back of her head, knocking her out.

Chapter Three

Familiar Face

When she came to, Aralyn found herself in a small space lit only by a single candle. The flame was dancing on its white wax pillar on the table beside the bed she was lying in. She tried to push herself up but the pain from putting pressure on her wounded arms kept her from getting far and she fell back against the pillows on the bed, a soft yell escaping her lips. She brought her arms up to examine in the dim light. They had been wrapped in gauze and medical tape. Blood seeped through the cloth, making red-brown blotches on the white.

Someone had wrapped her arms, but whom? Her rescuer? Or would the appropriate term be 'kidnapper'?

She searched the room, wondering where she was. It was dank and the air smelled musty like the air in an unkempt basement. Concrete walls confirmed her suspicions. There was only one small, very narrow window in the wall to the left. Foil covered the glass, heavily duct taped around the edges to keep it in place.

All that was in the room was the bed she was lying in, the table with the candle, and an old dresser with missing handles. The bed wasn't anything special, just an old brass frame with an equally aged mattress that dipped in the middle. Black satin sheets covered the bed and clung to Aralyn's body, which she just then realized was naked.

She started to panic, breathing in heavy gasps and frantically searching the room, seeking a door, any way out. The window was too small to crawl through. While she searched, her mind began conjuring up every image possible as to what could have happened to her while she had been unconscious. She quickly blocked out the images, shuddering in disgust.

The outline of the door was just barely visible to her eyes in the dim light. Its brass doorknob is what stood out the most and identified the exit.

Aralyn took a deep breath and gritted her teeth before forcing herself to sit up, grimacing at the pain as the cuts seemed to rip open again. Blood rushed to her head and she was blinded for a few moments. It was only after she could see again that she felt shooting pain on the back of her head where she had been hit. Her cheek throbbed as well. She touched the tender flesh under her eye and whimpered. It was bruised from where Devin hit her.

Slowly, she stood from the bed and pulled the top sheet with her to wrap around her nakedness, taking a second to steady her shaking body before making her way to the door. There was more firelight flickering underneath. She reached out and turned the knob, slowly at first so she wouldn't make any noise. She didn't want to draw attention to herself if she could sneak out of wherever she was. The door was locked so she shook it, panic once again igniting her actions. She was trapped. She needed an explanation or at least to know where she stood with her kidnapper. The door rattled in its frame, the sound reverberating through the whole room.

"Let me out! Somebody, please!" Over and over again, she cried the words and pounded on the door, but no one came.

She gave up when her voice started getting hoarse. She went back to the bed, crying and burying her wet face in the pillow, muffling her sobs. If only she hadn't been interrupted from jumping off the cliff. She wondered where she was. What her kidnapper's intentions were. Was she to be left in this dank basement to starve and thirst to death? Was she to become the object of a serial killer's twisted enjoyment? A toy? Something to bleed?

The door suddenly burst open, making her jump and interrupting her thoughts. Aralyn secured the sheet tighter and looked towards the doorway where a figure stood in the shadows, watching her. It was silent for a few seconds that

seemed like forever as she waited. Blood pounded in her ears as her heart pumped in anticipation. Her voice shook when she spoke.

“Who...who are you? And what do you want with me?” she asked.

“Who am I?” a gruff female voice mocked. “Maybe you need a closer look.”

The silhouette hissed and then ran along the floor like an animal—a predator—arriving at the bedside in only a half a second. The movement was almost inconceivable to Aralyn’s eyes.

She shrunk back against the pillows, terrified of what the woman might do to her. The look on her face was one of lust and anger. She meant to harm Aralyn, she was sure of it. But as the woman neared the light and revealed her flawless face, Aralyn gasped.

She knew her.

The face had changed over the last year; her skin was pale, almost translucent, her lips a dark crimson, and her hair, which used to be blond silk, was now a long curtain of black curls. But her eyes, they were the same. Hazel green and filled with curiosity.

“Claire?” Aralyn was in disbelief, shocked, and barely heard her own voice. A part of her wanted to grasp her sister and hang on to her, never let her go again. But the other part was frightened, instinctively as prey facing a predator. Claire was different. Fear kept Aralyn paralyzed against the pillows.

“The one and only.” Claire’s face split into a wide grin and Aralyn caught a glimpse of two sharp fangs that curved around her sister’s bottom lip. The tiny razors glistened in the flickering candle light.

“You...you’re a...Claire, what happened?”

“I’m a vampire, Aralyn.”

“How? When? God, Claire! You’ve been alive for this long—”

“Stop.”

Claire held up a hand and then, when she was sure her older sister was going to stay silent, gently sat down on the bed next to her. She took Aralyn's trembling hand and held it against her breast.

"You see? No heartbeat. I'm not technically alive." She smiled again.

"Who...who did this...to you? And why?" Aralyn bit her bottom lip to keep from crying.

"Aimeric, my sire, did this to me." She hesitated, a strange look covering her eyes that Aralyn couldn't identify. "He saved me, Aralyn. When the car crashed and mom went off the road, I hit my head against the dashboard, among other injuries. I was bleeding very heavily. My life was slipping away. I looked over at mom and saw she was already dead. You were in the back not making any noise so I thought you were dead, too. I didn't even try and live. I laid in that seat crying, I wanted to die; the pain was too much. I couldn't fight it. But in case I was wrong about you, I called the cops anyway. Halfway through the conversation, I blacked out.

"But soon, I felt my body being lifted from the car. I felt him licking away the blood on my head that was streaming down my face and into my eyes, blinding me. He licked his way down to my neck and then I felt the pain of his teeth break my flesh and puncture my vein. I knew what he was and what he intended to do. I didn't want it. I didn't want to be what he was. So I pushed at him, too weak to scream. The sirens came then and he grabbed my arms, dragging me through the grass and into the forest. He began the process of changing me there, draining me of what blood I had left and then making me drink from him, and then when he was sure my life was out of danger, he carried me back here where I continued to change until I became what I am now.

"I hated him." Darkness spread through her expression and she shook her head in disgust for a moment before remembering she hadn't finished her story. She looked back at Aralyn and smiled again, a warm, tender smile. She almost looked human again. Almost. "But I grew to love him. He's

an...amazing man. I learned to enjoy my immortal life in only the year that it's been."

Aralyn was silent, not knowing what to say. Here her sister was, saying she was glad to be a monster. She had been alive—not in the breathing sense, but still—for this long, torturous year, no word from her. Aralyn had fallen into a dark world, feeling as though she would never claw her way out, wanting to end her life, to end her suffering—and she almost accomplished that task and Claire would have let her. She couldn't help feeling a bit angry with her sister. How could she let Aralyn become what she was now? She had to have known how both she and their father felt. Why didn't she come to them?

"I know what you're thinking, Aralyn." Claire's voice was hard, her hands tightly clenching the bed sheets. "I'm not a monster."

Mouth dropping, Aralyn stuttered again. "How did...I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to. The disgusted look in your eyes is enough!" Claire jerked herself forward, knocking Aralyn back into the pillows. Her head hit the brass frame and she flinched away from the murderous look on her sister's face. "If I'm so much of a revolting monster, do you really think I would have let that prick have you? No! I would have watched him with pleasure as he beat you, cut you, and raped you. But I chose to help! I chose to stop you from doing something so stupid as jumping from a cliff to fall into the ocean where razor sharp rocks waited for you!" Another cold grin slithered into place on her lips as if her mood was so easily swayed. "Maybe you need some time to think about how you'll thank me."

She stood and, in a flash, was at the door.

"Claire, no! Please don't leave. I'm sorry!" Aralyn scrambled out of the bed, running for her sister. The door slammed in her face and the locks on the other side clicked together as her fists pounded against the wood.

"I'm sorry!" she cried as one last attempt.

She beat the door until her fists bled but no one came back for her that night. She went back to the bed, once again weeping and staining the sheets with her tears. She no longer desired to kill herself, not now that she knew Claire was still...well, around. She wanted to get out of here and find Claire, apologize, and then try to become friends again. She wanted her sister back.

She lay in the bed and cried herself to sleep until the creaking of the ceiling woke her up. People were walking around upstairs. The small tremors knocked dust from the rafters that fell and got caught in her throat. She coughed and rolled over on her side to escape the particles of dirt. She tried to get back to sleep but she couldn't. Her thoughts treaded deeply over her mind and kept her awake.

Claire was a vampire. She had changed so drastically. Always before, Claire's figure had been dainty, more feminine than Aralyn's; a cheerleader's body. Aralyn used to be more filled out, more athletic from throwing the football around with her dad and jogging every morning. Claire used to have lightly tanned skin where Aralyn was usually the pale one. Her eyes, once warm and protective, were now cold and evil, very similar to the eyes Aralyn had seen that night.

Rapid scraping at the tiny window jolted Aralyn into a sitting position. Her breath was caught in her throat and her blood felt thin, moving swiftly through her veins. What now? Zombies? The scratching stopped and for a brief moment she imagined it as just a tree branch hitting the glass in a strong gust of wind. But then it returned, more urgent than before. It definitely wasn't a tree. Cautiously, she rose from the bed and, keeping the sheet secure around her naked flesh, moved the bed against the wall so she could reach the window. The legs of the wobbly frame scraped against the concrete floor, making a horrible noise that clawed at Aralyn's ear drums. She was sure anyone in the house could hear it, but she didn't care. Maybe it would bring someone else down and give her a chance to escape and find Claire.

She stood on the bed and peeled back the corner of the tin foil to peer outside. She starting, almost falling off the bed, and let out a loud yell when she saw two yellow orbs only inches away from her face, separated only by the glass.

The cat was just as startled as she was and took off in a diagonal run into the darkness. Aralyn took a moment to calm her breathing and steady her heart. The animal was probably just cold and had been looking for shelter. Once her breaths were steady, she went back to looking out the window. The grass was at eye level, meaning she was mostly underground, and all she could see were tall trees; mostly oaks, pines, and red maples.

There weren't any lights on the grounds of this property. All that lit her view was the moon that shone through a break in the clouds. The wisps of gray cotton danced over the half-full moon as a moving, eerie painting.

She wondered how long she had been here, how long she had been unconscious. Her throat was parched as though it had been days since she had any drink to cool it. Just the thought of water made her long for the cool liquid and she imagined herself drinking a full dew-flecked glass, the refreshing taste easing the burning she felt now. She reached out and her fingers touched the cold glass and she remembered how sweet fresh air was. She longed for that, too. This room was musty and damp smelling, not at all comfortable to breathe. The window was nailed shut so she knew she wouldn't be able to open it.

Aralyn soon grew tired of looking out of her prison, only a wall separating her from freedom, so she fell back on the bed and stared at the ceiling until her eyes watered. Then, forcing them closed, she drifted off to sleep once more.

* * *

Warm rays of sunlight caressed Aralyn's face, gently bringing her out of her slumber. She groaned and rolled over, her eyes landing on the bedside table where a pile of wax lay, which

used to be her candle. It had burnt itself out sometime during the night. The bed creaked as she pulled herself up, wincing at the pulling sting on her arms as her bandages held tight to her wounds. She pulled back enough of the white cloth to see one of the gashes. A thin scab had formed on it but was now yanked away with the cloth, fresh blood seeping out of the cut. The air hit it, making it sting worse, so she put the wrap back on.

As far as she could tell, the door was still locked. Claire was apparently still upset or she would have come back down. Aralyn hadn't meant to offend her sister. Didn't she understand that this was a lot to take in? Claire was a vampire. A *vampire*. They were only supposed to be in stories; they weren't supposed to be real. The mere thought that all this time vampires had coexisted with her and her fellow man sent terror running through her whole body. How many times had the deaths of people been covered up? Brushed off as something else? How many people had been wrongly accused of murder because of vampires?

She was still having a hard time processing the idea, believing it, even though she had witnessed the death of a human, by none other than her own sister; Devin's life had literally been sucked out of him.

Aralyn's eyes went to the dresser. She wondered if there were any clothes in it so she got up and opened the drawers. Relief flooded her as she lifted a light blue cotton robe out of the middle drawer. At least she could properly cover herself. She quickly put it on, loosely tying the belt around her small waist.

Melancholy returned and she found herself almost in a trance, staring at the cold floor. What did she want? To live or die? Up until last night, she had wanted to die for so long. Now, her feelings came and went, changing like billows of smoke; sometimes they were clear, other times they were dense and indecipherable. One minute she would feel like she still wanted to die and then in the next second change her mind.

Frustration replaced depression, making her muscles clench so tightly she felt she needed to release her anger somehow. She did the first thing that came to mind and grabbed one of the drawers, yanking it out of its cozy casing and flinging it at the wall as hard as her weak frame would allow. The wood cracked and splintered, several jagged pieces sticking out like razor sharp teeth. The analogy made her shudder and she glared at the door.

Rushing up to it, she began pounding again.

“Let me out, damn it! Claire, talk to me,” she yelled through her dry and sore throat.

Blood spots appeared on the door where her fists beat and now her knuckles stung. She didn’t care though. She gave it one last violent punch and then turned her back against it, sliding to the floor, once again broken in tears.

“Claire, what have you done to me?” she whispered to herself, laying her head against the door.

She slept a few more hours and when she woke up, she found her legs cold. It was still day but it was gray. A blanket of clouds had returned, covering the sun’s rays. As she became more awake, she realized it was also raining. The streams of water beat the glass of the small window, knocking violently, begging to be let in. The rain became more insistent, like it was trying to get her attention and she realized this was her chance to get some refreshment.

Jumping up from the floor, she ran to the bed, tearing the top sheet off and wrapping it around her hand. Taking her protected fist, she climbed onto the bed and covered her eyes with her other hand before smashing through the window. She peeled away the broken glass, careful not to touch the sharp edges and then she threw the sheet to the floor so she could cup her hands and gather some of the water in her palms. She brought the cool liquid to her mouth and drank what she could, wetting her throat and soothing her tongue. She drank and drank until she was no longer thirsty, yet she felt sick from rushing. Her stomach

churned at the sudden replenishment. She should have taken it slow, but she hadn't known how long the rain would last, not to mention, it wasn't easy to restrain yourself after thirsting for a few days.

However, besides the nausea, she felt better. The water soothed the parts of her throat that had cracked from being too dry.

There was nothing else left to do but sleep.

Chapter Four

Virgil

When the door finally opened the next night she was so weak with hunger that she didn't have the strength to even lift her head to see who had come for her. She didn't think she cared anymore. It was one of the weaker moments, her indecision desiring death for that moment. Claire wasn't coming back; being a vampire, she may as well be dead. Aralyn shouldn't want to live either.

Her throat was back to being dry, her stomach rolled and tightened with hunger pains, and her cuts were itching madly where they were trying to breathe and heal. She had given up on trying to comfort herself and ignored the annoying sensations.

Whoever had opened the door didn't say a word, they just simply sat on the bed beside her. She felt glued to the spot, unable to move. She didn't think she could talk even if she wanted to.

A cold hand brushed her hair out of her eyes and away from her face. The hand was large and strong, that of a male. It slipped under her neck and down her back so he could lift her into a sitting position. He held her against his chest. She tried to open her eyes wider so she could see him but she didn't even have the strength to do that.

"Open your mouth." His voice was low but deep. He placed a glass to her lips, urging her to part them.

As soon as she felt the smooth glass, her body obeyed, anticipating the replenishment. Once the cold water hit her tongue and the back of her throat, she opened her mouth further to take in more. After a few gulps, the man pulled the glass away.

"Not so much at once, you'll make yourself sick," he said. "Are you hungry?"

Had she not been so weak and able to talk she might have responded with something sarcastic like, “No, I’ve been down here for God knows how long and I’m not hungry.” Instead, she nodded and he reached behind his back to the table and pulled a tray of food off it, holding it out in front of her.

“Same with the food; don’t go too fast,” he cautioned.

She nodded again and took a slice of red apple, nibbling it at first so her stomach didn’t get overexcited at the notion of finally being nourished. She went slowly, first one piece, then another, until she was able to eat at a more normal speed. She had several slices of the apple, a few strawberries, and a piece of toasted bread followed by a couple of orange slices before she finished off the water. She was still hungry, but at least she wasn’t feeling on the verge of death anymore. She had the strength to finally look up at the man and speak to him. Maybe even thank him. Now that she wasn’t feeling so horrible, her thoughts reverted to surviving.

He had hard facial features: strong cheek bones, a square jaw. Clean shaven, not a hair on his pale face, but the dark brown locks hanging to his shoulders were luscious and thick, not perfectly straight; they had a bit of a rebellious wave in them. His body was hard, his chest toned underneath the black silk shirt he wore. His eyes were black as coal, mysterious and full of wisdom as if a separate universe resided in them.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“My name is Virgil.”

“Where’s my sister?”

“Who knows?” He sounded annoyed at her question. “She comes and goes as she pleases.”

Aralyn looked down at her lap, feeling guilty for being the reason her sister left. Or so she assumed. Looking back up at Virgil, she said:

“Where am I? And how long have I been here?”

“You’re in Aimeric’s mansion on Prudence Island. And you’ve been here about four days. I would have been here

earlier today, but..." He trailed off, looking over his shoulder at the window.

"The sun?" she guessed.

Virgil nodded, looking grim. "So she did tell you." He was referring to the fact she knew they were vampires.

"More like showed me," she said, thinking back to the night Claire had killed Devin and then again to the flash of her sister's fangs.

He didn't say anything and they sat in silence for a brief moment. Aralyn forgot she was still being held by the man, her thoughts too preoccupied to notice.

"So, this Aimeric..." Aralyn said. "He's the vampire who changed..."

"Turned your sister?"

She nodded, unable to say the words herself. It bothered her that her sister was now a vampire. She wasn't sure why, if it was because the idea of vampires still seemed ludicrous or if it was because vampires had always been portrayed as monsters who fed off the living, or if it was the anti-Christian side of it. Her family hadn't been fanatics—they hadn't even gone to Church that often—but they were believers, saved by the blood of Christ. She didn't want to think her sister's soul might be lost.

"Aimeric is the master of this house. He is now your master too.

"Master?" She didn't bother trying to hide the indignation in her tone. "What the hell do you mean by that?"

He chuckled, gently pushing her off his lap now that she was strong enough to sit on her own. He held her eyes as she glared at him and continued smiling as if what he had to say next would bring him immense pleasure.

"Aimeric owns this house and all who are in it. You're under your sister's protection for now, which is actually Aimeric's protection as a special request from Claire. You will not be harmed as long as Aimeric gives the order. But, if your sister takes too long in returning, he might lift the order and give you to us..."

The look in his eyes was one of lust that made her skin crawl. But it wasn't for physical pleasure, it was for her blood. For the first time, she realized just how much danger she was in at this house. There were more vampires waiting for her, that was obvious in how Virgil had said "us." Right now, she was protected by this Aimeric, so she still felt she could speak freely without consequences.

"Well don't get any ideas," she sneered. "My sister *will* be back." Though the words came from her own mouth, she wasn't sure she believed them herself. Claire had, after all, locked her in this room and left her to die. She wasn't the loving sister that Aralyn remembered.

Virgil smirked and held his hand out for her to take.

Aralyn glared at it and then at him. "What?"

"I thought you might like to come with me and get cleaned up. Maybe put on some clothes?" Virgil grinned and eyed her body, which was barely covered. "Or do you prefer going commando under that robe?"

"Whatever, I don't need your hand to walk. I'm capable."

As she stood, she realized she did need his help. Her legs felt like there were no bones to support her; her whole body was weak. Blackness took over her eyes and she had to pause for a moment until her vision cleared. She grasped the frame of the bed to keep from falling and, looking up, saw Virgil's smirk widen.

"You were saying?" he said with a triumphant grin.

She continued glaring, her eyes burning even more intensely than before. She didn't like his condescending and sarcastic attitude. Determined to make it without him, she stumbled forward on wobbling legs. She felt like she had been run over by a mac truck but that wasn't going to stop her. She would walk on her own. Even though she had no idea where she was going.

As she passed Virgil, he grabbed her arm

"Wait."

She glared at him in response, silently scolding him for having the nerve to touch her.

“We both know you can’t make it upstairs on your own. Besides, you don’t want to go out there like that.”

“Well how do you propose I *do* go out there? There aren’t any clothes in here, I looked. There was nothing besides this robe.”

“I meant: you don’t want to go out there alone.” Without warning, he snaked his arm around her waist and pulled her into his chest. Aralyn gasped, shocked at how icy cold he was. She hadn’t noticed before, probably because she had still been too weak with hunger to care, or maybe the bed had kept her warm enough not to notice.

She struggled, trying to push him away.

“Stop that! This is for your own good,” he said.

She looked at him, willing to listen to an explanation but ready to kick him in the privates if he tried anything. Vampires may be stronger than mortals, but she doubted they were immune to a hard kick in the baby maker.

“You need to pretend you’re with me until you’ve been formally introduced as the one under Aimeric’s protection, otherwise, they’ll pick a beauty like you clean before you can take two steps.”

Blood flooded her cheeks at the ‘beauty’ comment, but she was sarcastic in her response.

“I need to be *introduced*? What are there other prisoners here against their will and you have to tag the ‘safe’ ones?”

Virgil urged her forward, walking her to the door and ignoring her question. His silence made her wonder if she was right. The thought made her shudder.

They went through the door and into a dark passageway that was only lit by torches. The cement walls were wet with condensation and moss and mold grew in patches on the chipped surface. The set of stairs they climbed were made of the same concrete and looked like they would crumble under even the weight of a small child. Surprisingly, they were sturdy.

Virgil led the way to a beat up wooden door at the small landing. He kicked it open and then smirked down at Aralyn to which she responded by rolling her eyes.

The room they stepped into was huge; the ceiling was probably twelve feet tall or more. It was open space with a set of curving stairs that led to the second floor. Even from across the room, Aralyn could see that the banister was coated in dust. Cobwebs and spider webs dangled from the ceiling, some containing insects that had long been dead; the blood sucked out of them—how appropriate. The walls were plagued with brown and red stains, probably blood, and the wallpaper plastered on them had yellowed with age and was dried out, curling at the corners. Dusty sofas and chairs were centered around an old television. Yellow foam hung from the furniture where some of the material had been ripped open from wear.

As soon as they entered Aralyn gasped and, as an involuntary reflex, her arms flew up around her body, hugging herself for protection. One of her hands went to her neck, trying to hide the vulnerable pulse, while the other clung to her side. Virgil tightened his arm around her.

There were more vampires. A dozen or so sitting on the furniture and leaning against the walls. Some had been watching the television, others were just casually observing the room. One female was even giving a male a blowjob on one of the sofas. They all stopped what they were doing when she and Virgil entered. They stared at her as if already they could smell her. Her blood. Her fear.

When they saw Aralyn's body tremble as she walked with her vampire companion, the way her shaking hands tried to cover her neck, how her breaths were unsteady, they grinned, flashing their fangs in malice. Some winked, some whistled.

"Well, well, look what we have here."

"She's gorgeous."

"A virgin."

"Aw, look how scared she is. I want her."

The vampires mumbled to one another, never taking their predatory eyes from her. To them she was just prey, a would-be fresh kill; deer to wolf. Their eyes were red with bloodlust and the smirks on their beautiful, pale faces made Aralyn's stomach tie itself in knots. The fruit she had just eaten threatened to come up, but she swallowed it down, hoping to rid herself of some of the fear as well. She turned her head so she wouldn't have to look at their mesmerizing eyes, burying her face in Virgil's shirt.

They walked several paces and then stopped. Aralyn risked a peek and saw a man with a small pointed nose blocking their way at the bottom of the stairs. He had beady eyes the color of cobalt and a thin mustache over his smirking, crimson lips.

"You're not going to keep her all to yourself now are you, Virgil?" He had a high voice, almost feminine, and spoke with a British accent.

"Move out of the way, Morgan," Virgil sneered.

"Come on, give us a taste."

"She belongs to Master Aimeric!"

Morgan had started to reach for her shoulder to pull her away from Virgil, but when he said 'Master Aimeric,' he stopped, his hand dangling in the air. Frowning, he pulled his hand back in to his side and he glowered.

"You're lucky, girly," he hissed to Aralyn.

She frowned, pulling her eyebrows together, as Virgil dragged her the rest of the way upstairs. Her thoughts swam in darkness, she was so confused. How much power did this master of theirs have over them? And what had Virgil meant when he said she belonged to this Aimeric? She decided she would ask him once they were away from the other vampires.

He led her down a dark corridor that smelled of must and dirt. Crumbles of foreign objects on the padded carpet collected on the bottom of her bare feet. She shuddered to think what they might be; food (though that thought was almost ridiculous), just dirt, or the remains of insects.

Virgil hesitated at first when she asked him her question. She felt the muscles in his chest and arms tense as if he were uncomfortable. Then, finally, he said:

“You’ll soon find out. I’ve already said too much; you weren’t meant to hear that, it just slipped. I can’t offer any more information without his permission.”

“Without his permission?” she mocked. “God, what’s wrong with you people? Learn to think for yourselves.”

He didn’t say anything so she decided to drop the subject. For now.

They went through a door on the left and Virgil felt around for a dimming switch, turning on the lights to the lowest setting. Through the dim light, she saw they were in a bedroom. A four poster bed with a red canopy took up most of the room. Thick red and black drapes hung from the window, not allowing even a crack of moonlight inside.

Virgil let go of her, closing the door behind him, and for a moment she found she was nervous, heart thumping violently in her chest. Here she was, standing in nothing but a robe in a bedroom with a lusty vampire.

“Why did you close the door?” she asked, not managing to get her voice higher than a whisper.

He let his eyes run the length of her body and smirked before saying in a sensual tone:

“I thought I’d take advantage of us being alone.”

Aralyn tightened the robe, guarding her body and neck with her hands and arms while trying to give him a menacing look that he could probably see right through.

“I’m kidding,” he said, his tone back to normal. “I just didn’t want anyone coming in and sneaking a taste.” He winked and headed for a door on the right wall.

After a few seconds she heard bath water running and then he came back out, going to a closet across from the foot of the bed. He rummaged around inside and then tossed a piece of black clothing to Aralyn.

“Take your bath and then put that dress on. It’s Claire’s, but I’m sure she won’t mind you wearing it. When you’re

cleaned up, you can have some more to eat if you want, so don't take your time."

"Okay."

"I'll be right outside the door. If you need anything just give a yell...but not too loud."

He left before allowing her the chance to respond. She went into the bathroom and turned the water off when the tub was halfway filled. Before undressing she made sure the door was locked, not that it would necessarily do any good, but she didn't want to give anyone an open invitation. After discarding the robe on the floor, she stepped into the old, clawed-foot bathtub, allowing the hot water to blanket her body. It was soothing and helped the ache of the cold that had set into her joints and muscles from the dank basement.

She left her arms wrapped until she was finished washing the filth from the rest of her body. It had been days since her hair and skin had been washed. She was glad to be rid of the grimy feeling and the scent of the lavender soap helped relieve the stress she felt from being in a strange place filled with blood-sucking immortals.

Once her hair was washed and the rest of her body was clean, she submerged her arms for a few seconds, allowing the water to seep into the material of the gauze so it wouldn't hurt as much when she went to take them off. As soon as she peeled away the cloth, the water and soap and air hit the cuts, making them sting. She turned on the water and held the wounds underneath to clean them out, grimacing at the pain.

After a few minutes of cleaning the wounds she pulled the plug and stepped out of the water, wrapping her body in a towel. She wrung her hair out over the tub and proceeded to dry the drops of water clinging to her skin before dressing in the garment Virgil had given her.

The dress went down to her ankles in long, flowing material. The sleeves were short and puffy and there was a red sequined rose stitched to the right shoulder. It was simple but pretty.

She didn't have a comb so she quickly ran her fingers through her wet and tangled hair a few times before going to the door. She listened, laying her against the cool wood for a few seconds to see if there was anyone else out there before she put her hand on the doorknob.

Before she could turn it all the way the door flung open. Aralyn started, yelling in surprise. Virgil smirked and she breathed a sigh of relief that it was only him. Then, feeling her heart ready to jump into her throat, she punched his shoulder.

"You scared the hell out of me!"

Virgil laughed and she went to hit him again but he grabbed her wrist. The grin melted from his face as he peered at the cuts on her arm.

"You should wrap these."

"I didn't want to snoop."

"Come on." He pulled her back into the bathroom and rummaged around in a few cupboards. He brought out some more gauze and rubbing alcohol. Aralyn's eyes widened at the bottle.

"You aren't going to use that, are you?" she asked.

He raised an eyebrow. "No, I'm gonna drink it."

Aralyn responded by narrowing her eyes in a fiery glare.

"You need to clean the cuts or they'll get infected."

"But it's going to burn. A lot."

He did nothing to hide the smirk in his voice. "Very good. Give me your arm."

Clenching her teeth in doomed prediction of the pain, she surrendered one of her arms. Virgil gave her a look of mock sympathy before pouring the liquid all over her cuts. The pain was blinding, breathtaking, she thought she might pass out from it. She gasped loudly and tried to yank her arm free, but he held tight. Now that her pain was real, he seemed to be more sympathetic, though there was still a glimmer of laughter in his eyes.

"You're enjoying this aren't you?" Aralyn said through clenched teeth and teary eyes as he wiped away the excess alcohol and secured fresh bandages around her arms.

"Yup." He took her other arm. "You women just make too big a deal out of this kind of thing. It doesn't hurt *that* bad."

"How would you know?"

"Trust me. I know. I've had a lot worse done to me."

The fire reignited on her other arm and she was drawn away from the subject to the new pain. Fresh tears soaked her eyes and she bit her lip to keep from yelling.

"There. You're done." He put the last piece of medical tape on her arm.

She sniffled, taking her arm back, and looked at the floor so he couldn't see she was crying. She didn't succeed, though.

"Hey, come on. Don't cry. I'm sure your sister will be back." He didn't sound too sure of himself.

"I'm not...crying...because of that."

"Then what? You still whining about your arms?"

She shot her eyes up at him. "No."

"Yeah right." Reaching a hand out, he wiped away her tears. His fingers were soft, but the chill of them made her pull back.

"Sorry." He grimaced.

"It's okay."

He stared down at her for a long moment. It was almost uncomfortable, like he wanted to kiss her, but something dark must have found its way into his mind and stop him because he blinked a few times like he was trying to rid himself of the thought. He then put the sarcastic smirk back in place and took her hand.

"Come on. I'll take you to the kitchen so you get some more to eat."

She nodded and allowed him to lead her out of the room. When they reached the stairs, however, she pulled back, fear returning. She may be under protection, but she doubted the strength of Aimeric's authority was enough to keep several

blood-thirsty vampires at bay. Virgil must have known what she was thinking.

“Don’t worry. They’ve gone out for the night to feed.”

She took a deep breath and then returned her fingers to his hand. He led her to the kitchen which was in as bad of shape as the rest of the house, or what she had seen of it, anyway. There were holes in the walls that looked like someone had used them for a punching bag.

“I’m going to leave for a little while but I’ll be back before the others.” Virgil opened the fridge and took out a plate of fruit and cheese and gestured for her to sit down at the splintered table in the center of the room.

She sat, not caring that it was dirty. At the sight of the food her mouth had started to water and her stomach was back to rolling, begging to be fed again. He set the plate down and let her take her pick. She chose a few more pieces of fruit, several slices of the cheese and another piece of bread. As she ate she wondered why a house full of blood suckers would need a fridge stocked with human food. It wasn’t that important, though, and she soon forgot her curiosity.

“Where will you go?” she asked in late response to his announcement of departing. Even if only for a little while, she was afraid of being left alone in the house. How could Virgil even guarantee that he would be back before the others?

“I have to...feed.” He avoided looking at her, averting his eyes to the floor.

“You mean kill?” Aralyn sneered.

He stood up, slamming his fists on the table. She flinched at the violent sound and the way the table trembled.

“We do what we have to in order to survive,” he growled.

“You’re all murderers.” She was really pushing her luck, but for some reason, she trusted Virgil; she didn’t think he would hurt her.

Apparently she was wrong.

Dead Seed

He snorted in anger and grabbed her, his fingers digging deep into the flesh of her upper arm. She was dragged through the kitchen and back to the basement door, which he shoved her through, almost knocking her down the stairs. As she spun around, intending on walking right back out, the door slammed in her face and two locks clicked together on the other side.

She was left standing at the top of the stairs. She gave the door a swift kick, like a child being punished, and then turned to stomp down the steps. She crossed her arms and proceeded in a huff, nostrils flaring, watching the floor pass beneath her in gray sections.

Virgil had a horrible temper, worse than her own. He was being childish, unable to face up to the fact of what he was: a murderer. The next time she saw him, he would get a lecture on treating her like an animal to be thrown back into its cage for being defiant.

She was on her way back to the room she had been kept in when she heard someone cough. The sound was innocent enough, but it made her stop dead in her tracks.

Someone was in the basement with her. . . .

Chapter Five

Fear and Punishment

Aralyn looked up and saw, for the first time, the other end of the corridor. Her room wasn't the only one in this clammy prison. There was another door at the end of the passageway, this one made of strong wood with a small, barred window at the top. She gazed down the dimly lit tunnel, her shadow cast on the wall by two torches. Apparently electricity hadn't been installed in the basement.

Cautiously, she crept towards the door, a strange new sense of fear clutching her. She had an idea of what the room was, but she didn't want to believe it. Were these creatures really such terrible monsters that they would keep a readily available supply of 'food'?

There was more coughing followed by what sounded like sobbing. She focused on only the door, nothing else around her. Her breaths seemed amplified and her blood pumped hard in her ears. She wanted to turn back. Ignore the sounds. Ignore the door. But she couldn't. One foot forward. Another step. Another.

Joining in with the coughing and sobbing, someone moaned as if stricken with fever.

She reached the door and touched the knob, slowly entering the room. It was dark mostly. A single torch sat off to the side. A wall of stench hit her hard and she had to cover her nose and mouth to keep from gagging. The musty cell reeked of blood, festering wounds, urine and feces. She could hear rats and insects scurrying above, in the rafters, and below, near her feet. She was careful to step lightly.

Looking up, she gasped, the sound muffled by her hands. Hanging from the ceiling were several nooses. Chains, whips, and shackles were attached to the walls. Just in front of her was a large metal table with four huge spikes that protruded

at each corner. They were all caked with old blood and what looked like pieces of human flesh. Next to the table was a smaller one, a surgeon's table that held many tools. Dull and sharp, all stained with blood. In the corner farthest from her was an iron maiden next to a fireplace and at the corner opposite of that was a wooden ramp.

A torture chamber. Aralyn was standing in the middle of a true torture chamber. Her mind was telling her to run, but she couldn't make her body listen. She was too much in shock.

"Who are you?"

The voice belonged to a weak sounding woman. Aralyn turned to the right and what she saw brought tears to her eyes. Lining the whole wall were metal cages and inside the cages were living human beings. Well, most of them were alive. There were a few lying on the cold ground that she couldn't tell if they were just sleeping or dead. All of them were dirty and wounded, some more than others. Crusting injuries were on their arms, legs, faces; everywhere. They all looked so pitiful, Aralyn's heart reached out for them. They didn't look underfed, though. As far as weight went, most of them looked pretty healthy. Pets. Some of them were thin, probably the ones who had been here the longest; they had given up and were starving themselves to death.

They were terrified. Some were huddled in the corners, hugging themselves and weeping into their knees.

"Well?" the young female asked. "Are you another one of *his* scum? Have you come here to get some sick pleasure like the rest-" she cut off her own words, looking up, her eyes wide with terror.

Aralyn spun around to find Morgan, the one from earlier that had blocked her and Virgil's path to the stairs. He was standing behind her. He was so close she could smell his putrid breath. He reeked of blood.

"Haven't you ever been told not to go snoopin' around in a house that doesn't belong to you?"

Before she knew what had happened, Morgan backhanded her so hard that she fell to the floor and was now being straddled by the vampire. He held her wrist down, pushing them hard into the cold concrete. His weight consumed her and she found it hard to breathe.

"Get off of me!" she screamed through gasps of breath as she struggled beneath him.

Morgan laughed, an ear grating sound. Some of the prisoners had scrambled to stand and peer through the bars to see what he would do to her.

"You're a feisty one, ain't ya? Struggle some more!"

His words were making her even angrier and the situation reminded her of Devin. She could feel her blood heating beneath her skin. Her muscles had tightened and were burning with the effort of trying to kick him off of her. He was too strong; she had to wait for an opening.

"No Virgil the Goodie-Goodie to stop me now and Aimeric's not here, either. Let's see how you taste, he'll never know."

He opened his mouth and leaned down to her neck, licking the flesh, tasting the pulse beneath her skin first. He drew back and sniffed it, his eyes fluttering in ecstasy, and then he bit into her. His fangs went deep into her vein. Aralyn screamed and went back to struggling, her eyes watering at the burning pain he was inflicting on her.

"Morgan. That's enough." The words flowed smoothly from a deep voice.

In a flash Morgan jumped up, wiping his mouth and staring with wide eyes at the doorway.

"Master Aimeric, I- I'm sorry. I just wanted to taste her and I-"

"I know. You didn't think I was here and you thought you could bathe her before I returned."

Morgan hung his head in guilt. Aralyn lifted herself up onto her elbows and looked to the doorway where the new figure stood. She saw him through glistening eyes, wet with her tears. He was tall, leaning against the frame of the door

with his arms crossed over his chest. Two icy eyes stared at her, the most intense color of blue she had ever seen. They scrutinized her as she lay trembling on the floor.

“Leave us, Morgan. I’ll deal with you soon enough.”

“Y-yes sir.” He whimpered as he scuttled out of the room, careful not to touch Aimeric as he went by.

Groaning, Aralyn pulled herself the rest of the way into a sitting position, touching the place on her neck where Morgan drank from her. There was blood seeping out of the two small wounds and it still burned, though not as much as it had when he had been drawing it out of her with his mouth and tongue.

Hearing Aimeric take a deep breath, she looked up and was instantly covered in chills, realizing he was taking in the scent of her blood as though it were some tantalizing aroma. His eyes were closed, a look of pleasure on his face, which she could barely see due to the lack of light. Suddenly, she wished she were left to face Morgan again. The aura coming off of Aimeric was pure evil, she could sense that much.

She couldn’t seem to make her legs work well enough to stand so she scooted away as far as she could, wanting to put as much distance between him and her as possible. If her brain had been working right she would have realized she was trapping herself, pinning her back against the metal table.

Aimeric opened his eyes, smirking at her, his face splitting into a malevolent grin. Then, seeing the curious prisoners, he sneered.

“Get back to the floor like the animals you are unless you want to come out and *play*.”

They didn’t hesitate; they knew what he meant by ‘play.’ Every one of the prisoners moved as far back as they could, keeping their backs against the wall and falling to the floor, not wanting to encourage him. They wouldn’t make eye contact with either Aimeric or Aralyn.

Aimeric pushed off the door frame, lithely moving towards her. His steps were soft, not making a sound and his eyes seemed glued in place, staring into her eyes. She felt

drawn into him, unable to look away, though she was trembling. Something about this creature struck her soul, making her feel as if all courage and happiness had abandoned her. There seemed to be a great pressure against her, like she was carrying a stack of heavy books on her head.

He knelt down only inches away from her and cocked his head to the side. Jet-black hair curtained his face and stray strands fell into his eyes. His hair was long, going almost to his waist. He didn't bother to brush it away; he only stared at Aralyn through the gaps.

No words were passed between them for a long moment. Aralyn tried to steady her breathing, tried to look away from him. Finally, he reached out and touched the side of her face with icy fingers that made her cringe. However, when he ran them over the bruise on her cheek from where Morgan had hit her, she found the cold to be soothing. Still, she didn't want him touching her.

"Claire has told me all about you," he said in a smooth voice that had the falsity of an angel. He ran his fingers down her face and onto her neck where the blood oozed out, taking a few drops of it onto his fingertips. Keeping his eyes lined with hers, he brought the drops to his mouth and licked his fingers clean in an almost provocative gesture.

"You're delicious," he said.

As if cold water had been thrown in her face, breaking whatever trance she was in, she was finally able to look away. She chose to look at the prisoners, her heartbeat increasing upon seeing the terror still in their eyes as they avoided looking directly at her. Some of them were almost in convulsions because of how hard they were breathing. Fear gripped them; clutched their hearts and emptied their souls. When she turned back to Aimeric, she saw he was grinning.

"Are you afraid of me?" There was delight in his velvet voice.

She glanced at the prisoners once more. *They* feared him. Look at what he had done to them; kept them in cages, tortured them and left them bleeding and bruised. She wasn't

able to form words to answer him; she couldn't even nod or shake her head.

Aimeric placed two fingers under her chin and made her turn her eyes back to him.

"You have no need to fear me. Not yet anyway..."

Somehow, she managed to respond, her voice quivering. "Yet?"

His eyes widened with delight. "Ah, so you can speak. Oh, sweet Aralyn, if you don't obey the rules, I may have to make you fear me."

The pressure was starting to lift, some of her courage returned.

"Rules?" she asked in disbelief.

"Yes. I make them and everyone here obeys them or they are punished."

Though she was still afraid, she felt more like herself again; the pressure had entirely lifted. Indignation spread across her face and she frowned.

"You can't make me stay here. I'm not going to follow rules made by some bully blood-sucker just so I can stay in a house that would put the Adams Family to shame. I want out of here, now!"

He seemed disappointed with her response. Fire consumed the ice in his eyes and they narrowed down at her, bringing the chills back to her flesh. She regretted talking back to him. His hands flew out and she gasped in pain as he grabbed her shoulders, pulling her up with him. He slammed her back against the table and pressed his hard body against hers to lock her in place. He had her caged by keeping his arms on either side of the table's surface.

"Wrong answer, *sweetheart*. I know you're new here so I'll let you off easy this time but you must be made aware of what it is you're challenging so you don't make such a brainless mistake next time."

The fear returned but this time without the pressure. The back of her throat felt cold and her blood thin. Her eyes were wide as she stared at him and she flinched when his tongue

slithered out of his mouth and to her neck where he licked the rest of the blood off her skin. When he finished, he grinned.

“And, Aralyn, my sweet, you’re not going anywhere. You may as well get used to the idea of this being your new home and me being your master.” He seized her once more, roughly by the shoulders, and pushed her against the wall a few feet down from the table. He secured her wrists in a set of chains.

“What are you doing?” She was trying her hardest to hold back the tears that threatened to spill out of her eyes.

His smile was reptilian as he ran a finger down her neck and onto her breast where the dress didn’t cover.

“I’m going to show you what will happen if you disobey,” he said in a seductive tone. He kissed her quickly, pressing his lips hard against hers. He licked her bottom lip as he pulled away. “Watch closely now.”

As he turned around he clasped his hands behind his back and paced near the cages. Aralyn followed him with her eyes, cautiously observing him. She had a feeling she knew what he was going to do.

“Which one will it be?” he said.

“What?” She was barely audible. She knew what he meant.

Aimeric sighed dramatically. “Which one will pay for your mistake?”

“You can’t be fucking serious.”

He disappeared and then reappeared directly in front of her, leaning only an inch away from her face, his cold breath blowing against her nose. She started, her head hitting the wall, giving her another bruise. There didn’t seem to be a part of her that wasn’t bruised.

“Oh but I am,” he hissed. “This is only one of the many ways I can punish you, my sweet.”

“Don’t call me that, psycho!” she said through clenched teeth.

The vampire chuckled, his voice hard and sarcastic. "Oh, how bold you are...But not for long. Once I am through with you, you will learn to respect me, hold your tongue in my presence, and think very hard before opening your mouth to defy me." He waved a hand back at the cages. "Now choose a playmate."

She shook her head. "No, no I won't."

He spun around, slamming his hands on either side of the wall, a hair from her head.

"Did you just say 'you won't'?"

"I won't have any part in this," she said, trying her hardest to stand up to him with courage even though her insides were torn up and in knots.

"Is that so?" He scrutinized her for what seemed like ever, challenging her with his eyes. "You don't seem to learn very quickly, but once you witness the consequences of disobedience, you may have enough sense not to go against me again."

He pushed off the wall and again moved so quickly that Aralyn didn't see him. He reappeared in front of one of the cages and flung open the door; the hinges squealed and echoed throughout the prison. He grabbed a young girl by the red flames of her hair and yanked her out into the room. She was only about sixteen or so and was struggling to get away from him.

Aimeric didn't seem to notice her flailing though. Not at first anyway. Once the gate was locked, he pulled the girl to his chest, embracing her soothingly, lovingly. He pet down her hair and swayed her in his arms. Aralyn watched, terrified, as he calmed the girl. What did he have planned for her? She was horrified to see that what Aimeric was doing was actually calming the girl. She stopped flailing her arms, her breathing steadied and she embraced Aimeric, laying her head against his chest. Now that she was at ease, he gently pulled her away from him and looked into her eyes.

"You don't want to die, do you?" The mocking sympathy was back in his voice.

She shook her red curls back and forth. "No, please don't kill me."

He ran his fingers through the red tangle of curls and then cupped her face in his hands. He kissed her, touching his lips to hers with such sickening tenderness it made Aralyn's stomach churn. The girl seemed to melt into him and the two went on as if they were lovers. She was in a trance, she had to be; there was no way she could be enjoying kissing him.

It didn't appear they would be stopping anytime soon so Aralyn turned her head in the other direction to glance at the remaining prisoners. They were still alarmed, terrified for the girl, that was evident in the looks on their faces.

"You won't die, my beauty. Not tonight, I will make sure of that."

Hearing his voice, Aralyn turned back to see Aimeric now leading the girl to the metal table. Her eyes were lifeless, as if her body didn't possess a soul. She walked with him as though she were being led to something grand. However, when he picked her up and laid her down on the table, she seemed to come back to herself. She screamed and went back to kicking her feet and flailing her arms.

"No!" she said over and over again, her voice becoming strangled as she cried.

Aimeric held her down, strapping a thick leather belt around her waist to keep her confined to the table. She kicked her feet hard as she could. The room filled with the pounding of her legs against the metal.

"Stop it!" Aralyn screamed.

He ignored her, now working on strapping the girl's legs.

"Let her go, please!" Aralyn began sobbing, too. She closed her eyes tightly, not wanting to watch whatever it was he was going to do to her.

"Aralyn, look at me," Aimeric demanded.

She shook her head, keeping her eyes closed.

"Watch, or I will make it last longer than it has to," Aimeric sneered.

Aralyn hesitated but opened her eyes and looked back at the girl and Aimeric. She was fully strapped now, barely able to move. Her arms were belted just above the elbow and her legs at the ankles. All she could do was raise her fists a couple of inches and move her head from side to side. Her chest heaved with the heavy breaths she took as she continued to sob.

Aimeric looked down at her. "Are you gritting your teeth, darling?"

Her sobs came harder.

Aralyn watched, her own breaths coming in quick gasps between her tears.

Seizing her right wrist, Aimeric violently slammed her hand down on the spike at the top right corner of the table. The girl let out a blood-curdling scream at the same time that Aralyn screamed, "No!"

The spike now protruded from her palm, blood ran down the sides of the iron pyramid and onto the girl's arm. The girl was still screaming, tears streaming down her face. Aralyn cried for her, her shoulders shaking as she sobbed. Aimeric was grinning, enjoying the torment.

Once the girl's screams died down to only whimpering and deep breaths, he reached down, stroking her cheek and moving hair from her face.

"You know I hate to do this to you, don't you?" he said. He glared at Aralyn and added bitterly, "It's all her fault, though."

"Please stop!" Aralyn cried again. She had turned her head, unable to look at the girl and her bleeding wound, but she could still hear Aimeric talking, his sickening words and accusations. She soon felt his breath against her neck and had to turn to look at him.

"You want me to stop?" He gestured at the girl. "You are the one doing this to her!"

"No, you are! Let her go!"

“Telling me what to do, Aralyn? Have you not learned your lesson?” He rushed back to the table, picking up the girl’s other hand. “Watch! Watch what *you* are doing to her!”

Tears flooding her face, Aralyn was only able to shake her head. She didn’t think she could take seeing it again or hearing the girl’s tortured screams. She already felt as if she would throw up.

When Aimeric spoke again, his voice was dangerously calm. “Watch or *you*’ll be forced to do worse to her.”

“Please don’t! I’m sorry! I won’t defy you anymore, just let her go! Please!” Aralyn pulled on her restraints, the chains shaking and rattling, as if that might help to persuade him.

“It’s too late for apologies.” He flashed a cold grin and shoved the other hand down. The room was once more filled with the girl’s screams and then Aimeric’s laughter joined in.

“What the fuck is wrong with you!”

Aimeric was on her in a second, pulling her head back by the hair so she was forced to look at him.

“What the fuck is wrong with *you*, Aralyn?” he sneered. “It is you who are responsible for this girl’s suffering, and if you do not obey the rules, you will be responsible for many more.” He let her hair go.

She kept her eyes level with his and glared but didn’t say anything else in case she said something to provoke him more.

“Now, are you ready to agree to the rules or shall I start punishing *you*?”

Aralyn looked at the girl. She was lying mostly still except for the occasional shudder of her arms and the slow rising and falling of her chest. She looked like she might pass out.

“Yes,” Aralyn whispered.

“Good girl.” Aimeric smiled and touched his lips to hers and for as long as they were pressed together she felt a strange calm wash over her. It brought serenity, peace. She closed her eyes, allowing his mouth to move against hers.

The feeling was gone as soon as Aimeric pulled away and when he did, she felt sick with herself for allowing that

moment of tranquility to overcome her while the girl suffered because of her.

Aimeric went back to the girl and removed the straps from her body before cruelly lifting her hands off the spikes. She moaned each time, apparently too weak to scream. He then picked her up and nonchalantly tossed her back in the cage, slamming the iron barred door. A few of the prisoners risked his temper by running to the girl, tearing off pieces of their clothing to wrap her injured hands in.

Returning to Aralyn, Aimeric raised her chin so she would look into his eyes.

“The rules are: Do whatever I say *whenever* I say it. You will not talk back to me and you will not try and escape. If you do, you will be punished just like that girl, maybe more painful, maybe less painful, it depends on my mood and how severe your crime is, but I promise: it *will* be painful. Are these rules clear to you?”

She nodded quickly, not wanting to anger him further.

“I can’t hear you,” he said in a dry tone.

“Yes.”

“Try again.”

“Yes, Aimeric.”

“Almost. Yes ‘what’ Aimeric?”

“Yes, Master Aimeric?”

He grinned. “Excellent.”

After releasing her from the chains, Aimeric snaked an arm around her waist, helping her walk through the prison and back upstairs.

“I’m not a monster, Aralyn,” he said as they walked. “I merely do what needs to be done in order to gain the respect that I deserve.”

Unsure of how to respond without making him angry again, she only nodded in comprehension, though she didn’t believe his words for a second. He was a monster.

When they walked into the living room, Aralyn raised her head at the scent of fresh air. The front door was open, the moon shining brightly outside. The tall trees and moonlight

looked so inviting. Freedom. If she could just run fast enough....

"I wouldn't if I were you. I'm much faster than you could even dream," Aimeric said, seeming to hear her thoughts. She wasn't sure if he could or if he had just sensed her longing. "Virgil, leave the rat alone and close the door."

Aralyn searched the room in response to the mention of Virgil. He was next to the door, holding Morgan up against the wall by the collar of his shirt. Glancing at Aimeric and then Aralyn, he loosed his grip and let Morgan slide to the floor before turning around and latching the open door to its twin.

Aralyn wanted to break free from Aimeric's hold on her and run to the sanctity of Virgil's arms. Even with his temper, he was a saint compared to Aimeric. But she knew she couldn't. What would he do to her or anyone else if she ran to Virgil?

Once the door was closed Virgil briefly turned his attention to Aralyn, careful not to look at her too long. His eyes roamed her body as if he were checking to make sure she hadn't been harmed. Her hair covered the puncture marks on her neck and the swelling of her cheek so he didn't see those. To his eyes she was in perfect health.

"Why are you back so soon, Virgil? There's still at least four hours left of darkness," Aimeric said, sounding amused.

"I came back to make sure the girl wasn't going to try and...escape."

Aimeric studied him a moment, reading his expression. "She won't be trying to escape any time soon; I've already made sure of that."

Virgil nodded, clasping his hands behind his back. "Very well. Would you like for me to take her off your hands and show her back to her room so you can go out now, Master?"

Aimeric chuckled. "That won't be necessary. I've already fed and besides..." he looked down at her, cruelty darkening his eyes, "Aralyn will be spending the rest of the night with me."

She looked at Virgil, silently begging him to help her. Virgil's body was tense and he looked like he was having a hard time keeping his fists unclenched. But he held back and instead forced a weak smile.

"As you wish. Is there anything I can do for you?" he said.

"No," Aimeric said.

"Then...I will be retiring to my room for the rest of the night."

"Really? So early?" Aimeric sounded suspicious.

"I've been tired lately."

"I see...Goodnight then."

Virgil gave Aralyn one last sympathetic glance as if to say he was sorry but nothing could be done to help her, and then he turned and went up the stairs, ignoring Morgan, who was still on the floor, a smug look on his sniveling face.

Aimeric ordered Morgan to go through the mansion and make sure all the windows were covered for dawn before leading Aralyn upstairs. Her stomach seemed to be getting more twisted with every step they took and nausea rose into her throat. She had a feeling she knew what was to take place and she didn't want it. She was still a virgin and she didn't want her first sexual experience to be with this sickening creature, this bloodthirsty monster. Not that she would have wanted to be with him at all, but especially not her first time.

The room he led her to was thick with darkness, she couldn't even see her hand in front of her face.

"Stay here," he ordered, letting her go.

She did as he told her. She wouldn't have been able to find her way to escape in such pitch blackness, plus she didn't want to risk his temper and have someone else hurt on her behalf.

A match struck, slicing through the silence, and after a moment the room gently glowed to life as Aimeric lit several candles on a vanity several feet away. The flames reflected in the mirror and she saw her reflection as well. A single tear rolled down her cheek.

Glancing around the room she saw a huge four poster bed that was closed in by red and black silks. The floor under her feet was beautifully polished wood and she could now see the black curtains covering a window that took up almost a whole wall. Set on the floor were several black vases with red and white roses in them. A tall floor lamp stood off alone in the corner. There was a closet to the left of the bed and another door to the right, probably a bathroom. There was nothing in here that could be used as a weapon. Not that she knew what would kill him. From all she had heard from books, movies, myths and legends, there were several ways to kill a vampire. All of them could be true or none of them; she didn't know. One of the myths she had heard was that vampires weren't at all interested in sex, they were just mindless killing machines. That wasn't true so how would she know what was? How could she know how to kill him even there was something to be used as a weapon? What if she fought and failed? Then another innocent victim would be punished for her defiance.

Aimeric lit the last candle and she saw him approaching her from the corner of her eye. Fear clutched her heart and she clenched her fists, wanting to run. She wished the floor would open up and swallow her or someone would rescue her. Anything to get her away from him.

Her mind was a swirling mess; she didn't know what to do except stand there and inwardly curse herself for her own weaknesses. Her nerves shook violently as he came up to her, cupping her face in his hands as he had done to the other girl. She averted her eyes, looking at the mirror, the candles, the bed, anything but him. Not saying a word, he lowered his mouth to hers, softly at first but then he became more aggressive, urging her to part her lips. She refused, trying to turn her head.

"Don't fight it, darling. Submit to me," he whispered gruffly.

He licked her bottom lip and then thrust his tongue into her mouth. She remained still, not responding or allowing

herself to feel anything but disgust. She cringed at the metallic taste in his mouth. He moved back to her lip, biting it gently to draw a few drops of blood to the surface where he gently sucked on it.

She flinched at the sting and reflexively pulled back. He kept her in place, sucking the blood for a moment longer while sliding his hands up and down her sides a few times before resting on her breasts. His thumb teased one of her nipples through the thin material of the dress.

Still, she remained as a zombie. The only emotions she could feel were anger, disgust, and fear.

After finishing the assault on her breasts, Aimeric slid his hands down to her hips where he grasped her and then roughly pulled her against him. She gasped loudly at the unexpected collision but the gasp was cut off when Aimeric slammed his mouth against hers once again, his tongue thrusting inside. She felt lightheaded and had to hold on to his waist to keep from falling over. He moved to her neck, kissing up and down her throat before stopping where Morgan had bit her. She cried out when his small, razor-sharp fangs penetrated her, reopening the wounds. He didn't care that he was causing her pain; he drank from her, pulling the blood from its chamber and taking a greedy amount. She started to feel weak from the blood loss and pushed at his chest. That seemed to wake him because he pulled away from her neck and went back to her mouth.

He untied the strings on the back of her dress and slipped it down her shoulder, kissing the warm flesh underneath as it was exposed. She felt his erection against her abdomen and tears watered her eyes. There was nothing she could do to stop this. Nothing. He turned her around and, still kissing her shoulders and neck, walked her backwards to the bed. He picked her up and laid her on the mattress before crawling halfway on top of her while unbuttoning his shirt with one hand.

"Please don't do this," she whimpered.

“Shh, the pain will be brief.” He placed a finger against her quivering lips and finished removing his shirt, revealing a pale, muscular chest.

The tears continued to roll down her cheeks, silently as she didn’t want to make him angry again, while he had his way with her.

He kissed her flesh, starting at the top of her throat and going down each part of her body as he pulled the dress down to her waist.

She felt like she would implode from the fear and anger building up in her tense muscles. She was angry with him, but also with herself. She should be stronger than this, there had to be something she could do without someone else paying the consequence.

He moved so that he was straddling her legs and lowered his head to suck on one of her exposed nipples.

She fought hard against the jolt of pleasure that tried to spread through her body. She contained it, closing her eyes and clenching her fists. He swirled his tongue around the hardening peak and then moved down her waist, continuing to peel the dress back. He was ignoring how tense and upset she was.

As he started to slide the dress down her legs, Aralyn remembered something. He had said he would punish her next, didn’t he? Maybe he would hurt her instead of making one of the innocents suffer. She could deal with that, or at least, she thought she could. Anything would be better than this. Aimeric had started to undo his pants and that’s when she made her decision.

“Get off of me!” She pushed at his chest and rolled out from under him, launching herself from the bed while pulling the dress back up over her shoulders. She ran to the door and went to turn the knob, unsure of where she would run. Where there was to run. But she had to try.

The door was as far as she got.

Aimeric threw her back into the wall, knocking the breath from her lungs. She would probably be bruised.

“I warned you, didn’t I?” he growled against her cheek.

The look on his face was murderous, his eyes were on fire. He wasn’t playing this time, he wasn’t just trying to make her understand the rules; he was livid. Grabbing her by the wrist, he yanked her out of the bedroom, down the stairs, and back to the prison. He went straight for the cages this time, yanking a young man out by the hair as if he were a rag doll and throwing him into the wall, locking him in the chains.

“No! Punish me!” Aralyn cried, horrified that she had been wrong.

She was thrown against the wall again, this time next to the boy and Aimeric sneered against her lips, “I don’t think so, *sweetheart*. I have something much better planned.”

He jerked her forward by the back of the neck and pulled her around to stand in front of the man, who was trembling, wide eyed, but knew not to protest. Using his free hand, Aimeric picked up a bloodstained fire poker that had been leaning against the wall and thrust it into Aralyn’s hand, locking her fingers around it.

“Strike him,” he commanded.

She shook her head, paralyzed in place and unable to say anything. He pulled her into his chest, gripping her shoulder with fingers that dug into her skin like teeth.

“Strike him or we’ll have to add another little playmate to our game.”

“I can’t! I can’t do this! I’m not like you!” Tears blurred her vision and her shoulders shook. Her fingers uncurled around the iron rod; had it not been for Aimeric’s fist over hers, she would have dropped it.

“Oh, for God’s sakes, Aralyn!” Using her hand, Aimeric began slashing at the man’s chest, inflicting deep wounds over his torso. He screamed with each hit, the chains rattling as he clenched his fists and tensed his arms against the strikes. The whole upper part of his body was soon a bloody mess, the crimson dripping to the floor, making a small puddle at their feet.

Aralyn was in hysterics, sobbing so hard she had trouble standing; Aimeric had to hold her up with one hand while he continued torturing the poor boy with the other.

When he finally stopped, letting the poker clang to the floor, there wasn't a clean spot on the boy's chest or stomach. He was gasping in pain, his head hanging to his chin. He would be lucky if he lived. Or maybe not, maybe it would be better for him to die, to escape this hell.

With her hand finally free, she was able to cover her face, not wanting to look at what *she* had done. Her hand was bloodstained and she could smell it on her fingers when she covered her eyes, making her gag. Another loud gasp, like something new had been done to him, drew her attention back to the boy. She saw that Aimeric had run his hand over the boy's wounds, collecting blood on his fingers. He then turned her around so she was facing him and he smeared the blood on her face and neck. She cringed away, but not too far.

"Do you see what *you* have done, Aralyn? This is entirely your fault!"

Aralyn's salty tears mixed with the blood and she turned to the man, barely able to whisper, "I'm sorry."

"Oh, you're *sorry*? 'Sorry' won't heal his wounds, Aralyn! You're selfish! You let others suffer for you!" Aimeric said.

"No! *You* did this to him!" Aralyn screamed back. She hadn't meant to, the words had just come out on their own.

He yanked her head back by the hair, leaning down to her face.

"What was that?" he hissed.

She didn't say anything.

"That's what I thought." He released her and unchained the boy, tossing him carelessly on the floor of the cage. As with the girl, the others ran to him so they could help his wounds. Some were even bold enough to glare at Aimeric's back as he turned to Aralyn.

"Are you ready to go back upstairs, or should I bring someone else out?"

Dead Seed

She kept her eyes on the floor but nodded. “Yes,” she whispered.

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, Master Aimeric.”

He took her back to the bedroom and finished what he had started while she silently cried and bit her lip to keep from yelling when he entered her. She stared at the underside of the canopy to avoid the sick expression of pleasure on Aimeric’s face as he moved inside of her. He licked away the blood he had smeared on her face and neck and groaned against her throat before spilling his dead seed inside of her.

When he finished he demanded she stay in the bed with him and there he held her, stroking her hair and back as if he truly loved and cared for her.

Aralyn Montgomery silently cried herself to sleep that night.

Chapter Six

Proposition

Stirring slightly at the soft stroking of her hair and cheek, Aralyn opened her eyes. Harsh reality came back to smack her in the face. She had hoped the night before had just been a nightmare, something dark that had left her behind as soon as the sun rose.

But she was still in his arms. Her naked body entwined with the cold, nude flesh of the creature she hated. She blinked hard and swallowed back tears; she didn't want to cry anymore; her eyes still felt like they had sand in them from last night and her head hurt. Every part of her body ached; her cheek was still swollen and tender where she had been hit, her back hurt when she took deeper breaths from being thrown into the wall so many times, she felt quick pangs of pain on her neck where she had been drank from, and every other part of her felt bruised from Aimeric's relentless claiming of her body last night.

"So soft...beautiful. Your pale skin and midnight hair; you're like Snow White. I would keep you forever," he murmured when he saw her awake, his voice seductive.

She closed her eyes, pretending not to hear him. Anger returned to burn her blood. She was angry with Devin for not letting her jump, she was still upset about Claire leaving her to deal with Aimeric alone, and most of all, she felt she needed to blame Virgil for abandoning her. Had he just stayed, maybe she wouldn't be where she was right now.

"Would you stay with me, Aralyn? Be my Queen? I would give you everything you've ever desired if you allowed me to turn you into one of us." His hand fell to the small of her back where he circled the flesh with his large thumb.

Releasing a slow breath at an attempt to calm the anxiety she was feeling, Aralyn responded through gritted teeth:

“Do I really have a choice?”

Aimeric chuckled, his chest vibrating beneath hers. “For a little while.”

He permitted her then to sit up on her own so she could dress herself. She jerked free from his arms and sat up away from him so quickly that she was blinded for a moment. She pulled the sheet with her, covering her naked breasts and as she went to stand, Aimeric grabbed her wrist, pulling her back down to his lap so she had to straddle his legs. He planted a hard, dominating kiss on her lips, stealing the breath from her lungs.

“I will have you forever. I won’t wait long for you to decide on your own.” He stared hard into her eyes and she shrank away, cringing. He repeated, “I *will* have you.”

She dared not deny it. All she could muster in defiance was a weak glare before pulling her arms free from his grasp. He let her slide off the bed this time, following close behind and watching as she made her way to where her dress now lay on the floor. Because of the soreness between her legs, she was forced to move slowly. She grimaced with each step and then again when she picked up the dress. Letting the sheet fall, she quickly pulled the gown over her head and started to tie the strings in the back, beginning with the one around her neck and going down. There were only three sets to tie, but the further down they went, they became more difficult to secure, almost out of reach. Aimeric came up behind her, first placing his hands on her shoulders and kissing her neck before taking over the tying. Knowing he wouldn’t listen to her if she said she could do it herself, she let her hands drop to her sides. When he finished, he went back to kissing her neck, trailing up and down it.

“I would love you for eternity. *Only* you if that is what you would desire,” he whispered against her flesh.

She only stared ahead at the wall, not answering. If she didn’t speak, she couldn’t get anyone in trouble, right? Aimeric smoothed down her hair, arranging it around her

shoulders, and then turned her around, kissing her forehead. She looked past his shoulders, not wanting to look at him.

"You don't have to decide right now; you have plenty of time." He chuckled sardonically.

Turning his back to her, Aimeric then retrieved his black pants from the floor and pulled them on followed by the dark shirt he wore the night before. Aralyn stood there, motionless, until he finished dressing and then he took her out of the room, leading her by the wrist like an animal on a leash. They went downstairs to the kitchen. On the way she saw through a crack in one of the boards over a window that it was dusk. She had slept all day with him.

Most of the other vampires hadn't risen yet but a few sat on the sofas and watched as Aimeric dragged his pet past them. None dared say anything to her this time. Not when he was the one with her.

Virgil was sitting at the kitchen table, massaging the sides of his head and looking stressed. His eyes were averted to the table's surface; it didn't appear he even noticed them enter.

"Virgil, tend to her wounds." Aimeric pushed Aralyn forward and Virgil looked up. There may have been a hint of relief in his dark eyes when he saw her, but she couldn't be sure. Casually, he stood from his chair and went around the table to take Aralyn's hand.

"Yes, Master, as you wish." He started to lead her out of the kitchen.

"And keep an eye on her. I'm going out. If she tries to escape, lock her up until I return and I'll deal with her."

Virgil nodded, his mouth set in a firm line. Aralyn glared at Aimeric over her shoulder, her eyes so cold it was amazing the room didn't frost over. Once she realized what she was doing, she relaxed her face, erasing the glare before she could get herself or anyone else into trouble. It was the first time she had looked at him since the night before. He didn't appear to be in good health. His skin was ashy instead of just pale and there were dark circles beneath his eyes which were now dark gray and sunken in. She didn't feel sorry for him,

though. In fact, she wished he would to turn to dust before her very eyes.

Aimeric grinned, amused. "Is that so, Aralyn? You wish to see me dead?" He closed the gap that had formed between them and cupped her face. "I'll try and remember that later." He kissed her tenderly, making her stomach lurch. She almost gagged. Her whole body tensed. Virgil squeezed her hand in comfort.

Aimeric pulled away, chuckling softly, and then swept past her and Virgil with an arrogant air surrounding him. Two other vampires followed him out the door and into the oncoming darkness.

As soon as the door closed, Aralyn fell to her knees, covering her face and sobbing into her hands. Virgil followed her, wrapping his strong arms around her and cradling her against his chest. She allowed him to hold her for a moment but then, realizing she was angry with him too, she shoved him away. He didn't seem to care.

"What did he do, Aralyn?" He spoke slowly, as if he knew and just wanted confirmation.

She didn't answer.

Brushing her hair aside, Virgil's eyes swept over the puncture marks on her neck.

"He drank from you," he said quietly. Was he feeling guilty?

"Yes! He drank from me," Aralyn finally said through her tears. "Morgan drank from me! You've allowed me to be passed around like a glass of wine!"

Virgil clenched his fists and gritted his teeth. "Morgan too? I'll kill him."

She shook her head, not comforted by his threat. How could she be?

"You're all monsters...sick, disgusting, twisted, and evil monsters!"

Virgil was silent for a few moments, looking away as if trying to control his temper. He didn't say anything, probably

thinking she was justified in her accusations after what Aimeric had put her through.

“How long do you suffer those people before putting them out of their misery?” she asked.

Again, he averted his eyes, this time to the floor. “...You found them.”

“Of course I found them. How could I not? I heard them crying from my door; I’m surprised I didn’t hear them sooner.” She looked up at him. “Do you know what he did, Virgil?” Not giving him a chance to respond, she said, “He tortured them. Two of them: a man and a woman. He tortured them in front of me and it was my fault!”

Once again, her body trembled from her sobs and she rocked back and forth, burying her face again in her hands.

“It’s not your fault,” Virgil finally said. “He would have gotten to them sooner or later; he only used you as his excuse this time.”

“He’s a monster,” she repeated. “Sick...evil...and, God! He was inside of me! This is your fault!” She pointed an accusing finger at him. “Why did you leave me with him? Why did you let him have me?”

“He had already claimed you. There’s nothing I could have done.” She could barely hear him, he was talking so low.

“But, I don’t understand. Last night you said I was just under his protection and that he might give me to you-”

“I couldn’t tell you everything, Aralyn.” Virgil looked at her, sorrow in his eyes. “Aimeric didn’t want you learning of your fate from anyone but him. Remember when I slipped in front of Morgan?”

She thought back to last night and nodded.

“I know you’re angry with me and I don’t blame you, but you’ve seen what he’s capable of and even that was just a small fraction of his power and his psychotic mind. I couldn’t stop him, Aralyn,” he repeated.

“You knew what he would do.” It was a statement.

“Yes. It’s not the first time he took a girl against her will.” He looked ashamed; his eyes were shadowed and he frowned.

She didn't say anything else.

"I know he drank from you, but when? And how much?"

Aralyn's mind flashed back to the night before and she blinked the images away immediately.

"Right before he..." she couldn't say it.

"Only before? Not during or after?"

Aralyn nodded. "He went to my neck a few times...during...and he seemed like he wanted to drink from me again, but he stopped himself. It was only the one time and he took enough then to make me dizzy."

Virgil nodded. "That explains his appearance this morning."

"What do you mean?"

He hesitated, the look of shame returning. "We get our energy from blood and because it sits in our bodies and gets 'stale' without a heart to pump it, we have to replenish it about once a week. But if a vampire exerts himself he has to replenish it sooner or he gets sick. Weak. That's what has happened to Aimeric and since he already drank enough from you to make you dizzy before, he probably didn't want to take more and risk killing you. That's why he had to feed again tonight and why he looked sick before he left a few minutes ago."

"Why didn't he just take one of the prisoners? And why would he care if I was killed if he had already had his way with me?"

"He hates feeding from the prisoners; they're really just his play things. He prefers to hunt for his food and save the prisoners for true emergencies. As for not killing you...he might have more plans for you."

She nodded, remembering what he said earlier. "He wants to turn me."

"I know. I just didn't know if you knew that."

Emotions welling up inside of her again, she returned her face to her hands and let more tears spill on her palm and between her fingers. This time when Virgil wrapped his arms

around her, she didn't push him away; she wanted his comfort. After a few minutes, she stopped crying.

"Come on, we'll get you cleaned up and change your bandages." Virgil helped her stand and then helped her upstairs.

She bathed quickly, making the water extra hot so she could scrub away Aimeric's filth and scent. By the time she was finished her skin burned and was covered in red splotches. She slipped into the robe and went out to let Virgil help her clean her wounds and wrap them with fresh gauze. She sat there silently and allowed him to care for her.

"Aralyn, I've made a decision, but you must not think about it. Aimeric can't hear what you're thinking all the time, only when he makes the effort to go into your mind, but if he hears of this, he'll kill me. So promise me you won't think about it."

"I don't know if I can make that kind of promise, Virgil. I can't control what I'm thinking."

"You can, it just takes some effort."

She shook her head. "Don't tell me, please." She would hate to be responsible for Virgil's suffering.

He sighed. "Alright. Just know that I've made an important decision. Don't do anything drastic, okay?" He finished taping the gauze and looked at her, waiting for her response.

"Okay." She wasn't sure what he meant, but she felt safe with him; she trusted him.

Their eyes held one another for a long moment and then he leaned over, close to her lips. He lingered, waiting, silently asking for her permission to kiss her. She didn't turn away so he brushed his lips up against hers. She closed her eyes and let his soft lips gently graze hers several times in sweet, quick pecks.

Unlike Aimeric, Virgil's kisses sent a warm sensation through her blood.

Unlike Aimeric, Virgil's kisses made her want more.

Unlike Aimeric, Virgil's kisses were sweet and not demanding.

"My, my, what would Master Aimeric say if he knew you were kissin' his bride-to-be, Virgil?"

He and Aralyn broke apart and looked up from the bed they were sitting on. Morgan stood in the doorway, casually leaning against the frame with his arms crossed over his chest. He had amusement in his cobalt eyes and was looking at them down the length of his pointed nose. Virgil was on the floor in a second, barreling for Morgan's throat. He grabbed him and shoved him into the hallway, hitting his back up against the wall.

"You will not say a word or I will snap your neck in two, do you understand?" he sneered, clenching Morgan's throat in his hands.

Eyes watering bloody tears, Morgan nodded vigorously and clutched at the hands around his neck. He didn't need to breathe, but it probably still hurt having his throat constricted. With one last intimidating shove, Virgil let Morgan go and he slid to the floor, sniveling but in a cowardly manner as if he knew he couldn't win a physical fight against Virgil.

Virgil went back to Aralyn and helped her stand from the bed before leading her out of the room. As they passed Morgan, Aralyn glared at him and Virgil sneered.

"And stay the fuck away from her," he said.

The sniveling vampire only smirked in response.

They went back to the kitchen and Aralyn ate a meal of microwaved chicken strips and fruit and bread. She ate hungrily having not eaten in almost twenty-four hours. Virgil sat with her but he didn't watch her. He had his eyes closed, looking stressed again, probably thinking about whatever it was he wanted to tell her.

"What's wrong?" Aralyn asked after swallowing a bite of chicken.

He seemed to be brought back to reality by the sound of her voice and opened his eyes, forcing a smile.

“Nothing you need to worry about right now. Just eat, okay?”

She nodded, going back to her plate and finishing the food on it. Finally, she felt full. Last night she had been nourished but still hadn’t eaten enough in her opinion.

She looked at Virgil, sympathy in her eyes. “Don’t you need to um...feed?”

She still hated the idea of living off of humans but she knew Virgil only did it to survive, unlike Aimeric who tortured and killed for fun.

Virgil smiled. “I fed last night, remember? No need to worry about me.”

“Yes. Don’t worry about him. He isn’t worth it and doesn’t deserve any concern you have to give.”

Virgil sat up straight and Aralyn’s insides twisted together, threatening to squeeze everything she had just eaten until it spilled from her mouth. Aimeric had returned and was now glaring at Virgil, jealousy tainting his eyes. Virgil smiled as if he was just doing his duty in watching Aralyn.

“Back so soon, Master?” he asked in a pleasant voice.

Aralyn could see Aimeric from the corner of her eye. He grinned.

“I just couldn’t stay away from this beauty.” He came up to stand beside her, smoothing his fingers through her hair. She clenched her fist around the fork she held.

“You can leave us now, Virgil. And for God’s sakes, go and rest. You look terrible.”

Virgil forced a laugh and stood. Aralyn raised her eyes to meet his and his eyes seemed to say, “Just a little longer.”

Aimeric seemed to notice the exchange of silent words between them and as if to say she belonged to him, he smoothed her hair behind her ear and away from her neck. She wanted to take the knife in front of her and plunge it into his chest but she doubted it would so anything except make him angry.

“I guess I’ll...retire for the rest of the night and afternoon.” Virgil gave her one last apologetic glance and then left her there. Alone with Aimeric.

He went to a chair across from her and sat down, not saying anything for a long time. He only leaned back in the chair and gazed at her with a smug look plastered on his pale face. His cold blue eyes were vibrant again, his face filled out, and skin back to normal. He stared into her eyes and then let them travel down to her lips, her neck, and her breasts beneath the robe.

“Are you going to sit there all night or are you going to come to me?” he finally said.

Her head shot up and she glared at him and almost let her words slip: “I’m not a dog who will come to its master when he comes home” but she caught herself and averted her eyes, glowering at the empty plate.

He laughed a bone chilling laugh. He appeared to be in a good mood at least, allowing her small mistakes to pass without consequence.

“Very well, I will come to you.”

He went to her side, his movements arrogant. Aralyn found she was shaking again, her fingers trembling from anger, fear and disgust. She averted her eyes to the floor, refusing to look at him. He pulled her from the chair and slid a finger under her chin so she would have to face him and then he cupped her face, running his thumb over her cheek. He touched the bruise under her right eye.

“I never did ask you: what happened to your face?” He moved to touch her arms, looking at the bandages. “And your beautiful flesh?”

“It doesn’t matter. Claire killed him.” Her words came out in a hard tone and she still refused to look at his eyes.

He chuckled. “Yes, that sounds like my Claire. I had her once and then she decided she preferred women and only felt pleasure with men when she was killing them.”

She didn’t respond; she wasn’t going to have a civilized conversation with this evil creature. He kissed her, pecking

her lips and for a moment he drew back as if tasting something putrid. This brought her attention to his face and she finally saw his eyes. They were consumed with anger but for only half a second. He went back to kissing her, going down to her neck where his tongue slithered out of his mouth and over the scabbed puncture marks. He tasted the dried blood and drew her closer, pulling her into his chest. His hands slid to her rear, giving it a gentle squeeze. She stood there motionless, not responding to his kisses or even the tugging of her bottom lip with his teeth. However, when she felt his arousal, she pushed him away.

"I'm still hungry," she lied.

He looked her over a moment, the anger coming back into his eyes, but then he gestured to the seat.

"Very well. Eat. Build up your strength."

When she sat, he leaned down, supporting himself by placing one of his hands on the back of her chair and the other on the table. He nibbled her ear a moment and then said, "You're going to need it."

At the seductive tone he used, Aralyn's stomach rolled and her mouth went dry. She almost wasn't able to swallow any of the food she put on her plate.

Aimeric watched her with a lustful grin, taking in every detail of how she ate. She deliberately chewed slowly, hoping to postpone what he had planned. After a few moments, he leaned over on the table.

"Do you have any idea what you do to me?"

She looked at him for a moment and then turned her attention back to the food. Her stomach was almost too full to take in much more, but she pushed it down anyway. She would rather eat until she threw up than allow him to take her again.

"You shouldn't force yourself to eat, my love; you'll make yourself sick," he said smugly.

She gagged on the food in her mouth. He had known all along that she wasn't eating because she was hungry. Throwing the fork down, she returned her hands to her face.

A tearful gasp escaped her lips. She didn't want him inside of her again. She wanted out of this place. Out of this hell.

Aimeric stood and went to her, pulling her out of the chair and bringing her back to his chest. She wanted to push him away, but knew that would make him angry so she allowed him to hold her and sway from side to side, brushing her hair down. It was all just a sick game to him. He would have his way with her as many times as he wanted until he grew bored, and then he would kill her.

"Come now, is it so bad? Do you really find me so repulsive?"

"How long do you plan on keeping me alive?" she asked through bitter tears.

"I told you I want to keep you forever." He stopped swaying her and held her out in front of him, brushing aside a strand of hair that had fallen in her eyes. "I knew I would have you from the first moment I saw you."

She looked away again, biting her lip to keep from crying fresh tears.

"You still hate me?" His voice was cold, cruel.

Aralyn's jaw tightened and she wasn't able to catch herself this time. She twisted around, an abrupt movement, and pierced his eyes with hers. What a stupid question.

"I...loathe...you. And I always will, nothing you do will ever change my mind about you."

As soon as she spoke the words, her heart fluttered in fear and she leaned away from him, preparing for his temper.

He laughed a moment, low and amused, chuckling at her audacity. She waited with bated breath. Waited for the yelling. The threats. And possibly torture.

Even though she was prepared, she still gasped when he grabbed her arm, almost yanking it out of the socket as he pulled her through the living room, up the stairs, and into his bedroom. She pulled back, digging her heels into the dirty carpet, but she knew it wouldn't do her any good. He slammed the door shut so hard that it shook the bedroom, rattling the mirror on the vanity.

She had pushed him too far this time. She regretted letting the words pass through her lips. But at least he wasn't in the basement. At least whatever he had planned would only involve her. She hoped anyway.

Taking her roughly by the shoulders, he pulled her up until she was an inch from his mouth. As he spoke, his cool breath passed to her lips and his words came out harsh, through his gritted teeth; the tips of his fangs protruded from under his upper lip and rested on his lower lip.

"This is what's going to happen: We are going to make love and it's going to be together this time. There will be no crying. You can whimper, you can moan, and you can scream your pretty little lungs out, but it had better be out of pleasure or you will be punished, and by 'you,' I mean everyone in that goddamn basement. Do I make myself clear?"

"No, please—"

"*Do I make myself clear?*" Aimeric interrupted, giving her a threatening shake.

It was too much. Too much. She could lie there and hate him for what he was doing to her, but she couldn't pretend to enjoy being raped. She couldn't kiss him, couldn't touch him, couldn't pretend they were making love.

Shaking her head, Aralyn struggled out of his arms, kicking him away and ducking out of his reach so she could run to the door. Deep down she knew she couldn't get away, but she still tried. She flung open the door and ran downstairs, passing by a confused female vampire as she ran. She made it to the front door. Still not caught by him. Maybe she had a chance of getting away after all. Once she was outside, she was free.

Through hot tears, she found the front doorknob and flung open the door. A burst of cold wind hit her in the face. Welcoming. Inviting her outside to freedom.

Not daring to look back, she took her first step out of the horrible mansion. Then another and another until she was running into black forest.

Dead Seed

I'm sorry, I'm so sorry! she repeated over and over in her mind, knowing that her escape meant the prisoners' suffering.

She didn't want them hurt because of her, but she couldn't stand the thought of being forced to take pleasure in being with him. For a brief moment she lost all empathy for any other human being. All that mattered to her was getting out.

Getting away from him.

Freedom.

Chapter Seven

Back to the Bedroom

All she wanted was to get away. To even go home. Her depressing life before was paradise compared to what she faced if she stayed behind with Aimeric. The prisoners would die eventually anyway, right? It didn't matter what her decision was. They would die. All she would accomplish by staying would be prolonging their suffering. In a way, this was the best thing for them.

Her cheeks were almost numb having the cold wind blowing against the dampness of her tears. Tree branches reached out and clawed at her face, drawing warm blood to the surface that trickle down her cheeks and contrasted with the cold. She was only in a robe, nothing for warmth. But she wasn't concerned. She'd rather freeze to death than go back there.

She was running in circles, she was sure of it. She couldn't see her way out of the thick forest; the moon was covered by a blanket of clouds, she was lost in total darkness. Where was the road? Was there even one? She remembered Virgil said they were on Prudence Island. She had never been here before; she didn't know which way she should go. Which way to the ferry that would take her to the main land?

She would worry about that once she escaped the trees.

Rocks and broken twigs stabbed the bottom of her bare feet and she almost tripped several times but managed to steady herself at the last second.

She couldn't hear anything except for her own heavy breathing and the cracks of twigs as she ran over them. There weren't any car horns or even the sound of moving traffic so that meant there wasn't a road nearby, or if there was, it was desolate. The sound of her own blood being pumped by a vigorous heart drummed behind her ears.

The cuts on her toes and now a few on her legs began stinging in the cold air. She had to rest, catch her breath. She stopped, steadying herself on a tree and searched her surroundings, gasping for air, her chest heaving violently. All she could barely make out were the dark outlines of the sea of trees. She looked up through the canopy of leaves hoping to find the moon but there were no breaks in the clouds.

A low growl nearby brought her attention back to the trees and she strained to see what it was. It sounded like a dog, maybe a coyote. She squinted into the darkness, but didn't see any eyes. Nothing.

She started running again. Not the smartest thing to do with a predator around, but compared to Aimeric any animal out here could be comparable to a furry pet.

Her running came to a halt and she screamed as Aimeric seemed to appear directly in front of her. She would have fallen had he not seized her wrists, his fingernails cutting into the tender flesh below her palms. He drew her trembling body up against him and took in a deep breath near her pulsing neck.

"I love the smell of adrenaline; you're even sweeter when you're afraid."

She went limp, trying to fall out of his grasp. "Please, let me go! Please." She dropped her head, pathetically crying. He held her tight, not letting her fall to the ground.

"I don't think so." He moved so his arms were holding her up by the waist. "You have more nerve than any of the other women I've had brought to me, I have to give you that. No one else tried to run away after the first day. You have more nerve, but you're not very smart, are you? *They* were smart; they knew what would happen to them or the others!"

"So kill me and get it over with." She was pleading with him now. The longing for death returned stronger than ever before.

"If only you were so lucky."

Aimeric picked her up and they rushed through the forest, the wind whipping by so quickly it stung her face. She

had to close her eyes against it. In only a few seconds, she was back in the bedroom with Aimeric.

“No more games; I’m losing my patience with you,” he said.

She didn’t have a chance to say anything; his lips were against hers before she could take another breath. He kissed her hard, violently. Whatever gentleness he had intended on using—if any—had vanished at the ascent of his temper. His tongue darted out and he licked up her face, cleaning away the blood from the cuts on her face and the tears on her cheeks. Then he went back to her mouth, biting her bottom lip as his hands grasped her rear. He picked her up and they fell backwards on the bed, his hands sweeping across her chest to grasp the folds of her robe. Pulling the robe open, he thrust against her and then took one of her legs, wrapping it around his waist and thrust again. She gasped as the hard bulge hit against her and then grit her teeth. Aimeric ran his hand up the length of her leg, over her hip and up to her left breast where he fondled her for several moments, moving his mouth back to her neck.

She whimpered once, trying to hold back the tears and the burning in her muscles from keeping them so tense. She grimaced with every kiss he laid on her and when he went back for her mouth, she turned her head.

Aimeric took her arms and raised them over her head, pinning her down with his body, and raked his fangs across her bottom lip.

“Respond to me,” he growled and covered her mouth, keeping her in place so she couldn’t turn her head again.

He forced her mouth open and his tongue crudely found hers, smashing against it.

Her breath was halted, she was trapped beneath his weight, and she was trying to keep her tears held back. Nausea rose in her throat and she feared what he would do if she didn’t obey so she forced herself to move her lips against his, kissing him back. She wasn’t very good at it, sickened at the thought of what she was doing but Aimeric didn’t seem

to care. All that mattered to him was she was doing as he had told her; responding to him. Taking her other leg, he wrapped it around his waist so her legs were circled around him and then he pulled her up with him in a sitting position so she straddled his legs. Tangling his fingers in her hair, he finally moved from her mouth and she gasped in a breath of much needed air. He went back to her neck, sliding his tongue up and down it. When it swept over the marks on her neck, he hesitated, licking the scabs and breathing in the scent of her blood.

She cringed and thought, *Please don't...* But she didn't dare say it.

He must have been prying and heard her thoughts because his head jerked up and he looked at her, a far away look in his eyes. He left her neck alone and kissed her hard, one of his hands sliding back into the robe, grazing her breasts. The touch elicited a soft gasp from her and she was surprised at her reaction. He slipped the robe off her shoulders and let it fall to the bed, leaving her naked, exposing every part of her body to him. His mouth was over her shoulder, kissing and gently biting it and he brought his hand to her breast, running his thumb over her tightening nipple for only a second before moving his fingers to his own shirt. He unbuttoned it quickly, threw it to the floor, and then crushed his icy chest against her, pushing her back down on the mattress.

As his head sank beneath her chin, his mouth going to cover and lick her nipples, she felt a wave of pleasure pulse through her body. The muscles between her legs throbbed in anticipation and heat pooled in her abdomen, spreading lower. Why? Why was she feeling like this? Guilty tears found their way from behind her eyes and one rolled down her face.

Aimeric didn't seem to notice.

He was now kissing down her midsection, letting his tongue graze her flesh every now and then. She closed her eyes, trying to push out the feelings he was causing, denying it

was pleasure. Her whole body ached but she convinced herself it was fear that tensed her muscles.

As he trailed lower, he moved to kiss her thigh, going down to the inner part of it. She clenched her teeth the closer he got to the opening between her legs and then she shuddered slightly when he barely grazed it with his tongue, moving over to the other thigh. He kissed and licked that part of her leg, teasingly. And then Aralyn gasped loudly when he bit her, letting his fangs penetrating a thin layer of skin, only inches from her opening. It stung and she soon felt hot blood surface. Aimeric licked it away and then sucked a few more drops out, bringing her both pleasure and pain.

As the pleasure overtook the pain and spread like uncontained water, she again wondered why she was feeling this way. She hadn't felt like this last night. Last night she had felt the way she should: disgusted, in pain, frightened. No pleasure, no wanting. Maybe he had gone so fast the night before that she hadn't had a chance to feel anything but disgust. Or maybe he was doing something to calm her, make her feel what she shouldn't be feeling. She remembered the effect he had had on the red-headed girl. Maybe he was doing the same to her now.

Her thighs now glistened with saliva and the sting from where he bit her was easing to just a dull ache. She whimpered again as he drew his tongue closer to the spot between her thighs, her heart was beating faster and she found she wanted him to keep going. That realization brought the nausea back.

*Stop it...*she said to herself, gritting her teeth and clenching the sheets with her fists.

He slid his hands up behind her legs to grasp her ass and took his tongue off her. Before she could decide if she was happy or disappointed that he had done so he said:

"I said no...*crying*."

As he growled out the last word, he slid her down the sheets so that he could place his face between her thighs. His tongue darted out in quick laps, licking her sex and she

gasped loudly, digging her heels into the mattress. Her fingers clenched tight to his shoulder, her fingernails digging into his white flesh, drawing out tiny drops of blood. Her head fell against the pillow and she gasped again as his tongue moved vigorously against her. She writhed and clenched her teeth to keep from screaming as the fires of enjoyment surged through every nerve in her body. She tore her fingers from his shoulder and went back to clenching the sheet. Her breaths came in more shuddering gasps and she focused once more on the underside of the canopy, trying to convince her body not to respond. It wasn't obeying her, though; she was on the verge of letting it out; screaming seemed like a sweet release.

He moaned into her, distributing vibrations against her that were enough to send her over the edge. Her body shuddered and she moaned loudly, closing her eyes.

Aimeric finally pulled away and she lay there, trying to catch her breath and control the beat of her heart.

But he wasn't finished yet.

She heard him unzip his pants and opened her eyes to see him hurriedly taking them off. He was already fully aroused. Without saying anything, he climbed on top of her, securing her legs back around his waist and dipping his cock to meet her wet opening.

This time she didn't bother trying to fight him. She raised her hips to meet him and he thrust into her. The painful gasp she let escape her lips when he entered turned into a pleased moan as he began rocking inside of her.

He brought her hands once again over her head and smashed them into the pillows, his fingers entwining with hers. Their nails dug into each other's skin and Aralyn found herself moving with him, keeping the rhythm. He kissed her neck and licked her ear. She let out another loud moan which brought his attention back to her mouth. She tasted a mix of salt and blood on his tongue and though it bothered her, she kissed him back eagerly, forgetting the disgust she was feeling with herself for enjoying this act. She didn't want him to stop.

What could she do?

Virgil.

His name entered her mind and she used it, mentally making the men switch places. She closed her eyes and pictured Virgil's face in place of Aimeric's. She moaned into his mouth and Aimeric (Virgil) quickened his pace inside of her. She moved to meet his every thrust, gasping for air as she became lightheaded. Her whole body was moving with him, the bed trembling beneath them.

She moaned again and breathed his name, "Aimeric..."

Her eyes flew open. Why had she said his name? She had been thinking so clearly of Virgil.

"Yes," Aimeric rasped in her ear in an authoritative tone. "I am doing this to you." He thrust harder. She yelled softly and then moaned against his neck. "You remember this, Aralyn." He sat up on his knees, bringing her up with him and thrust still harder, bringing an even more intense fire that spread through her body. She was close to coming. "I am the only one who can make you feel this way. Do you understand?" he growled against her neck, licking her. She didn't respond right away so he moved to her mouth and demanded, "Do you understand?"

He thrust harder, squeezing her rear so hard it almost hurt. He moved to touch her breast, cupping one of them in one hand while his other held tight to the back of her neck, clenching a fistful of her hair.

Her chest heaved beneath his hand and she slammed down hard on him, tightening her legs around his waist.

"Yes," she breathed.

They writhed together, their bodies moving in perfect synchronization. She glistened with sweat and her hair stuck to the back of her neck and forehead.

Finally, after several teases from Aimeric where he would slow his pace, sometimes stopping entirely, when Aralyn came close to coming, she felt her climax take over her entire body. She shuddered violently and arched her back, letting out a loud yell.

Aimeric continued to pump, keeping her moaning, and he went back to her neck, penetrating the wound to draw more blood. She already felt lightheaded from the exertion her body was going through and after only a few seconds of him sucking, she felt like she might pass out. He stopped as her eyes began to flutter and she shuddered one more time as Aimeric gave one last, hard thrust, groaning into her neck at his own release.

The two fell back on the bed and Aimeric took a moment to rest on Aralyn's chest while she caught her breath, gasping hard for it. He pulled out of her, eliciting another soft moan, and then he rolled over on his side, pulling her to his chest. He kissed her softly along her cheek, her neck and the parts of her arms that weren't bandaged.

Now that it was over and she wasn't consumed with pleasure and passion, she bit her lip to keep from crying. Guilty. Angry. She was disgusted with herself.

"Mm, that wasn't so bad, was it?" Aimeric said, his voice gruff. He nipped her ear.

She was too ashamed to respond. Instead, she closed her eyes, hoping he would think she was just too exhausted to answer.

Chapter Eight

Water

Several hours later Aralyn woke up to the sound of low growls of thunder and hard rain beating on the window. She turned her head slightly where a clock hung on the wall and saw the hands pointed to ten thirty-seven in the morning. The room was still dark as night however, due to the heavy curtains.

She was still in Aimeric's arms but his hold on her wasn't very tight so he must have still been asleep. His naked flesh was a cool contrast against her own skin, which had been kept warm from the bedcovers. Turning her head back so she could face him, she saw that he was indeed asleep. His head lay against her shoulder and his eyes were shut tightly.

Shifting her weight cautiously, she slid out from under the covers, silently praying he wouldn't be disturbed by her movements. So far so good. She made her way to the bathroom. Halfway there she hit a weak spot in the wooden floorboards. It creaked loudly. She cringed and looked at the bed, waiting for Aimeric to move and inwardly cursing herself for making the noise. He didn't even stir, though. Inward, she breathed a sigh of relief and stepped around the weak spot.

When she got to the bathroom and closed the door, a huge amount of relief flooded over her. It was as if a heavy weight had been lifted from her chest. She knew he could come in whenever he wanted, but somehow, having the door between them made her safe.

This bathroom was larger than the one she had been in before. The shower had a sliding glass door set in a gold frame. The glass was sandblasted so you couldn't see through it clearly. There were double sinks and a linen closet in the corner. Like Aimeric's room, this one was clean and up to date unlike the rest of the house.

She turned on the hot water, eagerly wanting to rinse the filth of last night from her body. She could still smell his scent all over her: that crisp smell of cold skin and the soap he used tainted with the smallest hint of metallic blood. As her bandages became wet, she peeled them off. The water was a little too hot first but she forced herself to stay under it until she was used to the temperature. The cuts stung for only a few seconds. She washed her hair and scrubbed her body as the memory of the night before came to her in quick flashes. They made her weak; she steadied herself on the cool tiled wall, crying under the cover of the falling water. Why had she responded to him like she did? It had been wrong. She shouldn't have felt anything but disgust.

After soaping her arms—ignoring the cuts—for the fifth time, she finally decided she was clean and turned off the water. Her skin burned and it was splotchy again. She wrung out her hair and then wrapped a towel around her body. She took a deep breath, preparing to go back out into the room. She hoped Aimeric was still asleep.

When she opened the door she saw she wasn't so lucky. He was awake and sitting in the bed, leaning back on his elbows. She could see him clearly because he had lit several of the candles, bringing light into the room. The silk sheets covered the middle part of his body, leaving only his toned chest exposed. A dark curtain of matted hair hung around his shoulders and his icy eyes stood out against his pale face. He looked tired having only had a few hours of rest. His eyes fell on her when she entered and he smirked, gazing at her towel-covered body. The parts of her skin that weren't covered glistened with tiny beads of water she had missed when drying off.

"I had hoped you would wait for me and we could shower together."

She hung her head so she could stare at the floor, not wanting to see his face and remember how it had looked last night.

"I'm sorry. I woke up and couldn't get back to sleep," she said quietly.

"No apology is necessary. Just wake me next time."

Aralyn looked up at him for a moment but when she saw he was now standing, she turned her head quickly to avoid looking at his naked figure. She sensed him walking towards her and a few seconds later he had his fingers under her chin. She made sure to keep her eyes on his face. He smiled and kissed her lips softly.

"Good morning, my love."

She forced a quick smile and mumbled, "Morning."

He reached down, taking her arms and gazed thoughtfully at the cuts on them.

"These would heal in an instant if you became one of us," he said more to himself than to her.

She pulled her arms free, careful not to yank them back too quickly. "No thank you."

He chuckled and kissed her forehead. "Go find something to wear in the other room and then come back here." He went to the bathroom and turned in the doorway to glare at her. "And don't try anything funny, Aralyn."

Once she heard the shower water running, she sighed and left the room, glad to be free of him for at least a few minutes. As soon as she entered the hall she literally bumped into someone.

Morgan.

Her eyes narrowed into a livid glare as he grinned down at her, steadying her.

"Ah, Miss Aralyn. Or should I say..." he paused to give a mock bow, "My Queen."

"I had hoped you would be dead by now," she said.

The smile melted from his face and he returned the glare. "Oh, don't worry. I was punished for what I did. The Master made me pay for tasting you. But," he touched her arm, running his finger down it in a provocative manner, "I think it was worth it."

She jerked away from his touch and then shoved past him.

“Where do you think you’re going?” He grabbed her arm. “Not trying to escape again are you?”

“Let go of me.”

“Yes, let go of her.”

She felt the familiar guilt from the night before creep up on her when she saw that Virgil was standing beside her, glaring dangerously at Morgan. He reached out and shoved Morgan’s hands off of her.

“I was just makin’ sure she wasn’t trying to run away!” he said, indignant.

“I doubt she would be going anywhere dressed...like that,” Virgil said, his eyes roaming Aralyn’s body. She was barely covered by the towel.

Her cheeks heated under his gaze. “I was just going to find some clothes when he stopped me.”

Virgil nodded in understanding and said, “Come with me.”

He took the hand that Aralyn wasn’t using to hold the towel up and led her away, leaving a scowling Morgan behind. When they reached Claire’s room, Virgil opened the door and led Aralyn inside. As soon as the door was closed, he brought her up to his mouth in a passionate kiss. It was as if he had been waiting several hours, anticipating the moment he would be able to kiss her. She almost gave in, starting to open her mouth so he could enter, but then, coming back to reality, she pushed him away.

“Virgil, I can’t...If Aimeric saw...” She didn’t even want to think of what might happen to either of them if they were caught.

“I know. I’m sorry.” He moved a few feet away from her. “I of all people should know better than to lose control like that. Are you okay?”

She nodded. “Have you thought any more about whatever your decision was?”

“Yes. And soon you will know what I’m talking about.”

She frowned. "I'm sorry, I wish you could tell me now, but I just don't think I could keep it from Aimeric."

He smiled, his eyes warm and looking like he wanted to take her up in his arms again. "Don't worry about it."

They looked at one another for a long minute. Aralyn wanted to feel his lips against hers again; it was taking every bit of restraint she had to keep from closing the gap between them.

He felt the tension, too, and gestured to the dresser. "You should get dressed now," he said.

She nodded and went to Claire's dresser, pulling out a few items of clothing: a pair of black pants and a red, tight-fitting band shirt. She looked shyly at Virgil and he nodded, taking the hint and turning around so she could get dressed. She quickly pulled the clothes on and then sighed.

"I have to get back. He's expecting me."

He turned back around and took Aralyn's hand, softly pressing his lips to her fingers.

She smiled and they walked out of the room together. He held her hand tightly, not wanting to let her go back to Aimeric any more than she wanted to. When they reached the door, it opened on its own. Virgil dropped her hand and they took a step away from each other.

Aimeric glared at Virgil as he exited, looking him over as if he were a dirty rodent. He hadn't dried off from his shower very well. The blue silk shirt he wore was sticking to his damp chest, wet spots appearing in the dark material. His hair was also wet.

"Ah, *Virgil*." He held out his arm for Aralyn. She took it without question and stood beside him obediently. "Aralyn's little helper, aren't you? I don't know what she'd do without you."

"I merely interfered with a confrontation she was having with Morgan, Master."

He seemed interested by this information. "Confrontation?"

"Yes, it seemed he was harassing her."

Aimeric looked down at Aralyn. "What did he do?"

She held her breath a second, wondering what she should say. She hated Morgan almost as much as she hated Aimeric, but she wouldn't wish Aimeric's form of punishment on anyone, must less be the one to doom him to it.

"It was a misunderstanding actually," she said. "He thought I was trying to escape."

Virgil's eyebrows pulled together, as if he couldn't understand why she was defending the sniveling vampire.

"I'll talk to him later, then. Virgil, you may go."

"Yes." Giving a farewell nod, Virgil disappeared down the corridor and went into one of the other rooms.

"And now, you." He turned back to Aralyn. His eyes narrowed and he took her arm again. They descended the stairs and she felt her blood harden. He didn't look happy.

They made their way through the empty house. Virgil and Morgan were the only other vampires awake apparently. Not surprising; it wasn't even noon. When she realized they were going to the basement, her heart started to pound. What now? Had he seen into her mind and watched as Virgil kissed her? Was he going to punish another innocent?

As they went through the door and down the stairs, every muscle in her body tensed. She didn't think she could watch another person being tortured. But what could she say? She couldn't say anything about Virgil in case that wasn't why Aimeric was taking her down here. Questioning him would just get her into more trouble. She would just have to wait.

"I have something I'd like for you to wear."

She swallowed a nervous breath and looked up at him. "What is it?"

"Come here." He moved her around in front of him so her back was almost touching his chest.

She waited. Heart beating faster. Breaths coming through a constricting throat.

Aimeric lowered a piece of red cloth over her eyes, tying it around her head.

Her nerves began to quiver as her imagination created possible reasons for this. Another form of torture? But for what? Or was it sexual?

Now blinded, all she could do was stand there and wait for him to take her hand again.

Instead, she felt another piece of cloth being tied around her mouth so she couldn't speak. The rolled up material was tightened in between her teeth, almost gagging her. Tears formed behind her eyes. Fear made her tremble.

"Don't worry. This won't hurt," he said in a sardonic voice against her ear once he was finished tying. He then took her hand, leading her into the prison. She knew this because she recognized the rancid smell of it.

"What are you doing?" Her frightened voice was muffled through the gag. Her face became wet with silent tears.

"Do you remember what happened last night, Aralyn?"

She thought back, remembering how they had been together for what seemed like a long time, how her body had moved with his, the moans, the pleasure. What was he talking about?

They stopped walking and Aimeric took both of her hands.

"Step up. Now kneel down."

She did as she was told and slowly lowered herself to her knees. She was sitting unevenly, on an incline. She remembered the wooden ramp she had seen in the prison before; that was what she was on now. She felt Aimeric kneel beside her and then one of his hands went to her stomach and the other to the back of her neck.

"Lie down."

"Please," she whimpered. She still wasn't sure what he had planned, but she knew that whatever it was, it wouldn't be pleasant. She wouldn't struggle, though. Struggling would only bring in more people to be tortured.

"Lie down, Aralyn." His tone was more authoritative, a warning.

With his help, she lay down, her head near the bottom of the ramp. Her feet were inclined. Aimeric took one of her hands and secured it in a leather strap above her head, then he took the other and bound it as well. He did the same with her ankles.

“You ran away from me last night. Into the woods, you remember?”

She nodded, her lips trembling against the cloth in her mouth.

“You must never do that again.”

She heard his footsteps: he walked around her and across the room, stopping near the cages. She heard something heavy briefly scrape across the floor as he picked it up and then he returned, standing behind her. His feet were near her head.

She braced herself, taking a deep breath, trying to prepare for whatever he was going to do. At least he was doing it to her and not someone else this time. That much she was grateful for.

“I hope I won’t have to do this to you again. Etch into your memory the horror you’re about to feel and remember it the next time you want to run away.”

A wave of ice cold water was poured onto her face. The angle she was laying made her feel like she was drowning. Her world, already darkened by the blindfold, seemed to grow even darker. Every nerve in her body was shocked and terrified. The water was heavy; she felt like she had been hit in the face with a sandbag. She gagged, coughing as best she could. She couldn’t get a breath of air. Her lungs burned.

He walked away, allowing her to catch her breath for a few minutes and then he brought a second bucket of ice water and poured it over her.

She screamed this time, choking on the water that made its way into her mouth. Her eyes felt like they were gouged and pushed into her skull. She couldn’t breathe. The ice water soaked her shirt and spilled onto her pants. Her whole body was cold and trembling. The shock of the cold reflexively

made her struggle against her bounds, bruising her where they confined her.

She was still choking. Choking and gasping. Trying to breathe. She became dizzy and thought she might pass out.

Aimeric knelt beside her again and she felt him fumbling with the blindfold. He removed it and she could see his face inches from hers. Drops of lingering water invaded her eyes, burning them and she blinked to get rid of the feeling while he slipped his hand under her head to remove the gag. Once it was out of her mouth she coughed some more, ridding the water from her lungs.

“Would you like to sit up now?” he asked.

She nodded through her coughing fit and he went to work on her restraints. First her arms. When she felt her wrists free, she sat up in order to catch a deeper breath while he worked on the straps around her ankles. She coughed and spit out what she could. Her throat burned and itched from where some of the water had gone up her nose.

Aimeric undid the straps on her legs and then helped her stand. Her legs were shaking, her balance unsteady. She clutched at his sleeves to keep from falling.

“Do you intend on running away again?” he asked, his voice calm.

She shook her head first and then gasped, “No.”

“Good.” Kissing her forehead, he walked with her out of the basement and back upstairs where he placed a blanket around her trembling shoulders.

Chapter Nine

Sadie and Mabel

That night Aimeric stayed in while the other vampires went out. Aralyn wondered what they did every night if they didn't have to feed. Maybe they just left to get out of the house. Probably went into the city to lurk in dark alleys and rape unsuspecting women. Or men.

Most of the others left her well enough alone now that they knew she belonged to Aimeric. He never did take her in to meet every one of them, but maybe all he had to do to "formally introduce" her was just tell them not to touch her. They had all seen her by now. They knew who she was. She was Aimeric's.

After those few minutes in the basement, Aralyn was afraid to even look at Aimeric the wrong way. She did her best to avoid looking at him all. Never again did she want to experience what she had earlier that day. The torture hadn't even lasted a minute but the effects would remain with her for a long time, she was sure of it.

She had changed into dry clothes since then but she had gone back to the bed, curling up in the blanket, feeling some comfort with it around her shoulders. Aimeric sat with her for a while, pulling her to his chest and stroking her face and hair. Almost like a parent to a child. As if he had had nothing to do with her suffering.

She had never hated anyone before as much as she hated him. His fingers crawling on her flesh and touching her hair still made her cringe inside. But now she knew. She knew not to go against him, or to defy him. At least for now. Maybe in a few days she would forget the horror she had felt, but she doubted it. The memory of the icy water flowing onto her face and into her lungs, choking and gagging her, would be one hard to forget.

“Come out to the garden with me,” Aimeric said after a long while. “You could use the fresh air.”

She didn’t really want to go. All she wanted to do was sleep, but she was afraid of denying the request so she barely nodded her head and let the blanket fall from her shoulders so she could stand.

When they first stepped out into the dark night, under the bright light of the moon, a gust of cold wind hit her in the face. She turned her head out of its reach, burrowing her nose in her shoulder. Aimeric took her hand and led her around to the backyard. They walked so the breeze was behind them. The wind pushed Aralyn’s hair around her shoulders, keeping her ears warm. The long white skirt and light pink sweater she wore mostly shielded her body from the chill.

As they walked she closed her eyes and breathed in the crisp autumn air, pretending she was anywhere but here. Anywhere but with Aimeric. The brown boots she had borrowed from Claire’s room crunched on the fallen leaves and she imagined she was a child again and going out of her way to step on them.

When they stopped walking, she opened her eyes and for a moment forgot her misery. They were standing in the middle of a garden that hadn’t yet succumbed to the death of cold weather. A rainbow of flowers surrounded them, edging the curving pathway of reddish stepping stones. Yellow and orange marigolds, pink, purple, and white vincas. Tall, thick green stems of the white blooming moon flower stood in between the smaller flowers. There were others that she didn’t recognize; blues, pinks, purples, and reds. In the very center of the garden was an old fountain that towered over Aralyn. The path curved around it as a round-about. The fountain wasn’t spewing any water—probably too old and didn’t work anymore—but it still added Victorian beauty to the garden. It was made out of gray stone and had three tiers plus a bench that went all the way around it.

It was the most gorgeous, serene sight she had ever laid her eyes on and it was almost comforting in the midst of her

sufferings. The garden seemed so out of place compared to the mansion. It was like Aimeric had demanded that only certain places be kept beautiful while the rest of the house and property were allowed to go to waste. He probably had.

He led them to the bench and they sat, the cold of the stone seeping through Aralyn's skirt but she didn't mind too much; she was still taking in the splendor of the flowers.

"What do you think?" he asked.

She held back the desire to purse her lips and ignore him.

"It's nice." Her voice came out harder than she intended.

Luckily, he didn't seem to care because he didn't say anything or even give her a look. Maybe he felt bad for what he had done to her and was letting her off easy. Yeah right.

"I know you're angry with me right now," he said. "But soon, you'll learn to respect me. Even love me." He brushed her hair to the side and she leaned away as far as she thought she could get away with without making him mad.

Love him? She would never love him. She wanted to spit his words back in his face. How could she, though? Telling him he disgusted her and that she would never love him would only put her back in the basement and with no guarantee that she would be the one to take the abuse for it.

She opted for silence and hugged herself for comfort against the wind...and him.

"Speak freely, my love. I would rather you speak your words than have me invade your thoughts."

She looked at him, barely shaking her head. She was dumbfounded.

"You say that, yet when I do speak freely you torture those people or..." she stopped, not wanting to say the word 'rape' and provoke him. She didn't say anything else, not wanting to take it too far and risk making him angry for accusing him of being what he was: a psychotic monster.

He chuckled, a low rumble in his throat. "I meant at this moment. I promise I won't be angry with you."

She shuddered at the familiar feeling of fear mixed with the cold. This could be a trap. She shook her head.

"I don't have anything to say."

"I know you do. Tell me your thoughts." His voice was harder this time, more authoritative.

As if he thought he could convince her to talk, he leaned over, bracing a hand on the concrete beside her, and began kissing her neck.

It might have worked if she had affectionate feelings for him. But no. She grimaced, knowing he couldn't see her expression.

"I..." she hesitated, still unsure if it was really safe to speak freely.

He moved to kiss her mouth once before going back to her throat. "Go ahead."

"I don't understand why you have to be so...controlling and torture people to earn their respect and...affection." 'Affection' didn't seem like the right word, but she couldn't think of any other to take its place. Her voice was starting to shake, nervous at how he would respond. "Wouldn't it be more...rewarding and pleasing if you gave women free will to love you on their own, rather than making them fear you?"

She heard the smile in his voice when he responded. "You still fear me?"

She swallowed hard and closed her eyes.

"Of course I do," she finally whispered. *Look what you've done, how could I not?*

He brought his head up so he could look into her eyes. His eyes surprised her; appearing warm, almost ashamed. He looked melancholic, as if he were about to apologize for everything horrible he had ever done; a pained expression.

And then she realized it was a play.

He smirked, his eyes narrowing as if they were laughing, ridiculing her.

"Good."

That was all the response she got from him. He brushed her off, disregarding her questions and concerns, not bothering to defend himself. He went back to kissing her mouth and she didn't dare pull away.

* * *

The next day Aralyn woke in Aimeric's bed with his arm draped over her side. The room was cast in shadow; the sun's bright light was filtered to only a dim glow through the heavy curtains and barely bringing light into the room. Not enough to hurt him, apparently. Too bad.

It was early afternoon. She woke up feeling refreshed instead of groggy like she had the last several days because she got more than a couple of hours of sleep. However, that didn't take away her wretchedness. She was still a prisoner.

As she lay there her thoughts went to Claire. She wasn't sure how long it had been since her sister stalked out, leaving her there for Aimeric to torture. At least near a week. Her suicidal thoughts were returning. The desire to get away from Aimeric was becoming more than the desire to see her sister again. Claire wasn't the same after all. What good would it do to wait for her? She might not be back for weeks or months or even years. Was being forced to live as the master vampire's pet worth getting to see and speak with what was left of her sister again?

Her thoughts started to wander to Virgil and what he was planning, what his decision was, but she forced them out of her mind in case Aimeric was pretending to be asleep and listening to her thoughts.

He stirred beside her and she closed her eyes again, pretending to still be asleep. She wanted to prolong the next time she would have to look at him or do anything else with him for as long as she could.

She only gained a few extra seconds.

He attempted to wake her himself by trailing his cold lips along her jaw. After a short time she couldn't pretend anymore.

This time he accompanied her in the shower and they stayed under the water longer than she would have liked. Every time he touched her, kissed her, and ran his tongue along her neck and breasts, she grimaced, her stomach feeling like a tempest. Yet at the same time, she felt pleasure just as

she had the other night, which made her feel even worse. Sometimes her disgust with herself was greater than her disgust for him.

The cuts on her arms had healed almost all the way into just scars, just a memory of the night she tried to kill herself. The bruise under her eye was no longer swollen and just a faint mark now. It would probably be gone entirely in the next couple of days. The scabs on her neck had tried to heal but, during the height of his passion last night after returning from the garden, Aimeric had cut into them again. He only took minute amounts of her blood at a time, but his greed prevented her from healing all the way.

That morning in the shower earned her two new punctures on the inside of her elbow where he decided to taste her again.

Aimeric finally turned off the water and went out into the bedroom to get dressed, leaving Aralyn to finish drying off. Once he was dressed, he went to the other room to retrieve clothes for her. As she took the bundle of a dress from him someone knocked on the bedroom door.

Aralyn closed the bathroom while he went to answer it, glad to have the interruption. Had she known who it was and what he wanted, she might not have been so relieved to have the few moments to herself.

As she put the skirt and shirt on, she heard the murmur of voices: one Aimeric's and one someone else's she thought to be Morgan.

She put her hand on the knob to open the door and before she could turn it the door flew open and Aimeric yanked on her wrist, swinging her out of the room. His eyes were ablaze again, fangs bared. He looked absolutely terrifying. He flung her onto the bed and pinned her down with his weight, pushing her arms deep into the mattress.

He was only wearing a pair of sweat pants and his chest still glistened from the shower. Drops of water lingered at the ends of his dark hair.

Her breath was caught in her throat again. She could only stare up at him, wide eyed.

“Morgan tells me you and Virgil have gotten quite close,” he sneered through clenched teeth. The very tips of his small fangs cut into his own bottom lip.

“It’s nothing, I swear!” she responded in a terrified whisper. “He’s only helped me with-”

“He saw the two of you kissing!”

She couldn’t argue or explain that. And now that the memory had been drawn to her attention, he could probably see for himself now anyway. Unable to respond, she turned her head to the side, guilty.

“Have I not been clear on the rules, Aralyn? What do I have to do to you in order for you to obey!”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered and turned back to him, tears shining in her eyes.

“I don’t believe you. I think you need another reminder.”

She could feel the ice water again in a violent memory. Her chest shuddered with the terrified breaths she took as she shook her head.

He pulled her up from the bed, keeping a tight grip on her wrist. He took her to the basement and she pulled back on her arm, trying to plead with him.

“It won’t happen again! Please don’t hurt anyone!”

“Silence! I’ll teach you not to whore around.”

“But I didn’t- I only kissed him, I swear!”

Ignoring her cries, Aimeric yanked her through the basement and into the prison, throwing her against the wall. He put her in the chains and then left, not saying a word as he stormed back out of the prison.

After a few seconds, she heard his voice boom through the mansion:

“Sadie! Mabel! Get down here!”

Aralyn looked at the prisoners, hoping they could tell her something, prepare her, but none of them would even look at her. Outside, thunder rumbled in the distance.

He came back with two female vampires. One was tall and thin with waist-length blond hair, almost white. Her eyes were green hazel. The only articles of clothing she wore barely covered her: a black mini skirt and a ripped top that showed off her midsection and dipped low into her small breasts.

The other woman had short hair, dyed purple with red ends. She was of short stature but still beautiful of course. Clinging to her eyebrows and lips were several piercings. Her eyes were yellow with black slits for pupils. She wore a short black dress with black fishnet hose and a pair of tall boots that zipped up to her knees.

Both of the women were pale; their skin almost translucent. They hung on Aimeric's arms, running their hands up and down his chest provocatively.

The purple-haired one licked her lips, revealing a pierced tongue.

"Mabel," Aimeric said to her. He glared at Aralyn a moment and then, as if it were supposed to make her jealous, he kissed the purple-haired one. They licked at one another's lips and then Aimeric turned to the blond.

"Sadie." He kissed her the same way, cupping one of her breasts while she caressed him over his pants. When they finally pulled apart, he pushed both women towards Aralyn.

"I want you girls to teach her a lesson. Do what you will," he said.

He sat down on the large, spike-ended table, observing, waiting for the women to begin their work. Aralyn looked at him and then glared at the women.

"Stay away from me," she said, trying to sound threatening, though her voice shook with fear.

Mabel laughed. "What are you going to do about it?"

Aralyn glanced at Aimeric. "What are you going to have them do?"

His lips curled up into a cruel sneer. "Whatever they want."

She shrank back against the wall, rattling the chains in her effort to get as far back as possible even though she knew it wouldn't do her any good. She was on the verge of hyperventilation, knowing that anything could happen now. The women were grinning, flashing their small fangs; ecstatic knowing they could play with her.

Sadie started first, moving to stand on Aralyn's left. She ignored the water welling up in Aralyn's eyes and ran cold fingers over her face.

"Such a pretty little thing," she said. Her hand smoothly found its way down Aralyn's neck and onto the puncture marks. She leaned down and sniffed the wounds a second, drawing in a deep breath with a satisfied smile on her crimson lips. She then looked over her shoulder at Aimeric and grinned.

"You've tasted her," she said.

Aimeric nodded and waved a hand. "Help yourself."

Sadie quirked an eyebrow as she turned back to Aralyn. "My, my, you must have done something bad for the Master to offer us a taste."

Mabel moved to Aralyn's side, chuckling in a melodic voice. "What'd you do? Fuck another man?"

Out of the corner of her eye, Aralyn saw Aimeric glaring at her. Mabel's assumption had been close according to him.

Sadie brushed Aralyn's hair to the side, examining it.

"Hm, this side is clean." She grinned at Mabel. "What should we do about that?"

"No," Aralyn whimpered, trying to shake the women off.

"Oh, what's wrong? Are you scared?" Mabel asked with mock sympathy.

"Best not to struggle, *love*," Aimeric hissed, watching with enjoyment on his face in the form of a hideous grin.

Heart pounding, Aralyn cringed as she felt the women licking her neck, tasting the blood that pulsed rapidly beneath her skin. Mabel's fangs entered her first and she gasped loudly before gritting her teeth and closing her eyes against the pain.

"Does it hurt?" Sadie asked, amused.

Mabel was slowly bringing the blood out, making the sting more intense somehow; perhaps by the way she was curving her teeth.

“Allow me to distract you from the pain,” Sadie continued, her voice low and sensual. She let the edge of her hand fall down Aralyn’s face and then slide all the way down to her stomach. She moved her fingers, slowly, up under Aralyn’s shirt until she found her breast and began fondling it while lowering her lips to her mouth, forcing her tongue inside.

The chains rattled fiercely as Aralyn tried to shake herself free of both women. Sadie followed her movements, keeping their mouths connected and stealing the breath from her lungs, so all she accomplished was allowing Mabel’s fangs to tear crookedly into her throat from the thrashing. She gasped into Sadie’s mouth as the new pain came, bringing hot tears to her eyes.

Aimeric chuckled.

After a moment Sadie stopped kissing her and knelt in front of her, holding onto Aralyn’s hips for support. She lifted Aralyn’s shirt, licking her stomach. Mabel was still sucking on her neck. Aralyn was beginning to feel lightheaded.

She yelled as something pierced her stomach right above her bellybutton. Sadie’s fangs. Mabel stopped drinking from her neck and took over kissing her, only instead of going to Aralyn’s mouth, she went to her throat. After a few seconds, she brought Aralyn’s arm up to her mouth, licking the inside of it between the wrist and elbow.

Sadie was sucking the new wound deeply, drawing out large amounts of Aralyn’s life source in long, painful sucks. But Aralyn barely felt her now, numb and about to pass out. Her eyes felt heavy and her head clouded. She started to close her eyes when she heard Aimeric say something, but she couldn’t hear what; it was as if she were under water and his voice was garbled. Her head bobbed and her chin started to

fall to rest on her chest. Maybe she was lucky. Maybe they had taken too much and she would die now.

Icy fingers touched the skin under her chin and she was momentarily shocked by the sudden cold and able to look up.

“Have you learned your lesson yet?” Aimeric asked. He had dismissed the women.

Barely aware of what she was saying and not able to stop herself, she mumbled “Fuck you” before letting her eyes close again.

“Later, my love,” he promised coldly as he removed her arms from the restraints. “Don’t make me do this to you again.”

That was the last she heard as he gathered her up in his arms.

* * *

Aimeric carried the unconscious Aralyn up the basement stairs, her head resting against his chest. His expression was blank. Who knew what he was thinking except for him? Did he feel any guilt for how he treated her and the hundreds—even thousands—of others he had tortured, emotionally destroyed, and killed?

He carried her through the living room where Morgan, Sadie, Mabel, and Virgil were along with a couple of the other inhabitants. They were conversing. Virgil, as usual as of late, looked angry and worried, hounding the others with questions about Aralyn.

Irritation spread over Aimeric’s blank expression, his face splitting into a frown, eyes narrowing and clouding over with darkness.

“What did you do to her?” Virgil’s eyes showed concern, eyeing Aralyn’s limp form.

“Nothing that concerns you,” Aimeric sneered and then added as he started up the winding stairs to the second floor, “I’ll deal with *you* later.”

Chapter Ten

Declaration

Virgil watched as Aimeric carried Aralyn away, his face dropping as if he felt guilty for what had happened to her. He glared at his master's back until he disappeared up the stairs and then he pivoted, his brown hair whipping around his neck, as he turned on Morgan.

"What did you tell him?" he growled, baring his fangs.

"Only the truth of what I saw," Morgan said, no remorse in his voice.

"I'll kill you." Virgil's dark eyes were consumed with fire.

Sadie and Mabel hissed at him in disapproval and crowded around Morgan, who smirked.

"You can't do nothin' to me; I'm under Aimeric's protection. You kill me, he kills you. Then who would poor, sweet, little Aralyn run to?"

Face contorting in rage, Virgil threw up his hands and turned around, trying to calm himself. His frustration was increasing, but he knew Morgan right. If he even tried to kill the sniveling vampire, Aimeric would kill him in return and Aralyn wouldn't even have the small chance she had now. She needed Virgil. If only he could set his plan into action....

Taking a reflexive breath (some habits died hard), he turned back around and pointed a finger at Morgan.

"You're going to pay for this." He stalked across the room and to the coat closet near the staircase. He took out a black rain coat and a pair of tall boots.

"What the hell are you doing?" Sadie asked.

"None of your business, whore."

She smirked. "Your whore at one time...or have you forgotten?"

Virgil glared at her but didn't respond as he buttoned up the jacket. He turned, hand on the door, ready to go outside.

“You’re begging for Aimeric to kill you, aren’t you?” Mabel asked.

“I don’t care what he does to me but I won’t let that girl suffer anymore. I’m going to find Claire.” He went outside, grateful the sky was now overcast with the oncoming storm. The first drops of rain had started to fall.

“You’re a bloody idiot,” Morgan called after him before slamming the door.

Virgil didn’t care if what he was doing was foolish; he had to save Aralyn from Aimeric before he destroyed her. He already planned on siring her, forcing her into the un-life; condemning her to hell. Not just physically would he destroy her, but mentally also. Aimeric had literally sent hundreds of young women to insane asylums after keeping them alive and allowing them to suffer in so many ways before he sent them back to their families as wrecked human beings, simply for his own twisted pleasure. The women would wake up screaming in their beds at night and would be in such a frenzy that their families couldn’t calm them down, couldn’t take care of them. Sometimes the women would hallucinate and think Aimeric was in the room with them. One girl stabbed her father in the heart with a letter opener, killing him, because she thought he was Aimeric.

Virgil couldn’t let this happen to Aralyn; he couldn’t allow her to go through the torture any longer.

He trudged through the mud and went through the forest until he came to the ferry that would take him to the mainland. He snuck on, stealthily going past the man running the transport. Once he was safely across the sea and the ferry docked, he slipped off before the man could see him. The rain was now a heavy downpour, keeping the sun’s rays blocked. However, by the time he pounded on the door of a white mansion, he was exhausted; even the gray daylight had taken a good amount of his energy.

Several minutes went by before the door cracked open. A soft gasp followed and then Virgil was pulled inside.

“What the hell were you thinking? You could have been killed,” the person hissed.

“I had to come, Orrin,” Virgil said.

“In the daytime? The sun may be covered today but that doesn’t mean you are entirely protected; it weakens you. Look at you, man!” Orrin said.

“It’s important. I don’t know if I would have had enough time to wait until dark, I don’t know how much time I have even now. Once Aimeric finds out I left he’ll be furious even more so than he already is.”

“What’s so damn important that you would risk the sunlight *and* Aimeric’s temper?” Orrin asked.

“A girl.”

Orrin scoffed and folded his arms over his broad chest. “I might have known.” He shook his head in dismay. “When are you going to learn that you just aren’t as powerful as I am?”

“Don’t get cocky; you’re one of the lucky ones.”

“Not so lucky. My so-called luck has also been a curse.”

“Only because you allow it to be,” Virgil said softly, looking into his old friend’s eyes.

“Maybe.” Orrin averted his red eyes, uncomfortable with the conversation.

Silence passed briefly and then he clapped Virgil on the back. “Come into the kitchen and I’ll give you a nice hot cup of blood and you can tell me why this girl is so important.”

Virgil nodded and followed Orrin to the large kitchen, which was opposite the one he was used to as far as cleanliness and up-to-date appliances went. This house was spotless and had new furniture and appliances. The colors on the walls were bright and inviting; cheerful.

“Everyone else asleep?” Virgil asked, sliding into a chair at the large oak table.

“Yes. That’s what *normal* vampires do during the day.” Orrin smirked as he took one of the many pitchers out of the fridge. He poured some of it into a glass mug and then put the mug in the microwave, pushing several buttons that

beeped loudly. A low humming started as the mug began to revolve inside.

"I guess my clan isn't normal then." Virgil sighed, thinking of his vampire brethren awake at the mansion. There were still several hours until sunset.

"I could have told you that. That's one of the reasons I left," Orrin said grimly.

"You're lucky he let you go so easily," Virgil said.

"I was a bother to him." Orrin shrugged.

Virgil nodded, laughing softly. "I remember. You did cause some trouble, didn't you?"

"It was worth it. Aimeric disgraces us all. He kills not only vampire kind, but his own clan members; I'm lucky he didn't kill me." He looked down at the floor as if remembering the reason Aimeric hadn't killed him.

Virgil didn't say anything else in response. Orrin shouldn't have to go back to those memories. The microwave beeped loudly and Orrin took the mug out, placing it in front of Virgil.

"Thanks." Virgil brought the cup to his lips and took a sip. His face contorted. Old blood never tasted that great. But cold blood was worse; he was glad Orrin had heated it up. He needed it either way, though; he was too weak to go back without it.

"Sure. Now tell me, what is so damn important about this girl? Who is she?" Orrin asked, taking a seat at the other end of the table.

"Her name is Aralyn," Virgil began.

"You mean Claire's sister?" Orrin interrupted.

"You've spoken with Claire? When? Is she here?" Virgil asked, searching the room as if she were hiding in a corner.

Orrin shook his silver hair. "Not anymore. She came to talk to me about...never mind, it's not important."

"Do you know when she'll be back? Or if she will be at all?" Virgil asked, his words coming more quickly. If he weren't in such a hurry to talk to Claire himself, he might have tried to get Orrin to tell him what he and Claire had

talked about. But Aralyn was the only thing on his mind right now.

“No. I don’t know.”

“She’s lucky that Aimeric hasn’t figured out this is one of the places she comes to on her little vacations. She’s lucky Aimeric doesn’t often go into her thoughts as he could with her still being young,” Virgil said, grounding his teeth together. “If he knew she was hanging out with another clan, especially yours...” He shook his head, not wanting to think about what might happen.

“You’re risking a lot yourself, my friend. And besides,” he smirked, “you’re the one who introduced her to me and my clan in the first place.”

“Sometimes I regret it. She’s risking her neck every time she comes here.”

“She knows the risk and it doesn’t bother her, or so she says.” Orrin shrugged.

“Claire has been strong since day one. She’s only been one of us for a year, still a child, technically, but she already acts like she knows everything and she thinks she’s invincible, even to Aimeric.” Virgil sighed in dismay.

“The new ones are always cocky like that. Then it hits them what their life really is and they sometimes can’t handle it. It would help if Aimeric didn’t toy with her and make her think she has control over things.”

“Like he’s done now.” Virgil nodded. “Claire thinks he’s agreed not to hurt Aralyn in exchange for her bringing her to him.”

“That brings us back to the original topic,” Orrin said. “What is Aimeric doing to her?”

“He’s destroying her.” Virgil shook his head, grounding his teeth together.

“He’s destroyed a lot of mortal women, and a few men for that matter. Why is she different to you?” Because she’s Claire’s sister?”

“I don’t know why she’s different, she just is.”

“She’s not your problem.”

Virgil's eyes shot up, brows furrowing in a heated glare. "Yes, she is."

Orrin studied his face for a moment and then, realization dawning, he leaned back in his chair, frowning and crossing his arms. "I see it now. You're in love with her aren't you?"

"Yes," Virgil whispered, clenching a fist on the table, his thoughts going back to Aimeric.

"Look," Orrin sighed as if trying to think of the best way to say what he wanted to. "Clearly, Aimeric has already claimed her. Forget her, Virgil; she may as well be dead to you."

"No!" Virgil pounded his fist on the table, not caring if he woke the others up. "I cannot forget her, Orrin. He plans on turning her, but I refuse to let him. I'm taking her away from here, far from Aimeric. But I need Claire to help me."

Disapproval showed itself in the form of a frown on Orrin's square-jawed face. "You're asking for something far worse than death, Virgil. Aimeric has kept other vampires alive for years torturing them. He'll do the same to you if he catches you. And you want to drag Claire into it?"

"I don't think she'll have a problem confronting Aimeric."

"That may be..."

Virgil studied Orrin's face, concentrating hard on it. His friend was frowning, deep in thought, keeping something from him. Something important.

"What did she talk to you about?"

"Huh?"

"Claire. What did she come here for?"

Orrin sighed, drumming his long fingers on the table. He looked like he wanted to tell Virgil what was on his mind, but he sighed. "It's not my place to tell you. I'll speak with Claire later and ask her to clue you in. We weren't going to, we didn't want to drag you into it, but considering your desires to get this girl away, I may be able to change Claire's mind."

"What is it about?"

"Please do not question me, old friend."

Virgil frowned, feeling frustrated that he would have to wait to find out what was going on. But he respected his friend and heeded his request.

"I should get back." Virgil set the empty mug down and stood.

"Already? What if the clouds break?"

"I doubt they will anytime soon. It's still pouring outside."

Virgil headed for the door and Orrin followed, sighing softly behind him.

"If Claire comes back here, I'll send her back to you so she can help with her sister."

"Thanks, but...I don't think I can wait that long. I may have to do this on my own after all. We don't have much time."

Orrin frowned, looking as if he wanted to say more but was unable to find the right words. As Virgil opened the door and started leave, Orrin stopped him.

"Good luck, my friend. I hope this girl is worth it."

"She is," he replied without hesitating and then stepped onto the porch. The rain was still coming down in sheets. Pulling up the hood of the jacket over his head, Virgil made his way back to his own clan. He hid on the ferry as it took him back to Prudence Island and then walked the rest of the way back to the mansion.

His mind went back to being consumed by Aralyn on his walk home. He knew Aimeric would keep her alive a little longer—he wouldn't turn her until she knew to fear and respect him at all times. Her fear was still too new to leave a real imprint and carry on to her vampiric life. Aimeric had to make sure the fear was instilled, consuming her entirely, before he turned her. That's how he always did it. Virgil was one of the first members of Aimeric's clan; he had seen his cruel ways, his patterns, for nearly three hundred years.

But what if they did escape? What if Virgil could take Aralyn away? They would never be free. Aimeric would hunt

them and kill them as he had done so many others who had tried to escape his brutality.

They would have to run forever.

But it would be worth it if it meant her freedom and safety.

The reason he wanted Claire to help him was because he wouldn't have much time to get Aralyn out of the house and far enough away to be safe before Aimeric would start hunting them. He planned on taking her during the time when Aimeric would go out and feed. But since Aralyn had been there, Aimeric hadn't spent much time out at once. They would have maybe two hours at the most. He needed Claire to help by being a distraction. But now, he would have to think of a way to get her out on his own; he didn't think Claire would be back anytime soon.

Orrin was right about Aimeric: he was a disgrace even to vampire kind. No vampire was innocent. Most fed off humans, but only enough to survive and usually by donors or people the world didn't need anymore; rapists, murderers, child abusers. But Aimeric was close to being Satan himself. He killed for fun. He killed his own kind and clan members. And the humans. The torture chamber had never been empty in the two hundred and seventy one years Virgil had been with Aimeric. His maniacal ways as a human had multiplied tenfold upon his becoming a vampire; Aimeric was pure evil if such an oxymoron could be used to describe him.

Aimeric was a true Master. Not just because he was the leader of the rest, but because he was created by Satan. He had strengths average vampires could only dream of having. No other vampire could intrude on anyone's thoughts as Aimeric could, which he himself was even limited with stronger, older vampires like Virgil, but still....

Aimeric truly was invincible. The only thing that would stop him was the sunlight and even at that it wouldn't kill him. Cutting his head off wouldn't kill him, either.

Virgil wasn't weak by any means. Compared to mortals and other vampires. He himself ranked just below the

Masters, but against Aimeric...Virgil may as well be an insect under his boot.

“Well, well. Look who’s back.”

He had been so deep in his thoughts that he hadn’t realized he was back at the mansion. And there stood his bane: Aimeric was heavily cloaked to protect himself from the daylight, leaning against one of the columns that held up the second floor balcony.

“Relax. I only went for a walk.” Virgil casually climbed the five steps to the porch and headed for the double oak doors.

Aimeric smirked an evil smile. “You must have really needed it to risk the sun.” His voice was smooth. He knew Virgil was lying. “I wonder...what might have upset you so much?”

“Is she dead?” Virgil asked, his voice low and hard.

False enlightenment shone in Aimeric’s cold eyes. “Ah, so it is *my* Aralyn you’re so dreadfully upset about.” He straightened his back and gestured at the door, motioning for him to go inside.

Virgil stayed put and repeated through clenched teeth: “Is she dead?”

“She’s sleeping. Sadie and Mabel wore her out,” he replied cruelly, keeping the grin in place. He knew Virgil would be bothered by this.

Clenching his fists along with his teeth, Virgil shook his head. He had an idea what the girls had done. They were almost as malicious as Aimeric. Only Virgil and a few others had been able to escape most of Aimeric’s qualities during the transformation.

“I may not be able to read your thoughts anymore, Virgil, but I know what you’re thinking and if I were you, I would *re*-think them. You can not win against me.”

Virgil scowled but otherwise ignored him, taking a step into the dark house.

“Oh, and Virgil?”

He turned.

Dead Seed

“Aralyn belongs to me. If you cannot accept that, I will end your misery for you. Allow me to give you a taste of what you will receive if you touch her again.”

Two pairs of strong hands grabbed Virgil’s shoulders from behind.

“Take him downstairs.”

Chapter Eleven

Briefly Heaven

Painful screams entered her dreams. Someone's pitiable cries, as if they were slowly being killed. Blood curdling screams. The crack of a whip. Her eyelids twitched and her body stirred with each crack and then again with each scream. A moment of silence. Then a hideous scream, the worst of them yet.

Aralyn jumped awake from her sleep, sitting up in bed at the sound of the disturbance. There was a sharp pain above her navel but she ignored it. Heart thumping and her breath short, she realized she hadn't been dreaming. The screams were real.

"Good evening, my love." Aimeric sat up next to her, wrapping an arm around her shoulder and letting his hand dangle to rest over her left breast.

She was only wearing an oversized t-shirt that slipped down one of her shoulders. Aimeric leaned over and began pecking the flesh of the bare shoulder with icy lips.

This time she didn't cringe when he kissed her. Her whole attention was only focused on the alarming sounds coming into the bedroom through the air vent on the bottom part of the left wall. The screams echoed.

"Who is that?" she asked, her voice hoarse due to her dry throat. She had a bad feeling.

"Never mind," he said, now against her lips. He kissed her once, twice, and then said, "Come downstairs. I'm sure you're hungry. Thirsty, too; you've been asleep for three days now."

"What?" She looked at him in disbelief.

"You were quite weak. Apparently the girls drank too much." He chuckled into her hair.

Aralyn didn't laugh. The memory of what he had done—or rather, allowed to have happen to her—came back to her mind, making the blood boil in her veins.

“Come. You need to drink. I gave you what I could through a dropper, but it's not nearly enough. I'm sure you're dehydrated.”

He helped her stand and then steadied her when a wave of weakness came through, making her stumble. Once she was steady, he retrieved a robe to throw over her shoulders. He tied the belt for her, fastening the ends roughly so the action pulled her forward, making her collide with him. She braced her hands on his chest, looking up at him and trying to read his expression. Was he angry again already?

He stared down at her a moment, his hands around her waist, and then he moved her hair to the side, touching the new set of holes.

“I trust you have learned your lesson?”

She grimaced as his fingers stroked the wounds, making the scabs pull painfully on the clean skin.

“Yes...Master Aimeric.”

He grinned. “Good.”

He then kissed her deeply, as if the three days of deprivation had been too much for him and he needed to make up for lost time. Aralyn forced herself to kiss him back even though her stomach lurched as his tongue entered her mouth. She wanted to know what was going on, who was screaming in the basement, and thought it best to comply with Aimeric's wishes in order to find out. If he wanted a kiss she would give it to him.

Pulling back, he smiled and touched her bottom lip with his thumb.

“Good girl,” he said. “Now come.”

They went to the kitchen and she sat at the table while Aimeric went to the counter to chop and prepare various fruits. He set the fresh pieces on a serving plate as he cut them. Aralyn smelled the citrus juice of orange slices and the sweet scent of strawberries and her stomach started rumbling,

anxious to be fed. Her mouth watered. She hadn't realized how hungry she was until then. She went into an almost trancelike state as she watched him slice the fruit; bananas, pluots, and more in addition to the oranges and strawberries. He also set a small bundle of red grapes on the tray before setting it in front of her.

As she started eating, Aimeric went to the fridge and took out a pack of sliced honey ham, which he placed in front of her next to the tray. She took one of the slices, rolled it up, and ate it in three bites before going back to the fruit. The last thing Aimeric set in front of her was a tall glass of water.

He massaged the tense muscles in her back while she chewed, moving up to her shoulders and then her neck. She winced when he got too close to the bruised punctures and, hearing her soft whimper, he pulled her hair back to look at the wounds again. This time, instead of smirking, he let his hands fall down and he followed them until he was kneeling beside her.

She looked at him, still angry about how she received the wounds in the first place, but she was curious because his expression was different. Soft. It could be another trick. Any second he would start laughing and go back to being cruel.

"I can make the pain go away forever," he whispered.

She leaned back in her chair, turning her head to the side—away from his eyes.

"I need more time," she said quietly, hoping that would be enough for him for now. Of course she was lying; she didn't want to be turned into a vampire, but she wouldn't tell him that. Her mind went to Virgil and she remembered what he had said: *don't do anything drastic*. She hoped he was planning something...a way to escape. She wondered where he was and then, looking back at Aimeric, made her mind blank in case he was listening. The last thing she needed was for him to hear her thinking about Virgil; he would go into a fit of jealous rage.

If he had been listening, he gave no indication. He only smiled and kissed her one more time before standing.

“As you wish. I will be leaving for a while as I haven’t fed since you passed out.” He took her now empty glass and filled it with more cold water from the fridge.

What he said surprised her. She looked up at him, confused. “Why?”

“I was worried I had let them go too far so I stayed to watch over you.” His voice was nonchalant.

It seemed he had spoken a foreign language to her; she didn’t understand why he would have been worried. He was starting to look ashy, yet it hadn’t been a week since his last feeding. She wondered if it was different for Aimeric, if he had to feed more than once a week. He looked tired. Still, she didn’t feel sorry for him and after a second, she was sure the only reason he had stayed to watch over her was not because he was worried for her well being, but because he wanted to make sure no one touched his property while ‘it’ was unconscious.

Aimeric glared at her as he set the glass down on the table. Apparently he had been listening to her thoughts that time. Probably because she had been staring at him with a dumbfound expression.

She looked down at her plate. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

He shrugged as if he weren’t bothered. “You can’t help what you think, I suppose...at least not right now.”

Something in that last statement told Aralyn that it was a warning and that she had better try her hardest to control her thoughts.

“I have made it clear to everyone here that you are off limits, so unless something happens to me,” there was humor in his tone, thinking the idea was absurd, “you are safe. I want you to go upstairs when you are finished eating and rest some more; your mortal body is still healing.”

Aralyn nodded, bringing another slice of orange to her lips.

“I have ordered that Morgan watch over you and make sure you don’t try and...escape.” Taking her chin, Aimeric

looked down at her and smiled a warning, sardonic smile. "But that won't be a problem, will it, my love?"

"No," she said quietly.

"No?"

"Master Aimeric."

"I didn't think so." He kissed her once and then turned, headed for the living room. "Morgan! Get in here."

A few seconds later, the sniveling vampire bounced into the kitchen, smirking. Aralyn would have liked to slap it off his narrow face.

"I'm leaving now. Watch her." He started to leave but then paused when his hand touched the front door. "Oh, and Morgan?"

"Yes, Master?"

"Don't touch her." He opened the door, letting a fresh wave of cool air enter the stuffy house, and then disappeared into the dark.

Morgan turned to Aralyn after the door closed, looking disappointed at the last thing his master had said. Aralyn couldn't help but grin sarcastically like a child who had been favored by a parent. Glaring at her, Morgan sat down and watched her as she ate. It got annoying after the first minute.

"Can I help you with something?" she asked snidely.

"Nope."

She finished off the second glass of water before hurriedly eating the rest of the fruit and two more slices of ham while trying to ignore him. How strange it was to hate someone more than Aimeric, but she realized it was true; she now wished Morgan's death before Aimeric's.

Wanting to get away from him, she stood from the table, intending on going upstairs to the bedroom where he wouldn't have to follow her. But she stopped when the door to the basement opened and then slammed. A few seconds later a tall, bulky vampire came into the kitchen, helping a very bloody Virgil walk.

Aralyn gasped. “Oh my God, what happened to him?” It was a dumb question—she knew what happened to him, but it was the first thing she thought to say.

Virgil was shirtless and only wearing a pair of tattered pants that looked like the seams had been burned off. His torso was covered in blood from what looked like whip marks and he had several gouges in his arms and one on the side of his face.

“First of all,” the big man said. His voice was deep and intimidating, yet held a bit of stupidity. “I would refrain from using that name in this house or Aimeric will let you have it. He’s the only one allowed to use the word. Second of all—”

“Second of all: he’s been punished for kissing you!” Morgan fell into a fit of exaggerated, cruel laughter.

“I don’t like being interrupted,” the big one growled. He carelessly tossed Virgil to the floor and grabbed Morgan by the collar of his shirt, growling something else to him that Aralyn didn’t hear because she wasn’t paying any attention to them.

She rushed to Virgil’s side and knelt down, pulling his head into her lap. His eyes were halfway closed. The gouge on his face was under his left eye, a trail of sticky blood dripping from his jaw. It looked like that part of him had been burned, too. Aralyn felt sick looking at his wounds; there was so much blood.

“Virgil,” she said quietly, tears filming over her eyes. “Wake up.”

He groaned at the sound of her voice and opened his eyes. He lifted a weak hand to touch her cheek and chuckled softly.

“Don’t worry about me, love. I heal pretty quickly.”

“This is my fault,” she said, one of the tears spilling over.

“No. It’s partially Morgan’s fault,” he said, his voice bitter and then, softer, he added, “But mostly it’s mine. I knew he intended on taking you, I knew what his plans for you were, I should have stayed away. I’m so sorry.” He groaned again and

then looked into her violet eyes. "Are you okay? What did he do to you? He wouldn't tell me."

As if reacting to his question, Aralyn felt a sharp pain run through the wounds on her neck and stomach, but she shook her head, not wanting Virgil to worry about her.

"Nothing, really..."

He frowned, obviously not believing her, and opened his mouth to say something but Morgan cut him off.

"Hey, whore. What do you think you're doing?" He was standing next to the big vampire now that they had apparently worked out their problems. The big one had his bulky arms crossed over his barrel-like chest, glaring at Aralyn and Virgil.

"Don't call her that," Virgil said.

"Shut up," Morgan growled and then looked at Aralyn, waiting for a response.

"He's hurt and bleeding, I can't just leave him on the floor," she said, her tone hard and defensive. Fighting her own weakness, she used what little strength she had to pull Virgil from the floor and helped him sit in one of the chairs at the table.

"I'll tell Aimeric," Morgan said.

Aralyn was going through the drawers and cupboards, searching for a washcloth. She found an old rag in one of them and went to wet it under the kitchen faucet.

"Go ahead," she dared, though part of her was worried. But the other part, the part that was concerned for Virgil, was stronger.

"Don't worry, honey. It's not his blood," the big vampire said and then left the room, chuckling to himself.

Morgan exaggerated another laugh, leaning on the wall for support. "Not his blood'. Because we drink from humans, taking *their* blood, I get it." He let out a drawn out, laughing breath. "I'n't Wes a riot?"

Aralyn ignored him and took the cloth to Virgil, dabbing at the cuts on his chest. He took her hand, stopping her.

“Sweetheart, really. I’ll be fine. The bleeding’s already slowed down, look.”

She looked at the gashes on his chest and saw that he was right. The blood wasn’t coming out in large amounts anymore; he had already started to heal.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, looking into his eyes.

“Don’t be, I’m fine.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck, careful not to touch his wounds, and he kissed her cheek, securing his arms around her waist.

“Oh, well this is interesting,” Morgan said thoughtfully. “I’m sure Master Aimeric will love to hear this.”

Virgil glared at him over Aralyn’s shoulder right before she turned around. She had had enough of him. Morgan got under her skin like the head of a tick and all she wanted was to end his sniveling, childish, tattletale behavior. Her body reacted before her brain could stop her. She spun around, taking the knife Aimeric had used to cut up the fruit and plunged it into Morgan’s chest.

He looked surprised at first, as if he didn’t think she had it in her to do something like that. She surprised herself as well and stared at him, jaw partway dropped. Virgil took her arm in a protective gesture.

Morgan looked down at the wooden handle protruding from his dead heart and pulled it out slowly. It made a slurping noise as the metal slid from his skin, coming out bloody.

He smirked. “Nice try.”

She felt Virgil tug her arm. “Aralyn, come on, sit down.”

She did, slowly lowering herself into the chair and glaring at Morgan before turning back to Virgil.

“How do you feel?” she asked.

“Better.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I promise.”

“Are you hungry?”

“I’m fine, Aralyn.”

“Really? ‘Cause, no offense, but you don’t look it. I mean, if you’re hungry, I could...I mean you can...” she stuttered, not sure if she really wanted to do what she was offering.

“I know what you’re trying to say and the answer is ‘no.’ I am not going to drink from you.” His voice was stern, he almost sounded angry.

Morgan scoffed from behind her and mumbled something neither of them heard. Probably making mental notes on what to tell Aimeric and for a few seconds, Aralyn’s fear returned and she thought about the trouble they were going to be in. It was too late now; Morgan already had things to tell him. She would worry about it later.

“But if it will make you feel better-”

“No, Aralyn.”

She slumped down in her chair and he smiled.

“Thanks for the offer, love, but I could never drink from you, not just because I never would, but you’re too weak anyway. Plus, Aimeric would find out.”

“Hm, ‘love,’ I’ll be sure to write that one down, too,” Morgan said. “And I’m sure the Master would love to hear that you offered your blood to him even if he didn’t take it.”

Aralyn sucked in an angry breath, trying to calm herself.

“Just ignore him,” Virgil said softly.

“How?” She lowered her voice. “He’s going to tell Aimeric-”

“Of nothing. Nothing’s happened here, Aralyn. He can’t prove any of it.”

She got the feeling he was only saying that to make her feel better. When had Morgan had to prove anything before in order for Aimeric to take action?

Speaking of....

Aralyn looked at the digital clock on the microwave and saw it had been thirty minutes since Aimeric left. He could be back soon and would be annoyed to find she wasn’t resting. She stood from the table, taking her dishes to the sink.

“I have to go,” she said to Virgil. “Will you need help up the stairs?”

He shook his head. "I can walk on my own now."

"Okay." She hesitated, wishing she could kiss him. "Goodnight then."

"Goodnight, Aralyn."

She turned, shoving past Morgan and then went upstairs to Aimeric's bedroom. Morgan was at her heels.

She rounded on him. "Don't you have somewhere you could be?"

"The Master told me to keep an eye on you so that's what I'm doing," he said.

"You don't have to follow me into my bedroom!"

"This is Aimeric's bedroom. And yes, I do." He swiped a hand across his nose, sniffing indignantly.

Aralyn sighed, trying to think of a way she could escape him. The bathroom. She stomped inside and slammed the door in Morgan's face as he tried to enter behind her.

"What do you think you're doing?" he yelled through the door.

"I'm taking a bath! And I doubt Aimeric would want you to watch me do that!"

He pounded his fist on the door once and she jumped. "Don't try anything, wench! I'll be right out here!"

She didn't say anything else, glad that he wasn't going to try and force his way in. She turned on the water and let it fill the tub while she pulled the robe and shirt off. The teeth marks on her elbow were scabbed over now and the cuts on her arms were only scars. She checked her face in the mirror. The bruise under her eye had completely healed, leaving her face scar-less and clear once more. Her neck, however, was a mess. She pulled back her hair to get a better look and saw the two marks that were healing from Aimeric and then the two fresher ones from Mabel. The holes were still red and the wound had a purple bruise around it. The ones on her stomach were bruised, too.

She slid into the water, content at the privacy and the warmth of the liquid covering her. She relaxed for a few minutes before soaping up and washing her hair. Once she

was clean, she rinsed off and pulled the plug. As she wrapped a towel around her body, her eyes caught sight of a sharp blade in the cupboard where she got the towel.

It was a pair of scissors.

She took them out and held onto them thoughtfully, thinking of all that she had been through in the last couple of weeks—if it had even been that long; she wasn't sure exactly how long she had been in this hell.

They could be her escape. Aimeric wasn't here to stop her and Morgan wouldn't be able to do anything. All she had to do was swipe one of the crossing blades over her wrist....

"Hey! You need to hurry up in there!"

She glared at the door as if Morgan could see her and then she looked back at the scissors, her mind now going to Virgil. Maybe there was a reason to live, to be Aimeric's slave for just a little longer.

Sighing, she put them back in the cupboard, quickly dried off, and then put the robe on. She found a comb in a drawer next to the sink, rinsed it off with hot water (just in case—she didn't know who had used them last) and combed her wet hair.

When she went back out to the bedroom, she first saw Morgan, leaning against the bedpost with his arms crossed and his lips smirking.

"Did you enjoy your bath?"

"It got me away from you for a little while so, yes."

"I see." He eyed her, taking in the form of the black silk robe Aimeric had put on her earlier. It clung to her skin where she missed drops of water, hugging her hips and breasts, outlining her nipples. Her chest glistened in the dim light of the lamp.

He looked like he was having trouble controlling himself.

"You look....absolutely satisfying," he mumbled and pushed himself off the bedpost. His hand was outstretched. Aralyn stepped to the side.

"Aimeric said not to touch me," she sneered.

His fists clenched tightly, but he stopped, knowing she was right.

"I want to go to sleep so leave," Aralyn demanded.

"You can sleep with me in here, go ahead." He waved a hand towards the bed.

Her face contorted, eyes narrowing in a hateful glare. "Leave now," she said through clenched teeth.

He crossed his arms again and sneered, "Make me."

She lunged forward, grabbing a fistful of his shirt and pulling him towards the door. The very sight of him made her angry and uncomfortable. The looks he gave her, the perverted glare in his eyes made her feel like she was in constant danger. She doubted she had the strength to throw him out, but she had to try.

He caught her wrists and shoved her backwards.

"Enticing bitch!"

"I wasn't inviting you touch me, you piece of filth! I want you out now!"

Morgan chuckled, turning his back on her and straightening out the messy sheets on the bed.

"You are something else, you know that? Acting like you own this place. Honestly, I don't know why Aimeric keeps you around. You're just a stupid bitch."

The door opened and Morgan froze but Aralyn sighed a breath of relief.

"What the hell are you doing?" Virgil asked, glaring at Morgan. "I can hear you yelling from my room."

He was standing okay on his own now. The blood on his chest was gone and the wounds already scabbed over.

Morgan scoffed. "Go back to your room, rat."

"No. I don't trust you alone with her." He turned to Aralyn. "What's going on?"

She sighed. "I just want him to leave."

Virgil glared back at Morgan. "I don't see any harm with what she's asking."

"Aimeric said-"

"I know what he said. But I doubt he meant for you to watch her sleep."

"I'll be the judge of that." Morgan sneered and grabbed Aralyn's wrist, intending on forcing her onto the bed.

She grabbed a heavy candle holder off the dresser and used it to hit him in the back of the head at the same time that Virgil rushed the rest of the way into the room and punched his face. Morgan's fingers went limp around her wrist and the rest of him slid to the floor. Unconscious.

Aralyn looked at Virgil with wide eyes and he responded by frowning.

"This is bad," he then said.

"How did *that* knock him out? What a wuss."

Virgil shook his head. "I hit him pretty hard. I think it's my fault."

"Well, what are we going to do? If Aimeric comes back and sees him like this..."

"I know..." Virgil closed his eyes and rubbed his temples.

Aralyn waited, quietly biting her lower lip.

Finally, he said, "Wait here, I'll be back in a few minutes. If Aimeric comes back before I do, just tell him Morgan tried to touch you or something. That should clear your name at least."

She nodded and watched Virgil leave, closing the door behind him.

Several minutes later, the doorknob turned and she held her breath, hoping it wasn't Aimeric. She didn't want to run to him and cry 'rape'.

She exhaled when Virgil stumbled in, helping a human male walk. The man was one of the prisoners. He was mumbling words incoherently, his sentences slurred.

"What are you doing with him?" Aralyn asked.

"He's drunk." Virgil grunted and shifted the man's weight in his grasp, leading him towards Morgan.

"I see that, what are you going to do-" she gasped in mid-sentence, seeing two holes in the man's neck as Virgil lowered him to the floor.

“What...did you drink from him?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Aralyn, please don’t ask me questions right now. Help me with Morgan.”

Hesitating only a second, she went to Morgan and lifted him up while Virgil placed the drunken man under him.

“Hey...was going on?” the drunken man slurred.

“You might not want to watch, love,” Virgil said to Aralyn.

She nodded, letting Morgan drop and then turned around, having an idea of what he was about to do. She heard the man moan softly and couldn’t resist taking a peek over her shoulder. Virgil had made a slit in the man’s wrist and was now holding it over Morgan’s mouth. After a few drops of the blood fell onto Morgan’s lips, he began unconsciously sucking at it.

“Hey...are you doing...what?” the man slurred.

Aralyn scoffed in disgust. “Couldn’t you have at least knocked him out first?”

“He can barely feel it,” Virgil said.

She frowned, unsure, but saw that he was right. The man’s eyes were fluttering closed; he was almost passed out himself.

“So,” she hesitated. “What is your plan exactly? What are you doing?”

Morgan moaned in his sleep and began sucking harder.

“You’re not going to like it,” Virgil mumbled.

“Just tell me.”

“I gave him hard liquor-”

“He got drunk that fast?”

Virgil smirked. “You’d be surprised how quickly you can get drunk when your body is weak. And when you’re given the hard stuff. Anyway, I give his liquored up blood to Morgan and that will explain to Aimeric why he’s passed out and even if he’s not by the time Aimeric returns, he’ll be so

drunk that anything he says will go in one ear and out the other. Aimeric will be mad at him instead of you.”

“Do you really think he’ll fall for that?” Aralyn raised a skeptical eyebrow.

Virgil shrugged. “It’s all I could think of. And Morgan has been known to give the prisoners alcohol before and feed off them in order to get a buzz.”

That was a little more comforting but there was still something she didn’t understand.

“So, why did you have to drink from him first?”

“To make sure there was enough liquor in him.”

“How come you aren’t drunk?”

He smiled. “I only had a taste, not nearly enough.” His smile faded as he seemed to remember something. “Look away.”

“Why?”

“You’re full of questions tonight, love.” He smiled again. “I need to bite him a few times to make him look played with; that’s how Morgan feeds.”

Feeling her stomach churn, she regretted asking. Disgusted, she looked in the other direction and cringed when she heard Virgil’s fangs bite into the flesh in several different places.

“You can look now...Aralyn?”

She heard him but wasn’t able to turn her head again. The reality of the situation had just hit her now that it was finished.

“What’s wrong?” Virgil came up to stand behind her.

“I just...wish he didn’t have to die.” She felt very selfish. They had killed this man in order to avoid Aimeric’s temper. It wasn’t any different from what Aimeric himself would have done.

“Sweetheart, he would have been dead in no time anyway. Aimeric rarely keeps them very long and even if he would have, would you want him to suffer for that long? Trust me, this was the best way for him to die. It was fairly quick and he didn’t feel most of it.”

Aralyn nodded but she still felt guilty about it. Her heart jumped when Virgil put his arms around her, wrapping them around her waist and holding her back to his chest. Even against his cold body, she felt comforted and safe.

"I wish we could go somewhere. Be alone," she whispered, placing her hands over his, which rested against her stomach.

He took in a breath against her hair, taking in her scent. "Aralyn, I'm going to take you away from here."

Startled, she turned around in his arms, looking up at him with curious eyes.

"What?" she said, unsure that she heard him right. "How? When?"

"The next time Aimeric goes out. That's the decision I came to. I'm getting you away from him. I was going to take you away tonight but, for obvious reasons, it didn't happen. At his next feeding, though, we're leaving. I'm not waiting any longer and giving him the chance to do anything else to you."

She had to stop herself from screaming in excitement and jumping around the room. She threw her arms around his neck, hugging him tightly.

He laughed softly. "I'm glad you're happy about it."

"Of course I am."

"It's going to be risky. He'll follow us for a while..."

"I don't care. It's worth it if we can be together and get away from him."

He smiled down at her and she pushed herself up so she could touch her lips to his. He started to pull away at first, probably thinking of Aimeric, but then, unable to stop, he returned the kiss. She opened her mouth and their tongues touched. Tasting the metallic remnants of blood in his mouth, she reflexively started to pull away, but he was holding her tightly and started kissing her more passionately; she soon forgot the taste and melted into him. She felt intense heat spread through her body.

He must have felt the same way because he stopped kissing her and laid his forehead against hers.

"You have no idea how much I want you right now," he whispered.

She nodded slowly. "Yes, I do."

Her words were enough to convince him and he pressed his lips to hers again. She closed her eyes and felt like she was floating through space, like she was moving at an alarming speed. When she opened her eyes again, she saw it had been true.

"Where are we?" she asked.

The ceiling was low and slanted and pieces of old furniture were thrown around the room along with boxes filled with old, dirty items.

"The attic," Virgil said.

She smiled and he lowered his lips to her neck. Pain shot through her when he touched the wounds and she pulled away, wincing.

"What is it?" His eyes showed concern.

"It's um...nothing."

Knowing she was lying, he brushed her hair to the side and found the wounds from Mabel and Aimeric. Anger laced his words when he spoke.

"Is this the only one?"

"No," she whispered and held out her arm for him to see the marks on the folds of her elbow. His eyes raged at the sight of them and then again when she pulled the robe opening to the side just enough to show him the ones on her stomach.

Taking her back in his arms, he said, "I'm sorry I've waited so long to get you away from him."

"Don't be." She took in a deep breath, securing her arms around his waist. "At least you're trying."

He held her out in front of him and then ran his fingers through her hair, looking down at her with sincerity.

"If it hurts you too much right now, we can wait."

“No. I want you now,” she said, leaving out her thoughts that this could be their only chance to be together. If Aimeric caught them before they could get away, they could be dead. She needed to feel him now. She would worry about hiding the fact from Aimeric later.

He nodded and she saw a hint of relief in his eyes despite how he had said he was willing to wait. She pulled him down to her and they shared another passionate kiss and he gently slipped off her robe before pulling her to the floor.

It only lasted a short time. Both were afraid that Aimeric would be back at any moment and catch them, but when they finished, Aralyn was consumed with a sort of bliss she had never before felt. This was the way it was supposed to be; making love with the one you wanted to be with. Not being forced to, not having to hold back tears.

They lay in each other’s arms for only a minute or so after and then Virgil took them back to the bedroom.

“Remember, don’t think about it, okay?” Virgil said.

“I won’t.” She knew it would be hard not to think about their plans, but she also had the confidence she would be able to keep it from Aimeric because it was so very important to both her and Virgil.

“I love you,” he said, kissing her. “And I promise I’ll make love to you the right way when we’re far away from here.”

She smiled and they kissed once more before Virgil finally let her go and left the room, leaving Aralyn alone with Morgan and the corpse. She shuddered when she saw the body again as she went into the bathroom. She had to bathe once more to take Virgil’s scent off of her.

She washed and brushed her teeth quickly before heading back to bed, ignoring the morbid scene on the floor. As she started to crawl onto the mattress, the door opened and she went deathly pale.

Chapter Twelve

Death of the Undead

“**W**hat the hell happened in here?” Aimeric said as he eyed the mess on the floor.

A quick wave of panic rushed through Aralyn as she realized she and Virgil hadn’t come up with an explanation to cover up what really happened. She said the first thing that came to mind while blocking the real events so he couldn’t see into her mind.

“Um, I came out of the bathroom earlier and found him like this.”

He eyed her skeptically as he stepped the rest of the way into the room, softly closing the door behind him.

“How long had you been in the bathroom?”

Heart beating faster, she shrugged. “Half an hour, maybe? I took a bath.”

“I see that, your hair is still damp.” He paused, setting his mouth in a firm line. He was fearfully calm, his voice smooth. “How long have you been out of the bath?”

She swallowed, taking a soft breath. He was suspicious. Her nerves were in knots and her blood felt thin.

“Twenty minutes or so,” she said, hoping her voice wasn’t shaking. She couldn’t tell him she had just gotten out because he would wonder why her hair was mostly dry. And she definitely couldn’t tell him that she had taken a second bath. She held her breath and kept her mind blank, picturing a dark space.

He was taking slow steps, leisurely making his way towards her. His slow steps and calmness frightened her more than if he had come barreling into the room.

“Why are you just now getting into bed?”

“I almost got sick when I saw. I had to leave and only just now got the courage to come back in.”

“Where did you go?”

“Just out in the hall.” A lump had formed in the back of her throat. He was asking too many questions.

“Why do you seem so nervous?” He was only a few feet from her now.

“The...the blood,” she waved a trembling hand in the direction of the felled human. “It’s making me nauseous-” she gasped as Aimeric seized the upper part of her arms.

“You aren’t planning anything are you, Aralyn?” His upper lip pulled over his fangs, baring them as a warning.

“No, of course not,” she whispered, terrified and on the verge of tears.

His grip loosened but he still held her.

“Good. That’s very good, Aralyn. Because if you were, that would be extremely foolish. I don’t think I have to remind you of the consequences, do I?”

She shook her head and he eyed her coldly for a moment. She kept her mind clear of all that had happened that night, now picturing the garden in order to keep Virgil’s plan out of his reach.

He let her arms drop, releasing her, and she inwardly breathed a sigh of relief. He turned around to face the mess on the other side of the bed and she steadied herself by holding on to the post at the headboard. She watched him lean down and grab Morgan by the shirt, jerking him off the floor and growling a rude awakening:

“What the hell did you let happen here tonight, Morgan?”

The sniveling vampire’s eyes shot open and terror instantly spread across his face.

“I...what’s going on?” he asked.

Aralyn’s heart dropped as she realized he wasn’t drunk. How had the alcohol in the blood worn off already? Or had Virgil been wrong about how much he had given the man?

“*What’s going on?*” Aimeric mocked. He threw Morgan back to the floor. “You decided to have a little snack on duty and passed out!”

Morgan stood on shaky legs and pointed a finger at Aralyn. "No, she hit me!"

Aimeric smirked at her over his shoulder before turning back to Morgan. "I doubt that."

"She did! And so did-"

"He tried to force me into bed," Aralyn interrupted before Morgan could get Virgil's name out. She wasn't technically lying. But she knew Aimeric would assume she meant Morgan had forced her sexually. Aimeric would be too angry to listen to what he had to say now, she was sure of it.

Just as she thought, Aimeric's head whipped around to face her and she started at the fierce look in his eyes. Absolutely terrifying. She gripped the post tighter. Was he angry with Morgan or did he think she was lying?

"I was only-" Morgan started to say.

Aimeric turned his anger on him. "Silence! I told you not to touch her."

"But Master-"

The back of Aimeric's hand collided with his cheek, cutting him off and knocking him to the floor. He cowered there, holding a hand to the bruised side of his face.

"Get out of here and take this *thing* with you." He kicked the body towards him and Morgan stumbled to pick it up, glancing at Aralyn as he did so, but not daring to glare at her. "And don't go far, Morgan. I'll be dealing with you soon."

Morgan's face dropped, terror once again clouded over his eyes, but he only nodded and scooted out of the room, half carrying, half dragging the body with him. The door closed and Aralyn just stood there, unsure of what to do or say now.

"Come here," Aimeric commanded.

She obeyed and, on shaky legs, went to stand in front of him, avoiding his eyes. Her insides felt like they were ripping apart. She jumped slightly when he touched her cheek, turning her head from side to side and then moving her hair to examine her neck. He didn't say anything as he untied the robe and slid it from her body. This time it wasn't sexual. He

was looking her over, searching for blemishes. He was surprisingly gentle.

“Did he do anything?” Anger laced his words, but not directed at her.

“No,” she said quietly.

He took one of her arms and brought it to his lips, kissing the soft flesh while drawing her body against his. She watched him and they held one another’s eyes as he kissed up towards her neck. He seemed to be also breathing in the scent of her blood and for a moment she thought she saw his blue eyes turn red with rage, but it only lasted a second. It must have been her imagination because he stopped kissing her arm and smiled.

“You appear to be okay.”

“Yes.” She swallowed again, trying to keep Virgil and what they had done out of her thoughts.

He leaned down and kissed her mouth, moving his lips urgently against hers. Her stomach sickened at the quick thought of making love with Virgil and then being forced to lay with Aimeric such a short time after. She pushed gently at his chest as his lips started to move to her throat.

“Not now, please. I’m tired,” she said softly, daring his temper. At least that wasn’t a lie. She was exhausted.

There was that fire in his eyes again but, as before, it only lasted a second.

“Very well. Get into bed.”

She nodded, grateful he wasn’t angry with her. He helped her climb into bed and pulled the sheets up around her. She laid her head on the pillow and he settled next to her, securing an arm over her middle and grasping one of her hands that lay on the pillow. He kissed her cheek and then her shoulder.

“Just...go to sleep now, my love.” There might have been malice in his tone, but she was too tired to notice. Her eyes were all of a sudden heavy and sleep was the only thing on her mind. She closed her eyes and drifted off into her own world. Away from Aimeric. Safe with Virgil.

* * *

A cold chill woke Aralyn up a few hours later. Her body was trembling and small bumps had risen on the skin of her arms and legs. Aimeric was no longer beside her and the sheets had been kicked off. She didn't care that Aimeric wasn't there, but she wanted her covers back so she sat up, pulling the sheets and the thick comforter with her. As her head hit the pillow again, she heard the familiar sound of painful groaning. Once again it came from the vent in the wall. She thought it might be Morgan, remembering Aimeric's promise to deal with him later. At first, it didn't bother her that he was being punished. He would deserve it. But the groaning became more and more frequent and she started to feel guilty. She imagined the things that were being done to him and it made her shiver, the cold having nothing to do with it.

Maybe she should go down and convince Aimeric that Morgan had been punished enough. Not in those words, of course—she would have to think of something else so he wouldn't get angry with her.

She thought about it for a few more minutes as her body warmed under the covers, making sure she really wanted to go down and intercede. Hearing a scream through gritted teeth, she finally decided to go down. If Aimeric got angry that she was out of bed, she could say she was just curious as to where he had gone and went to find him.

She put the robe back on and descended the stairs, going into the basement. Luckily it was near sunrise and most of the vampires had returned for the day, asleep in their rooms, so she didn't have to worry about running into anyone that would hassle her. Not that they would so willingly go against Aimeric, but without him at her side, they might make snide remarks that she wasn't in the mood for.

She snuck down the stone steps and followed the corridor to the prison. The torch on the wall was lit, revealing a bloody figure chained to the wall. Aralyn gasped and ran inside.

“Virgil!”

A strong hand yanked her back by the wrist as she flew by and then she was enshrouded in his icy arms. He held her tightly, locking her against his chest.

“Good morning, my love,” Aimeric sneered against her ear.

Wes stepped out of the shadows near the cages, a sardonic grin on his large face. Morgan slithered out opposite of Wes.

“What did that son of a bitch tell you?” Aralyn gasped, glaring at Morgan.

“He didn’t have to tell me anything. Do you think I couldn’t smell him all over you, you fucking whore?” Aimeric said.

Virgil struggled to raise his head. “Leave her alone.”

He was covered in fresh wounds, blood dripping from every part of his body which was only covered by a pair of boxers.

“I’ll tell you when you can speak,” Aimeric growled to him and then nodded once at Wes.

The big vampire returned the nod and then slapped a whip across Virgil’s neck. Virgil yelled through gritted teeth, the muscles in his arms flexing as he tensed. Salty tears streamed down Aralyn’s face.

“Not to mention,” Aimeric continued. “That little setup of yours was pathetic. Morgan’s scent wasn’t anywhere on that human, only Virgil’s was. That got me suspicious anyway and then I smelled *him* on you. Apparently you weren’t careful enough when you bathed for a second time,” he added, his voice dry. “I almost went crazy right there but then I decided I would have a little fun with both of you first, make you think you got away with it.”

“Don’t hurt her, it wasn’t her fault. I am responsible for everything,” Virgil interrupted, his voice strained.

It was obvious in the way his face was contorted that it hurt him to even speak. Seeing him this way brought pain to Aralyn. She should have just insisted Virgil leave and let Aimeric come home and tell him the truth of what happened.

She should have told Virgil they could wait to make love. This was all her fault. She felt sick just looking at Virgil; she couldn't even imagine the pain he was in.

Aimeric forced her to walk forward, coming to a stop directly in front of Virgil. He raised his head again and mustered all the strength he had to glare at Aimeric.

"Do you honestly believe I would harm this beautiful flesh?" Aimeric ran his hands across her cheek, throat, and down to her arms.

Virgil sneered through the blood on his face, jerking the chains as far as they would go, which was only a few inches. Aralyn tried to shake off Aimeric's hands, but he only put them back around her shoulders and waist, keeping her in place.

"I may be able to forgive Aralyn for this; she's only a weak human. But you, Virgil. *You* have been trying to manipulate me the whole time she's been here. I've been generous up to this point, letting you get away with it with minimal repercussion, but not now. This is the last time you try and take her away from me."

"You don't deserve her," Virgil growled. "Look what you've done to her before and what you're doing now!"

"Virgil, no," she whispered, shaking her head. Both men ignored her, though.

"You're in no position to reprimand me," Aimeric said. He stepped backwards, walking with Aralyn, and then, keeping his eyes on Virgil said, "Wes?"

"Yeah?"

Aralyn could hear the smirk in Aimeric's voice when he gave the command:

"Do your worst."

"My pleasure." Wes went to stand in front of Virgil.

"No." Aralyn struggled to get free as if she might be able to stop him.

"You're not going anywhere." Aimeric tightened his arms around her. It was painful, she felt like he might crack the

bones in her arms if he squeezed her any tighter. She was having trouble breathing.

“Master, I want to do something,” Morgan said with a gleeful tone.

“Get out of here, Morgan. I don’t need you down here anymore.”

Looking hurt, he hung his head and shuffled out of the room.

“I want you to watch closely, Aralyn,” Aimeric said against her cheek. “I want you to watch this and then ask yourself if it was worth it to allow another man to fuck you. And then I want you to remember it if you ever feel so inclined to be fucked by anyone other than me again.”

Momentarily, she lost her fear, thinking this was the worst thing Aimeric could do. She didn’t think he could get angrier than he already was.

“He didn’t fuck me,” she said bravely through her tears. “*We* made love, which is something you and I will never do.”

He yanked her backwards, knocking her further into his chest and kicking the air from her lungs. She gasped loudly and then grit her teeth against the pain brought to her ribs.

“If you ever say anything like that to me again I will make you regret your words,” he sneered. Then, raising his head to look at Wes, he said, “What’s taking so damn long? Strike him!”

Wes had been watching Aimeric as if he thought he would give him a new command. He now nodded and began sending the whip through the air with a loud crack. He hit Virgil once. Twice. Over and over. His chest, his legs, his arms, his face. It tore out bits of his flesh, sending the bloody pieces flying through the air. With each hit, Virgil yelled and Aralyn’s tears fell harder. She was sobbing so hard now that she almost choked a few times.

“Are you memorizing it?” Aimeric said cruelly. “Are you burning this image into your mind? Close your eyes.” He took a deep breath. “Remember the screaming. Remember the smell of the blood, my love.”

If he hadn't have been holding on to her so tightly, she would have slid to the floor due to the weakness in her legs. She felt like she would throw up at any moment. She tried to cover her eyes but Aimeric held her hands down and held her head in place so she was forced to watch. After only a few moments, Virgil was so covered in blood that he was unrecognizable. His dark hair was stuck to his face, matted in the sticky blood.

Wes put the whip down but he wasn't finished. He took the fire poker and held the tip of it in the flame of the torch for several seconds and then touched it to Virgil's legs in a few places before stabbing his arms. Virgil's screams were shrill and sickening. She tried again to break free from Aimeric so she could help him, but it did her no good. Aimeric was too strong for her and laughed at her attempts.

"Stop it! Please let him go!" she said.

Some of the prisoners had been watching, probably thrilled to see a vampire going through what they had, but now, they too looked sick and most of them had turned away, covering their eyes and ears.

When Wes finished with the poker he took a small container from the table and picked out several sewing pins. He inserted them underneath Virgil's fingernails. It seemed he had run out of screams because all he was doing now was whimpering and groaning.

Aimeric finally allowed Aralyn to sink to her knees, falling to the floor with her as she sobbed into the curve of his arm that was loosely around her neck. His other arm still constricted her middle.

"Please...stop," she repeated, her voice small and weak.

"I could go on with him forever, Aralyn. He can't die from these wounds. If you want his suffering to end, you must promise to be mine forever. *Only* mine...and you must agree to become one of us."

"I promise! Just let him go, please," she whimpered without hesitation.

“A promise to me is unbreakable. If you even attempt to break it, you will be punished severely.”

“I know...” Her heart sank even further than it already had. She didn’t want to be a vampire; she didn’t want to belong to Aimeric. But she would do anything to save Virgil.

“You heard her, Wes; end his suffering.”

Hearing the malevolence in Aimeric’s voice, Aralyn raised her head to see Wes taking an axe off the floor in the corner of the prison, next to the iron maiden. Fear once more engulfed her, rolling over her head like a wave and crashing into the pit of her stomach. She knew what was to be done.

She had been tricked.

Using all the strength she had left in her, she tried to stand, her legs straining with the effort. The muscles in her calves burned from the restraint. She shook her shoulders violently, trying to break free from Aimeric.

“No!” she screamed.

Aimeric kept her on the floor, crushing her back against his chest. She could only stare at Virgil with wide eyes. Knowing what was about to happen, he used the last bit of his strength to raise his head and look as deeply into her eyes as he could.

I love you. He mouthed the words right before the axe was swung. His head was sliced off his neck in one sweep.

Aralyn was paralyzed. Shock and disgust and fear rushed through her as she watched his severed head fall to the floor. As if he had just been charred, his body and head dried out, curling up into a ball, and turned to dust within only a minute or two.

She panted her breaths. Quick gasps that shook with tears. She was still in disbelief and unable to tear her eyes away from the spot where his head had been.

Aimeric began chuckling, followed by Wes. The sound of their cruel laughter woke her up and she realized Aimeric’s arms had gone slack around her. She shoved back at him as hard as she could and this time was able to break free. She ran as fast as she could, up the stairs, through the living room

and to the front door. She yanked on the knob and opened it only a crack before it slammed shut.

Aimeric grabbed her arm, his fingers digging into the bone painfully.

“Breaking your promise already?”

“Get away from me, you sick son of a bitch!” She pulled back, trying to jerk her arm free.

“Didn’t I warn you? How many times will it take!”

She let her other arm fall behind her back while he yelled. She reached backwards, blindly grasping for the door. Her fingers ran along the wood and, finally, she found the knob again. Kicking at Aimeric, she flung the door open, allowing the rising sun to enter the mansion. It seared Aimeric’s vision.

He yelled, dropping her arm and bringing his arm up to cover his eyes.

Not waiting a second longer, Aralyn turned and ran outside into the welcoming arms of the sun, leaving Aimeric far behind her. Leaving the mansion. Leaving hell.

Chapter Thirteen

Through Her Eyes

Face contorted, eyes burning with fury, Aimeric kicked the door shut to block the damnable rays of the sun. The windows closest to the door rattled in their frames with how hard he slammed it. His blood burned, a drastic change to the usual chill.

Not that she would get away. No, she wouldn't get far. She may think she had escaped but she was in for a surprise. He would hunt her. He would revel in the scent of her fear. And she would pay. The things he had done to her thus far would seem like paradise compared to what her punishment would be when he brought her back. He had warned her.

"What are you going to do, Master?" Morgan asked from the kitchen doorway. The look in his eyes was one of concern.

"I can't do anything right now, can I?" Aimeric snapped and then mumbled, "Cursed sun."

"Should I have the others get ready for a hunt tonight?"

"No. I will handle her." He started for the stairs, headed for his bedroom. "I need to concentrate. Make sure no one disturbs me, Morgan, or I will make *you* pay for it. And bring me one of the prisoners! A healthy one."

"Yes, Master."

* * *

Finally, she was free. Tears streamed down her face; half grief, half relief. She looked up at the sun, silently thanking it for lighting the sky on fire. It was chilly in the early morning air. Dew drops sparkled on the grass and there was a bit of fog hanging in the atmosphere that hadn't burned off yet.

Aimeric couldn't follow her this time. He feared the sun, she knew that. If he followed her, he might be killed. That was what she assumed would happen anyway; she didn't know what the sun did exactly, but she knew the vampires avoided it.

Once again she was barefoot, running literally for her life. But this time she could see. There was a long winding driveway made of gravel. She took that path, grimacing at the pain the tiny pebbles inflicted on the bottom of her feet, but otherwise ignoring it. The drive seemed to go on forever, descending a hill. It must have been near a quarter of a mile long but she finally reached the main road. Pausing for only a second, she brushed her feet off, clearing away the smaller pieces of rock that clung to her heels before she continued down the road, heading north. There weren't any other buildings in sight; the area was only densely populated with trees.

She was still wearing the robe. Her fingers and toes numbed after a while, but she kept going. She would rather freeze to death than return to the mansion. Tears still rolled down her cheeks, her mind repeating the scene of Virgil's death.

After twenty minutes or so an old farm truck approached, the engine rattling noisily. The driver was an elderly man who stopped and rolled down his window to ask her if she needed a ride somewhere. She declined his offer, deciding it best to ward off strangers for a while due to her most recent experiences. Aimeric wouldn't be hunting her until that night; she still had the whole day to escape on her own.

However, she did talk to the man for a few minutes in order to find out exactly where she was. She discovered she was on the north part of the island, in the "tail." And she needed to be headed southeast to the ferry to Bristol. She also discovered that there was virtually nothing on the island save but a few houses—most of which were summer homes and unoccupied—and a general store and gift shop.

The man seemed concerned, frowning at the only scrap of clothing she had on, and asked again if she was sure she didn't need a ride to the ferry. Once more, she refused.

"Well, here. At least take this, I insist." The man struggled out of the coat he was wearing and handed it out through the window.

"Oh no, I couldn't." She shook her head.

The man made a "pushk" sound, brushing off her concerns. "I've got three more at home, don't worry about it."

She took the coat, thanking him, and he drove away. She saw him glance back at her several times in the rearview mirror, the same concerned look in his eyes.

The coat smelled like dust and cigarette smoke but she was grateful for it. She put it on around her quivering shoulders and then turned around, headed south to the ferry. As she passed the drive that led to the mansion, she ran by as quickly as she could.

* * *

Aimeric was sitting on the floor of his room with his legs crossed. A few candles were lit on the floor in front of him. He needed the dancing flames as a point of focus; a way to help him concentrate. He needed absolute silence for what he was about to do. Aralyn would probably do something stupid, try and kill herself again. He had to make sure she wouldn't accomplish this.

Cold, hard eyes stared into the flames. His lips were tight, jaw clenched.

Soft whimpering at the other end of the room caught his ears and he frowned, brow furrowing in anger.

"Shut up or I'll make you suffer before I kill you," he said through his frown to the person in the corner. A male, about twenty or so. Strong body, healthy. His hands and legs were bound and he was blindfolded and gagged.

The man fell into silence, leaning against the wall. He knew Aimeric would keep his word and feared it. He must have given up on living anyway.

Aimeric went back to concentrating. He pictured Aralyn as he had last seen her; raven hair mussed, tear streaked face, pale arms and legs quivering underneath the thin robe.

He found her. She was wandering along the main road that led to the ferry. Scared. Alone. But she was now wearing a coat. She hugged herself tightly. Insecure. Her face was still wet and her mind was on that pathetic being that was now a pile of dust, Virgil. Another rush of intense anger made its way through Aimeric's cold blood, but he forced it away. He needed to be calm in order to keep her in sight.

Her mind went to her father back on the mainland. She wondered how he was doing, if he had started drinking even more since her sudden and mysterious disappearance. Then back to Virgil. Aimeric's fists clenched and then relaxed.

He followed her for over an hour without much strain on his mind and body since all he was doing was watching. The ocean was nearby, the waves crashing against the cliffs and the shores. She looked out across the water and Aimeric felt her longing. Death. She craved it. Now her mind went to her sister. Claire—Aimeric's most recent creation. Where was she? Aralyn wondered. Did Claire even care about her?

She thought about jumping into the waiting arms of the ocean then and there but something changed her mind. She saw the ferry.

"It won't save you," he whispered.

He saw her stop, felt her heart palpitate, and grinned to himself when she turned in half circles, searching all around her. Her eyes were wide with horror at the sound of his voice. She started to run, running for her destination, and he heard her thoughts:

Oh God, how can he be here? It's still daylight.

He grinned again. She kept running.

By the time she reached the ferry, she was out of breath and had to stop to catch it before talking to the man in charge

of running it. The man looked at her, confused since all he could see on her was the coat. He looked at her as though she were an insect.

“When does the ferry leave?” she panted.

“About ten minutes,” he mumbled, still looking disgusted.

Her heart leapt; a ray of hope. “I need on, please.”

“Costs \$6.50.”

She hadn’t thought about costs. She didn’t have even a penny on her. The ray of hope quickly turned grim.

“Please, I have to get off of this island.”

“You don’t got no money?” he looked at her again in revulsion.

“No, but it’s an emergency.”

“No money, no ride.”

“Please! I *have* to get off this island!” she repeated, her beautiful, violet eyes welling again.

He leaned down so they were face to face and formed his words slowly as if talking to a child.

“Unless you got money, you’re not gettin’ to the mainland.” He straightened up and crossed his arms. “I don’t work for free and I won’t ask my men to neither.”

Aralyn’s body tensed and she growled in frustration, throwing up her arms as she pivoted. There was more, though. She was afraid. There was only about nine hours left of daylight. It hadn’t been a problem for her before; she thought she could get off the island in time. He heard in her thoughts her concern in escaping the horrid piece of land. If this prick wouldn’t let her ride the ferry without paying, what were her alternatives?

As she left, she caught a glance of the schedule. The next time the ferry would leave was at four in the afternoon. She could come back and try and sneak on. But what if her plan failed? There weren’t many places to hide and she was pretty sure she would be noticed since all she was wearing was a coat.

He would come for her, she thought. He smirked. Her fear was intoxicating, like a breath of fresh air to his dead lungs.

She would do it if he didn't stop her. Her fear of him finding her again was so great that she made herself ready. Running. She made her way to where the cliffs were. This was what he had been prepared for; he knew she would come to this decision sooner or later.

"Come to me, Aralyn." He spoke softly.

Again, she paused and her head whipped from side to side.

"Leave me alone!" She screamed it to the sky since she couldn't see him; she now knew he wasn't physically near her. She continued running.

"Get away from the cliff!" Aimeric ordered in a roaring voice.

She didn't stop. The edge was coming closer; she was prepared to fly off without hesitation.

"I'll kill your father."

That stopped her. She paused, waiting, listening, and Aimeric continued:

"I'll kill him. But I'll keep him alive for a very long time, first. Barely. I'll make him suffer worse than you can imagine. Do you really want to be responsible for that? And after him I'll hunt children, I'll bring them back here and keep them in the cages. Would you condemn such innocent lives to torture, my love?"

All strength left her. She sank to her knees, crying into her hands, knowing she was defeated once more. Of course she wouldn't allow that to happen—to her father or innocent children. She knew he wasn't bluffing, she knew he would do all he promised. Her sobs shook her entire body. She gave up, falling the rest of the way to the ground and lying in the grass, curled into a ball.

"Get up."

"I can't," she whispered into the cool blades of the grass.

“You must return. You’ll freeze in what you’re wearing now.”

“Why can’t you just leave me alone?” Her voice was broken, words coming out in sobs.

“Come back to me, Aralyn. If you come back on your own your punishment will be mild.”

“No,” she said through ground teeth.

“You hate me now, but you’ll soon love me. I will make you *think* you love me until you actually do if I have to.”

She closed her eyes, grasping a handful of grass between her fingers. “Why are you doing this to me?”

“You’re the one, Aralyn. You belong to me...and you cannot escape.”

* * *

She woke up several hours later having drifted off to sleep. Her persistent tears and all that she had been through had exhausted her. Aimeric hadn’t tried to speak with her again since he stopped her from jumping, or if he had, she hadn’t heard him; too deep in sleep.

She woke up with a headache and her eyes were dry. Her throat was sore, too. She needed water and food, but she was at a loss. She didn’t have any money. If only she could get back to the mainland she could convince her father to leave and get far away from here. Maybe go west to the other side of the country.

Deep inside, she knew that was impossible. If Aimeric would threaten to torture children for her killing herself, he would probably do the same if she ran away that far. If not, then he would hunt her and eventually find her again. What could she do?

When she stood, a wave of nausea rolled through her stomach. She was starving and without any way to get food. It didn’t matter, though, did it? She made her way back to the ferry, not sure why. Maybe she would go ahead and try and sneak on and then decide from there what to do.

It took her several minutes to make it back to the docks. When she did, her heart sank. It was already loaded and pulling out. The next one wouldn't leave until six-thirty. That would be too late. The sun was already near sinking, it would be sunset in less than an hour.

She felt suffocated. Her lungs squeezed painfully with each breath she took. She was literally trapped. Once more, she would be seized by him. There was nothing she could do. She had no way out. Confined to this island. Confined to Aimeric.

All hope, all happiness, everything good she had ever experienced, was taken from her.

* * *

As the sun started to sink into the trees Aimeric let go of her. She was too afraid now to try anything, too scared he was still watching; she knew she was trapped.

He felt weak, but he expected that. Going into Aralyn's mind and following her all day, especially at such a distance, had drained him of most of his energy. This kind of task left him vulnerable, which was why he rarely did it. But it had been necessary with her. She would be dead now if he hadn't have stopped her. His cheeks were sunken, his lips almost white, and his eyes were dark. He barely had the energy to stand, but he managed.

He needed replenished.

Stumbling to the corner, he struggled to lift the bound man to his feet. With the wall helping to hold up the whimpering man, Aimeric didn't waste a moment in sinking his fangs into the jugular, drawing the blood out of the victim's neck at a fast rate. With each mouthful his strength returned and his cheeks filled out. It happened so fast the man didn't get a chance to struggle.

Once the human was dead Aimeric threw him to the floor. He would send Morgan to clean up the mess on his way out.

The temperature outside was falling with the sun. When Aimeric opened the door, he was welcomed by a cold gust of wind and a cloud bank on the horizon. There was a storm moving in. It would make the chase all the more interesting.

Now that the red disc in the sky had sunk below the level of the eye, the sky was an ash rose color. Some of the other vampires were awake and followed Aimeric out the door. It was feeding time for most of them. Because of the low number of people living on the island, they went to the mainland to hunt. The ones that left early would sneak onto the last ferry of the evening, moving so quickly and hiding that the attendant would only think they were a stray breeze. The late risers would take the old bayliner kept at Aimeric's boathouse not far from the mansion.

He considered the possibility that Aralyn would be back at the ferry so he warned the others to leave her alone if they saw her, that she was his to deal with. He thought she might panic and decide to try and leave the island one more time. Not that he blamed her. But even at that, she still wouldn't be let off easily.

He picked up her invigorating scent right away; that voluptuous combination of her honey-sweet blood and the smell of her fear he had become obsessed with. That was the funny thing about an obsession: the object's natural scent became all the more alluring, even if it hadn't been so strong before.

And she was his.

He grinned to himself. Oh how lucky she had been to survive the car crash. And how lucky was he that he had been in the vicinity of the crash and smelled the blood of the three victims that night? Had Aralyn's mother not wrecked the car, he might never have known Aralyn. He might never have been able to smell her. Hold her. Kiss and touch her milky, beautiful skin.

Virgil had brainwashed her. Aimeric knew Aralyn didn't really love Virgil. He had taken advantage of her during her time of confusion. Of course the sudden change of life would

be hard on anyone. But Aimeric had known she would adjust in time; she would learn to love and respect him, and be happy with him. But Virgil had almost ruined it with his sympathetic facade. It was a good thing Aimeric had taken care of him before it was too late. Before he could really take Aralyn away.

Her scent turned north but he knew not to go that way. She hadn't known where she was or where to go when she first started out; she wouldn't be there now.

He went southeast, following the trail at a speed incomprehensible to humans until he reached the ferry.

She wasn't there. But the air was heavy with her scent. Fresh. She had only recently left. Aimeric's eyes fluttered a little as he breathed her in for a second before continuing down the new trail. It was almost completely dark now; there was only a hint of gray light left in the sky and the clouds seemed larger, engulfing the small land mass.

The trees rushed by him as an autumn-colored blur. She wasn't far ahead. Her blood was rich with fear, her stunning heart was pounding erratically against her breast. Provocative. Sensual. His own blood heated in anticipation at having her again. In his grasp. Under his control.

Intoxicating.

Her scent stopped at an old house that had been abandoned until summer. More specifically, she was in the garage behind it. Huddling in the northwest corner of the shack. Her arms were wrapped tightly around herself and he was close enough to her now that he could hear her thoughts on his own.

She was terrified.

Good.

Aimeric crept up behind the building, stealthy as a feline hunting its prey.

Chapter Fourteen

Whisper in the Shadows

Her whole body was tense. The cement floor beneath her was freezing, the chill seeping through the coat and the robe. Her eyes were dry now, almost painfully so. She had kept the tears at bay so she could better see and be prepared for him. Deep inside, she knew this cat and mouse game was only delaying her suffering. She knew she couldn't hide from him for long. And yet there was an overwhelming desire to keep hidden for as long as possible; survival instincts forced her to stay unseen and not surrender.

She was scared though. More so than she had ever been because now she knew what the consequences would be for her disobedience. She knew Aimeric now. What he was like, what he was capable of. His only reason for walking among the living was to torture and make miserable the lives around him.

Her heart betrayed her; he could probably already hear it pulsing at twice—or even three times—its normal speed. She imagined him lurking in the darkness, sniffing the ground and the trees like a bloodthirsty animal. Searching for her. Hunting.

As if on Aimeric's side and desiring to bring terror, the wind came up and played with the nearby tree branches, acting as a puppet master with the trees as its dolls. It pulled invisible strings and guided the trees to claw the side of the garage with their bony fingers. They scratched at the one small window on the eastern wall. The wind howled over the creaky roof.

She had been lucky to find this shelter. After fleeing the ferry, she came across the old Victorian house with the garage behind it. She had first tried knocking on the door of the house but no one was home and the windows and doors were

all locked. She then ran around to the garage and found it was out-of-date with an old door that slid open and was secured with a padlock. Out of breath and fingers trembling, she had searched all around the building, looking under bricks and plant pots for a spare key. She then found it under a large rock in the garden on the side of the garage, relief spreading through her for only a second. She had run inside the building and shut the door, scrambling to the northwestern corner and huddling against the wall with her knees brought up to her chest and her chin resting on them.

Now she sat in mostly darkness. Only a small bit of light came through the window from the moon that wasn't yet blanketed by the oncoming storm.

She clenched her teeth to keep them from chattering. It took all the willpower she had to steady her breaths that fought to come out in terrified gasps.

At the sound of the wind, her heart beat even faster. Her fingers clutched at the flannel over her knees. The old man's coat had helped keep some of the cold off her but she still trembled. Part of that was fear though.

The large door was closed but it had been impossible for her to lock it from the inside. She kept her eyes on it, wide and searching. It seemed to open a little and she held her breath. It must have just been the wind because it didn't move any more.

Something out of the corner of her eye caught her attention. She moved her head half an inch to the left, to the window, and had to cover her mouth to stop a loud gasp from escaping. She ducked back and pressed herself against the wall, hoping the heavy shelf hanging above would help to conceal her.

Outside stood a silhouette. She could tell by the long hair and the way he carried himself with arrogance that it was Aimeric. He had his back to her, sniffing the air. If he turned around and peered in through the window he would surely see her.

There was an attic in the garage and the ladder leading up to it was only a few feet from her.

Should she risk it? What would be the greater risk? To stay there and hope he wouldn't turn around or risk the thirty seconds it would take to get out of his sight before he could turn?

Coming to a quick decision, she scrambled on her hands and knees to the ladder. She was quiet, not breathing, and careful not to hit any of the tools or other accessories housed by the garage.

The ladder was nailed to the wall about three feet from the floor and had only seven steps. Without glancing over her shoulder, Aralyn climbed the ladder with silent haste. The entry to the attic was only a hole cut in the floor. It was difficult, but she managed to pull herself up and slide the rest of the way onto the second floor. It smelled of damp wood and mold. The air was also thick with the scent of distant rain. It was even darker up here than the lower level. As her eyes adjusted, she could barely make out the shapes of falling apart boxes and old paint cans beneath a slanting ceiling.

She scooted away from the square cutout in the floor and then rose to stand. She tiptoed across the floor, walking backwards so she could keep watch on the entrance.

It was only a second later that she felt the air grow colder on the left side of her face. Cold fingers touched her hair and then ran down her cheek. She jumped, feeling the tiny hairs on the back of her neck rise. Her heart accelerated once more. She started to run, but he grabbed her from behind, pulling her hard against his cold chest.

"Did you really think you could escape?" He twisted her around to face him. His fingers dug into her arms.

"Let me go, please," she cried, hiding her face in her shoulder. Then, without thinking and realizing it wouldn't do any good, she raised her head and yelled, "Help!"

"You can cry as loudly as you want but no one will hear you, and even if they do, they cannot stop me," Aimeric said.

She looked at him for only a second, seeing the rage that consumed him. His lips were stretched tight across his teeth, the tips of his small fangs barely protruding. His eyes were colder than usual, some dark, twisted humor shining in them. When he continued speaking, she turned her head again, not wanting to look at his frightening face.

"Do you remember your promise? We both agreed it was unbreakable and yet here you are, trying to escape me."

"You lied to me; you said you would let him go," she whispered.

"I did let that poor excuse of a vampire go."

"You killed him."

"Is death not a release?" he asked, amused.

She considered that a moment and then bravely looked at him again. "Then kill me too; release me."

"Your mortal body will die, but it will not be a release. You will belong to me for eternity." He moved a strand of her eye that had fallen in her eyes. "You will soon forget he even existed, I will make sure of that."

She shook her head. "I won't forget. He'll be with me in everything I do. Even when you take me to your bed, he'll be with me there." She grimaced, waiting for him to slap her, threaten her, whatever else. She knew she had crossed the line, but what else could he do to her?

He was gentle though. Even more terrifying. His shoulders quivered as he chuckled to himself. He touched her cheek again and she flinched.

"Is that so?" he said.

She didn't say anything.

"You know, Aralyn, I was going to hunt you most of the night, just to see you tremble, just to smell the fear in your blood. But when I saw you climbing up that ladder, my dead heart seemed to palpitate and I couldn't bear the thought of being way from you any longer." He smiled down at her: a cold, sadistic grin. "That's because you are mine. And whether you know it or not, you desire only me. Now come."

He picked her up and the world seemed to spin around her for several long minutes. She closed her eyes until she felt they had stopped. When she opened them again, she saw they were back in the basement, standing at the top of the stairs. The familiar stench gagged her after having been out in the fresh air for so long. She covered her nose and mouth as Aimeric set her down. He then pulled her along, down the steps. His fingers painfully gripped her arm. They felt like thick, dull needles prodding her flesh. His anger was obvious in the quick steps he was taking. She stumbled a few times and would have fallen if he hadn't have been holding her so tightly.

Eyes welling with tears, Aralyn held her breath. Her insides twisted at the sight of the familiar torture chamber as Aimeric kicked open the door. A flash of Virgil's sufferings. The girl with spikes through her hands, and the boy with the bloodied torso. The restrained breath forced its way through her lips. She cried out one desperate, "please," but he ignored her. Her wrist felt like it was going to shatter under his grip.

He flung her forward into the wall and she felt his hard chest against her back, keeping her in place while his hands secured her own in the shackles on the wall. These were tight, no slack; she wasn't able to move. Cold stone pressed against her left cheek, which was wet with fresh tears. She stared at the prisoners.

"I have something special planned this time." His voice was hard and sarcastic; nothing like it had been only a few minutes before. "Just for you, darling. I don't want you getting confused anymore; you must always remember that you belong to me."

Aralyn didn't even try and respond or plea for her suffering to be spared. It wouldn't make a difference anyway and, to be honest, she wanted him to torture her. She wanted him to make her bleed so that hopefully he would go too far and accidentally kill her.

She heard him walk to the fireplace on the other side of the room and then the sound of him arranging several logs in the pit. After a few moments she heard the crackling of a fire. Then a clanging metal sound. He was soon behind her again and he picked up a pair of large scissors from the surgeon's table. She grit her teeth and closed her eyes, waiting for the pain that would be inflicted.

He cut away the coat, starting at the wrist of the sleeves and going up around her shoulders until the material fell away from her back. The scissors then sliced through the robe, cutting away a large hole in the back, exposing her flesh to the chilly, dank air.

What had he planned for her this time? Maybe she would get the whip. She took a deep breath to prepare for the sting.

He ran the tips of his fingers over the small of her back, sending shivers all over her body. Fear. She kept her face pressed against the wall, taking a small bit of comfort in the feel of it against her cheek.

Several minutes passed with him touching her thoughtfully. It was mostly quiet; the only thing she heard was the crackle of the growing fire and a few stifled coughs from the prisoners.

"Aralyn, my love, don't consider this punishment," Aimeric finally said softly. He left her hanging on that sentence as he went back to the fireplace. Something briefly scraped across the floor as he picked it up. A few seconds later his lips were at her ear and then his cool breath hissed against her cheek, "Think of it as art."

The pain was searing.

White hot.

Blinding.

He held it there for several long seconds. Darkness clouded her eyes. Her fingernails dug into her palm, drawing blood. But that pain wasn't felt. All she was aware of was the red hot iron on the small of her back where

Aimeric's fingers had been moments before. At first she gasped and then she screamed through clenched teeth. Her legs went weak. She moved her head to the side, scraping her forehead on the wall after seeming to lose control of her nerves for as long as the rod was pressed against her flesh. The shackles around her wrists were all that kept her from sinking to the floor.

Finally, Aimeric let the iron shaft drop to the floor and she could breathe for just a second. Quick gasps. Sweat clung to her face. The air hit the burn but it didn't soothe the pain. It added a stabbing sting to it. Short breaths. Deep breaths hurt.

She wanted to curse at him. Scream. But by now she knew better.

His fingers curled into her hair and he laid his head against the side of her face.

"You shouldn't have done it, Aralyn. But now, now I hope you understand just how important it is that you never give yourself to anyone but me. Promise me."

In between her shallow gasps and tears she whispered, "I promise." Tears stung her eyes.

He kissed her cheek in approval and then left her there in the basement. The door clanged shut. His retreating footsteps made her cry harder. With him gone, she didn't have to hold back her pain. Always, she was afraid of making him angrier by crying too loudly.

When she scraped her head it was because she had barely been able to turn it the other way. She now faced the fireplace and could feel the prisoners' eyes on her but they dared not speak. Aimeric had probably given them a warning glare as he left.

The pain didn't leave but after several minutes she got used to it and was able to breathe normally again. Exhausted from the hurt and crying and lack of sleep, she started to close her heavy eyes.

But the door opened.

Her muscles tightened, tense with panic, and her eyes flew open again. She couldn't see anything but the wall next to her but she knew by the tension in the room—swelling from the prison cells—that Aimeric had returned.

He came up beside her, carrying a jar of burn ointment.

"It has lidocaine so it will ease some of the discomfort you're probably feeling."

Had she not known his temper she would have scoffed at what he said; she was feeling more than discomfort. Jumping slightly when he started to rub the balm over the burn, she closed her eyes again, clenching her teeth at the pain. As his fingers circled the cool gel over her skin she gained enough courage to ask, "Why me?"

"I claimed you a long time ago. After I first saw you, and smelled your blood in that car."

"It was you that night," she whispered, only just now realizing it. She had been too confused before to comprehend that the reason Aimeric's eyes bothered her so much was because they were the ones she had seen a year ago in the car with her.

He nodded. "I watched you every night after that; the way you walked, the way you combed your hair. The way you cried for your mother and sister. I followed you when you would leave your house after getting into an argument with your father. I knew from that first night that I wanted you; you had eyes the color I had never seen on a human before, your flesh soft, pale as snow. You were human and yet the most beautiful creature I had ever laid eyes on. Your beauty is unnatural and shouldn't be wasted in humanity. And your blood..." He leaned over and finished by breathing in the scent that flowed beneath the flesh of her neck before continuing. "However, your intelligence is lacking but hopefully my branding you will take care of that."

She cringed as he secured large gauze over the wound, using medical tape to hold it in place. The pain only subsided a little.

“Why did you wait so long to bring me here? It’s been a year,” she asked quietly.

“I was finished playing with you,” he said in a simple voice as he moved her to a new pair of shackles. These ones gave her room to sit on the floor and move around.

“You require further punishment.” He went back to his normal tone. “Perhaps after spending a few days down here you’ll learn to appreciate the bed I have to offer you upstairs.” He tossed an old brown blanket at her feet and left.

The chains weighed heavy on her arms so she sank to the floor, moving slowly so as not to further irritate her latest pain. It was very uncomfortable. She couldn’t lean against the wall without being in an awkward position and aggravating the burn. But leaning forward wouldn’t permit her to sleep. Finally, she was able to get semi-comfortable by leaning sideways against the wall and resting her head on the stone.

The fire was already starting to die out, losing grasp on its low abundance of fuel. Rats scurried above in the rafters, kicking small pieces of dust down to the floor on their hunt for food. The prisoners who weren’t already asleep were settling down, still not attempting to make eye contact with Aralyn.

A brush of wind attacked the ground level window on the western wall, startling her momentarily. The burn throbbed; jumping pain that came in short intervals. Aimeric hadn’t given her anything other than the blanket to wrap around her shoulders to shelter her from the dank cold. She still had the robe on, but it gave little warmth considering it had the hole in the back and the material was thin. The concrete floor was cold and the farthest one could be from comfort but she would rather be down here than

upstairs, forced to lie with her enemy. To her, in this world of darkness, blood, and torture, the basement was Heaven

Wiping her eyes first, forgetting the blood crusting on her palms in the shape of half moons from her fingernails, she tightened the blanket and let sleep overtake her.

* * *

She spent three days down there. Her entire body ached; her bruised and scraped-up forehead, the blood-crusted cuts on her palms, plus her neck was still sore from the many times she had been fed from, though not quite as painful as before. What hurt the most, however, was the burn mark on the small of her back. She hadn't seen it, she didn't know how big it really was, but every part of the lower section of her back hurt when she moved. And bouts of pain still shot through it randomly, even if she hadn't moved in hours.

Aimeric came down several times a day, mostly to tend the burn and rub more cooling ointment on it. He also allowed her to bathe every night and gave her fresh clothes to wear, but he always took her back to the chains when she was finished.

She refused to eat at first but Aimeric threatened to kill her father again so she forced herself to swallow the stale food he brought down. He kissed her whenever he wanted but did nothing else—even when he bathed her—supposedly because he didn't want to irritate the wound on her back, but she had a hard time believing he would be so sympathetic.

Every morning, before he would go back to his room to rest, he would ask Aralyn if she had learned her lesson yet and if she was ready to be released from her prison. Each time, she had declined his offer. Now, though, she feared how many declinations she had left. How long would he allow her to refuse his offer of a warm bed and real food before punishing someone else or taking her forcefully

upstairs? Each time she refused him, the flash of anger in his eyes seemed to last longer.

Morgan came down every night at sunset to feed the prisoners and then again right before dawn. He also supplied them with blankets so they wouldn't freeze. Aimeric kept his prisoners well fed and taken care of in order to make sure they had enough energy for him to play with. They were so terrified of him that they refused to even look at Aralyn. She had even tried talking to them, tried asking for their names, but they would never answer her.

On the forth night, after Morgan fed the prisoners, he came to stand in front of her, laughter in his eyes; he loved seeing her helpless.

"Still bein' naughty, I see," he said.

"Get the hell away from me." Aralyn glared, pulling herself to her feet; she didn't like looking up at him.

"I don't understand why the Master doesn't punish you the way you deserve it. Your skin would heal." He thoughtfully picked up a Phillips-head screwdriver from the table. "These make pretty stars if you do it just right."

"Aimeric would kill you if you tried anything. Don't you learn?" She wasn't afraid of Morgan; he mostly just got on her nerves.

He smiled. "Are you worried about me?"

Her glare heated. "No."

He stared at her, lust in his eyes as he let them roam her body. She was only wearing a pair of sweat pants and a long sleeved shirt that was two sizes too big for her, but it didn't seem to matter to him; it was as if he were undressing her with his eyes.

"Get out of here," she said.

He sneered. "I can be down here whenever I want and your precious Virgil isn't here to save you anymore."

As images of Virgil and his death flooded into her mind, she clenched her teeth to keep from yelling at the sniveling vampire.

“Morgan, how many times do I have to tell you to stay away from her?” Aimeric’s stern voice came from the doorway and Morgan jumped, turning around.

“I wasn’t doing anything, Master, I swear.”

“You thought I was out so you took advantage of my being gone to antagonize her.”

He hung his head. “I’m sorry, Master.”

“Leave us.”

Morgan scurried out of the room, taking the empty dinner trays he had carried the prisoners’ food on. Once he was gone, Aimeric came to stand in front of Aralyn.

“Why do you always let him go?” she asked. She was curious why Aimeric never did anything to Morgan but, as her words came out, she realized she sounded like a child who was feeling pushed aside by a younger sibling that was favored.

“He’s harmless. All I have to do is speak and he cowers like a dog and does whatever I order; *he* obeys me.”

“You tell him to stay away from me, but he doesn’t.”

He sighed, exasperated. “Do you want me to kill him? I will. Just for you.”

“No.”

Aimeric chuckled, grasping her right hip in one hand and curling his fingers in her hair with the other. He kissed down her neck.

“You don’t have to be jealous of him,” he said between pecks.

“I’m not.” She grimaced each time his lips touched her skin.

Aimeric didn’t press the issue of Morgan any further; he didn’t seem to care. He continued kissing her for a few moments, as if trying to influence her response to the question she knew was coming.

She averted her eyes to the floor when he looked down at her.

“Are you ready to get out of these chains?”

Though she didn’t want to go back to his bed, she knew eventually she wouldn’t have a choice. Her muscles ached from being on the cold floor every night; the warm bed did sound inviting. Her stomach also lurched hungrily at the thought of fresh food and water whenever she needed it.

“Yes, Master,” she said quietly.

Aimeric grinned as he took a key from around his neck and used it to unlock the cuffs. Her wrists were sore. She rubbed at them while he replaced the key around his neck, attached to a string of twine.

The door suddenly burst open, making Aralyn jump and Aimeric turn around.

“What the hell is going on here?”

Aralyn recognized the voice and breathed a loud sigh of relief. “Claire!”

Chapter Fifteen

Return

“I said I didn’t want her harmed, Aimeric!” Claire stepped across the room, taking long strides. As soon as she was close enough to Aimeric, he reached out and grabbed her, throwing her into the wall beside Aralyn.

“And *I* have told *you* many times before: nothing you say matters here. I am in charge of every one of you leeches. She may be your sister, but she belongs to *me*.”

Claire smirked at his outburst, seemingly unafraid.

“Besides,” he continued. “She tried to escape.”

He let her go and they both turned to glare at Aralyn. She took a step backwards, feeling as if she were shrinking under their malicious stares. Neither of them said anything for a minute. Claire pushed herself off the wall and turned to face her sister, placing her hands on her hips. Aralyn stared into her eyes, noticing they almost seemed apologetic.

But then Claire slapped Aralyn across the face without warning.

“Ungrateful bitch!” she yelled as Aimeric’s hand flew out, grasping her around the neck.

“She is not to be hit,” he growled.

Claire didn’t seem to hear him or notice he had her by the throat; her eyes were still on Aralyn and she continued:

“I saved you, I took you in! I rescued you from being raped, tortured, and probably murdered, and you show your appreciation by trying to escape?”

Aralyn was covering the side of her face that had been hit. The skin under her fingers was hot and swelling.

“You rescued me?” Her voice was low and laced with malice. “Isn’t it ironic that you brought me to this hell where all that and more have happened anyway?” She knew she should stop now since Aimeric was there, too, but once she

started talking, venting her anger, it wasn't easy to stop. "I've been raped, kept as a prisoner with no free will, tortured, and I've been close enough to death so many times that I wish it would just come already! I wished it before, but never so much as I do now!" She was almost yelling now. "At least if you had left me with that dumb fuck you supposedly saved me from, I would be dead by now!"

"You can't mean that; you don't want to die," Claire said.

"Why the hell wouldn't I?" Aralyn couldn't hold back the tears, they fell down her cheeks one after the other.

"I've heard enough." Aimeric stepped in between them, securing his arms around Aralyn, careful not to touch the lower part of her back. He examined her bruising cheek and then looked into her eyes. "Do you really hate it here that much?"

She didn't say anything, letting her silence be response enough for him.

"I'll make it better for you, my love." He brushed his lips against hers and then led her out of the basement, leaving Claire behind. Aralyn glared at her sister over her shoulder as she was led away.

Aimeric took her upstairs where he helped bathe her and then gave her a warm nightgown to put on. He also tended her wounds and was surprisingly gentle; totally uncharacteristic for him, Aralyn thought. They went to the bed and Aimeric pulled her into his lap so her head would rest against his chest. He took a cool washcloth and pressed it against the tender part of her face where Claire hit her.

She winced at first but the cold soon brought relief and she found herself relaxing, even so close to him. A strange calm had settled over her that she didn't understand.

"I've ordered Morgan to bring you up some food," he said and softly kissed her forehead.

She nodded.

"Do you really hate me, Aralyn?" Aimeric asked after a moment's silence passed.

Her first reaction was to say “yes” but she stopped herself before getting the word out. How could he even ask her that after all he had done? She would be insane not to hate him. But she knew her response could mean another night in the basement...or worse....

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I don’t understand how you can be so gentle like you are now and then...” She paused in order to keep her voice from cracking and stop the tears that wanted to form again. “Why did you kill him?”

She felt the muscles in his chest tighten and, for a second, she thought she might have gone too far in asking that question.

“I was jealous,” he responded, his tone simple and nonchalant. “Somehow he had managed to make you fall in love with him and yet, you hated me.”

She tightened her jaw and tried to cool the anger warming her blood. She wanted to jump up and scream at him, tell him why she had loved Virgil and hated him. Virgil had been sincere, he hadn’t raped her, he hadn’t tortured her, and he had even planned on rescuing her from Aimeric.

“Is that would make you happy, Aralyn? Would you like for me to wait until you are ready to make love? Not give you so many rules? Allow you to speak freely?”

He had gone into her mind again. She tensed knowing he had heard her thoughts. Were his questions a trap? An excuse to punish her (or someone else) again?

She didn’t say anything, just wrung her hands in her lap.

“I might consider doing those things for you, my love.”

Looking up at him, Aralyn noticed something in his eyes she hadn’t seen before. They were sincere, warm. And she felt as though she were being pulled into them.

Briefly, she remembered he looked like this once before. In the garden when he tricked her; she thought he had been sincere then until he made it clear he was being sarcastic. But now it was different. She couldn’t explain how. Things just *felt* different.

And yet, she didn't believe her own eyes or her own feelings. He didn't love her; the things he had done to her were not affections of one's love.

So why did she want him to kiss her? Why did the pit of her stomach feel like it was turning into a hot pool?

Moving the cloth from her face first, Aimeric lowered his mouth and moved his lips against hers. And for the first time since she had been there, she didn't feel like she wanted to push him away. Instead, she willingly hooked an arm around his neck and kissed him back.

A soft knock on the door interrupted their kiss for as long as it took Aimeric to tell the person to come in. He then continued kissing her, moving to her neck, as Morgan entered with a tray of food. He brought it to the bed and Aimeric straightened up, taking it from him. Aralyn frowned, disappointed he had taken his mouth off of her.

Morgan stood at the end of the bed as if waiting for something.

"Do you think you're getting a tip? Get the hell out," Aimeric said.

"Yes, sir." Morgan grumbled to himself as he left the room, his cheeks red with embarrassment.

Once he was gone Aimeric helped her sit up and laid the tray over her lap. He fed her and there was something inside of her that made her think it was erotic. Feelings she didn't understand swelled through her whole body and she suddenly found she was unable to concentrate. She wanted to hurry and finish the food so they could go back to kissing. She wanted him to touch her, feel him inside of her.

She wasn't feeling like herself.

Finally, the food was gone and Aimeric put the empty tray on the floor. When he pulled himself back up, Aralyn took his arms and crawled into his lap, facing him. She kissed him with a hunger that heated her entire body.

Aimeric didn't seem at all surprised by her sudden change in behavior. He pulled her closer against him, crushing her

chest against his and, sliding his hand down to her calf, pulled up her leg to wrap around his waist.

He leaned back on the bed, bringing her with him so she straddled his legs. She followed him down and kissed him with force, biting at his lower lip. Aimeric lifted the nightgown over her head, tossing it to the side, and brought his hands up to massage her breasts. He ran his thumbs over her nipples in slow circles. She let him play with her a moment, throwing her head back and moaning softly, before she leaned back down to his chest. She unbuttoned his shirt, kissing his cold skin as she progressed. She went down his torso and stomach until she reached his pants. Slowly, teasingly, she unbuttoned them and slid the zipper down. He was already hard.

She had never gone down on anyone before but it seemed she was being guided so she wasn't nervous. She touched the shaft with long, slow strokes of her tongue and then flicked around the head, smiling to herself when she heard Aimeric groan with pleasure. As he hardened more, she took him into her mouth, moving up and down the shaft and sucking the head. She massaged the inner part of his thigh with one hand and rubbed the base of his cock with the other.

She worked on him until she felt he was close to coming and then, with a devilish smile, she stopped, crawling onto his chest and kissing his mouth.

He rolled her over, taking charge and hissing "bitch" against her mouth before kissing her hard. She clung to him, wrapping her arms around his back and locking her legs around his waist. He thrust into her and she moaned loudly at first; partly in pain, partly in pleasure. The violent thrust had brought an intense, shooting pain to her back that she didn't understand. She soon forgot about it though.

As he started moving inside of her, the moans became softer but more frequent until she felt her muscles tighten. She released, yelling loudly, and Aimeric continued rocking,

feeling her muscles clench and pulse around his cock before his own release.

After, they lay in each other's arms and he kissed the length of her arm.

"Aimeric?" she asked, feeling confused.

"Yes?" He rasped the word.

"Did something...happen last night...or maybe a few nights ago? Something significant?" She was trying to remember the last couple of days but they were all foggy in her head; she couldn't remember anything.

"Mhm," he took her lower lip into his mouth, biting it gently until a few drops of blood surfaced. "We made love, just like now."

Before she could respond, he moved off the bed and zipped up his pants. She rolled over and propped herself up on one elbow to watch as he continued dressing.

"Where are you going?"

"I need to feed." He leaned over and kissed her again. "Go wherever you want in the house, but stay inside. You're protected from the ones here, but if you leave the house you're fair game to others. You were lucky they didn't come for you the other day before I did."

She frowned. "What do you mean?"

He grinned, an evil and malicious smile. "You'll soon remember."

He left her there, confused. As soon as the door was closed, Aralyn fell back on the bed, the strange feeling increasing. Her mind wandered. She wondered what Aimeric had meant about being lucky she hadn't been found by the others before he could find her himself. What would she soon remember? She heard Aimeric yell something to Morgan and then the front door slammed shut.

Aralyn jumped into a sitting position, her insides twisting in response to what she had just willing done with Aimeric and had even initiated. Her memory came pouring back into her from all sides. She remembered all that Aimeric had done; how he had tortured Virgil. The image of Virgil's severed

head flashed in front of her eyes and she had to force it away. Her anger flared and her fists clenched against the bed sheets. She remembered now how she had escaped, how he had briefly hunted her and then brought her back here and branded her like an animal. That was what had caused her pain when Aimeric had thrust into her earlier.

Somehow he had made her temporarily forget Virgil and all that he had done to her and instead of hatred for him, placed affection in her heart. She felt sick. She ran to the bathroom in case she would throw up. She was disgusted by her own actions; she had *wanted* to have sex with him; she had *willingly* gone down on him.

Feeling unclean and wanting to rid herself of him, she turned on the water in the shower and scrubbed every inch of herself. She clenched her teeth against the pain the hot water inflicted onto her burn.

Once she was clean again, she put the nightgown back on and brushed her teeth for longer than she needed to.

Going back out to the bedroom, she stared at the bed for a minute, not wanting to get back into it after what she had just done in it.

Her throat felt dry so she decided to go downstairs and get a drink. Maybe she would give herself a tour of the mansion since she hadn't seen all of it, try get her mind off of things. Though she was afraid of what she might find. She didn't have to worry about the other vampires in the house at least. For one thing, most of them were probably out for the night, and for another, she was under *his* protection.

She didn't care where she went, just as long as it wasn't the bed.

When she stepped into the hallway, she saw Claire's bedroom door opening and a second later, her sister appeared in the doorway wearing nothing but a see-through black robe.

"Ah, I was just coming to see you," she said to Aralyn. "What are you doing out here?"

"I need a glass of water and...I wanted to get out of the room for a while," she said.

“Yeah, it does get pretty boring here.” Claire nodded in understanding.

Aralyn took a few steps towards her sister. She wanted to talk to her, be near her, try and find even a small part of her former human self. She wasn’t mad at her anymore and needed comfort.

“What did you want?” she asked her.

“Oh, I was just going to catch up with you on things. I heard Aimeric leave and figured you would be lonely.”

“So, you don’t need to feed then?”

Claire laughed as if the idea were preposterous. “No. Can’t you tell? I already had my meal; look at how I glow!” She laughed, a cold sound.

Aralyn frowned and Claire stopped laughing.

“I ate the girl.” She stepped to the side, waving a hand into her bedroom. “In more ways than one.”

Aralyn peered inside. She covered her mouth to suppress a scream. There on the floor was the red headed girl that Aimeric had tortured the first day Aralyn woke to this hell. Her creamy skin was now entirely pale, drained of blood. She had many teeth marks and punctures plaguing her naked body.

Claire sighed. “I feel kind of bad for going crazy like that and killing her, but,” she shrugged, “I was overcome with passion.”

Aralyn closed her eyes, feeling for the wall. She slid down it and buried her face in her knees, not wanting to see the corpse again.

“Oh, Aralyn,” Claire sighed. “I have to eat, you know? This is how I live now. You understand, don’t you?”

Aralyn looked at her sister and chose her words carefully; she didn’t want her to leave her alone with Aimeric again.

“I just...need some time to get used to it.” Aralyn forced a smile.

Claire laughed. “Of course you do. So did I at first.” Her eyes lit up as she seemed to be enlightened. “I have an idea. You can come along with Aimeric and me the next time we

both go out to hunt. That way you can see us and better understand how we need blood to survive.”

Aralyn’s blood heated up again at the mention of *his* name.

“I won’t be going anywhere with that monster.”

A moment of silence passed. A grievous look clouded Claire’s beautiful eyes and she frowned.

“Aralyn, Aimeric is your master now. You must respect him; haven’t you learned anything of his temper yet?”

“I’ve learned,” she whispered. “That’s why I don’t say these things to him.”

“It will be better. Once you’re used to him, I promise.”

“I don’t want to get used to him.” She was barely audible.

“Come on, I’m not that bad.”

Aralyn looked up from the floor and found Aimeric smirking at her as he walked down the hall towards them. She stood, keeping her back against the wall and glaring. Her head was beginning to cloud again and she was having trouble concentrating. He was trying to make her forget again. She forced the image of Virgil and his death into her mind, trying to keep her memories, trying to keep control.

But it was no use. Her own mind fought her, trying to go blank.

“Don’t try and fight it; it’s useless.” Aimeric slowed his steps, intimidating her.

“What are you doing to me?” Aralyn asked drowsily. She looked to Claire for help but saw her sister was gone, going back into her own bedroom.

“Just a little mind manipulation. I told you I would make you forget. I’ve waited long enough for you to obey and submit to me on your own. You’re much more fun and *satisfying* when you want what I want.” He pressed his body against hers, kissing her lips. She responded, her mind wholly clouded, and brought his tongue into her mouth. She sucked on it until Aimeric pulled away, going to her neck.

“I need you now. I need you to become one of us,” he said, raking his fangs across her skin.

“Do it,” she gasped.

He bit into her and she yelled in pain as he started drawing blood from the wound. After a second, though, the pain subsided. She put her hand on the back of his head, holding him there against her neck, urging him to continue.

But he pulled away.

“I have a better idea, my love.” He licked at her bottom lip.

“What?” she asked.

All urgency was gone from him. Gently, he took her hand and led her back to the bedroom.

“I don’t want to take away your ability to have a child just yet,” he said, helping her into bed. He kissed her forehead and pulled the covers up over her. “Get rested; you’re going to need it.”

He kissed her and started to pull away but Aralyn wanted more. She held onto his neck, keeping him there and sliding her tongue into his mouth. He humored her for a few minutes and then pulled away, smirking.

“There will be plenty of time for that later. For now, rest. I’ll be back in a while.”

As soon as he was gone, her memories came back to her and, once again, she was disgusted with herself. Not only that, she was upset now more than ever. The tears flowed down her cheeks and she rolled onto her side, cuddling with a pillow.

She could only imagine what Aimeric had planned for her now....

Chapter Sixteen

A New Face

The next day Aralyn woke shortly before noon. She was alone in the bed. The room was still mostly dark; only a sliver of light came through the gap in the curtains where the two pieces of material met. Aimeric had never returned. Not that she knew of anyway and not that she was disappointed. If she were lucky he would have gotten caught in the sun and would never be returning.

It was boring in the mansion. It seemed like all she ever did was eat, sleep, and be forced to make love with Aimeric.

She never did tour the house like she wanted to.

Not bothering to change out of the nightgown, Aralyn left the room and began her exploration of the creepy residence. The whole house was dimly lit, either by candles or low watt lamps. Except for Aimeric's room, the house was in poor shape. The walls were cracked, the wallpaper yellow and curling. In rooms without carpet, there were cracked and missing tiles. The ones with carpet had at least an inch of dust gathered on the fabric beneath her feet. Cobwebs and spider webs dangled over her head. Insect corpses were strung up in them. On the floor and crawling on the walls were cockroaches that made Aralyn cringe and hurry by. She could also hear rats scurrying in the walls. The journey made her feel dirty; she would have to take another bath when she was finished.

Most of the rooms she came across were locked, probably bedrooms belonging to the other vampires. She was glad she couldn't open the doors after thinking of what she might see inside.

She reached a third staircase that twisted to the very top floor; the attic. The corridor after it was creepier than the rest of the house. It wasn't that it looked that different from the

rest of the house (although it did seem darker); eeriness just seemed to resonate from it. There were several paintings that lined the walls that she could barely make out. Most of them were huge, sitting in large brown frames. When she looked closer, she saw they depicted horrific scenes of blood and terror, frightening settings such as the classic gothic castle on a foggy cliff. The ones that sent horrific chills up Aralyn's spin, however, were the ones with sinister looking men and women with eyes that seemed to be real. The eyes were brightly colored against a mostly dark background and they seemed to follow her as she passed by.

There was a door at the end of the hallway. It was dead silent up here. She couldn't even hear the rats and insects anymore. It was ominous. She wanted to leave, go back to the second floor at least, but curiosity overcame her and she went to peek inside the room.

Slowly, she cracked open the door.

It was a bedroom. The only source of light was a hanging lamp on the dimmest setting. There was a single bed in the corner and several small and large tables and a couple of easels scattered all about the room. On the easels were more dark paintings. On the desks were jars filled with a liquid slightly thicker than water. Small objects floated in them.

Stepping into the room for a closer look, Aralyn gasped. Inside the jars were animal parts: eyes, feet, and tails. Some jars had whole rodents in them.

Feeling her stomach lurching, Aralyn covered her mouth and backed out of the room, closing the door.

She hit someone. Her back collided with someone behind her. She turned around quickly, expecting to see Aimeric.

It wasn't him.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Aralyn said, looking into the soft brown eyes of a young female.

Her skin was beautiful; the color of dark coffee and her hair was pure white and silky, trailing down over her curvy rear. A black mini skirt showed off her long and slender legs, and a red tank top showed off her elegant arms.

“What are you doing up here?” the woman asked. Her voice was soft, almost childlike. She had a vacant expression, like her mind was in a faraway world.

“I was just, uh, looking around. I’m sorry if I intruded or if I’m somewhere I’m not supposed to be. I was bored and-”

“Shh.” The girl placed a finger over Aralyn’s lips to quiet her. “I was only curious, I don’t really care that you’re up here. Not many wander to these parts but then, not many get the chance, do they? The Master usually kills them or keeps them locked up. It’s nice to have a visitor. And such a special one at that.”

“What do you mean by that?”

The girl smiled. “The Master has chosen you to be his eternal companion; not just a creation. He’s never considered settling for one lover before. He usually went from lover to lover, many women and even a few men. You should feel honored, especially because he’s going to make you the mother of his child.”

“What?” Aralyn’s eyes widened. She had thought he might be up to something like that but hearing the words seemed more shocking than just thinking them.

The girl giggled. “I guess I wasn’t supposed to mention that part. Forget I did.”

Aralyn averted her eyes to the floor. Something like being the mother of Aimeric’s child was a subject not easily forgotten.

“Oh, he’s talking to me now.” The girl closed her eyes, swaying from side to side and nodding as if in response to someone talking to her. She grinned.

Aralyn watched her for a few seconds, thinking she was odd, but not wanting to say anything in case she offended the girl.

The girl opened her eyes and continued smiling. “The Master has just sent me a message because he knows you’re here with me. He wants you to meet him in the basement. I will come with you.”

Aralyn's stomach clenched. There was only one reason Aimeric would want her to come to the basement. But why? She hadn't done anything, had she? The last time she had seen him, he wasn't angry with her.

"Did he say why?" she asked the girl.

She shook her head. "Can't tell you."

"Can you at least tell me your name?"

"I'm Cora." She smiled again, seemingly honored that Aralyn had asked. She then held out her arm. "Come, Aralyn. I will take you to the Master now."

Knowing she didn't have a choice, Aralyn took Cora's arm and allowed her to lead her down to the basement. She didn't bother asking how Cora knew her name. All the vampires probably knew Aralyn by her first name by now.

When they reached the prison, Aralyn's eyes locked with Aimeric's and her insides shuddered at the memory of how he had been able to control her thoughts. Despair crept into her veins, consuming them; she had no freedom, not even the sanctity of her own mind. He could probably control her dreams if he wanted to.

Cora let go of Aralyn and, without a word, left, closing the door quietly behind her.

The prisoners had taken their normal stances, huddling up against the wall, trying not to breathe and risk making a sound. There were at least three new victims, all men. They were set apart from the others in their own cage.

Aimeric held an arm out, a sadistic look in his eyes. Aralyn reach out with shaking fingers and took his arm, silently praying he wasn't going to hurt anyone. She hadn't given him a motive to, had she?

He took her to stand in front of the cage with the three men in it.

"Pick one."

Her legs went weak and she started to sink to the floor. "Aimeric, I haven't done anything," she whimpered.

He chuckled softly, holding her up around the waist.

“Not for that,” he said. “Choose the one whom you think will give us a healthy and beautiful child.”

She tensed.

Her breath caught in her throat.

“You can’t be serious,” she whispered.

“I am. I’ve always wanted a child but thanks to my mortal life being taken from me at an early age, I wasn’t able to accomplish that desire. You are still capable. Of course I would do the job myself and impregnate you but I am unable. My seed is dead as I am, so,” he waved a hand and repeated, “pick one.”

She looked through the bars, her vision clouded with tears. Was she to be forced to lay with these men, too? Aimeric had chosen three beautiful mortals. All were in great physical shape. One was darkly tanned with short, sandy blonde hair and emerald-green eyes. The second was pale with dark hair and silver eyes. The third had shoulder-length, chocolate curls and deep brown eyes set into a chiseled face.

They each only had on a pair of loose fitting sweat pants and all seemed to be in a daze. Drugged or manipulated by Aimeric, Aralyn couldn’t tell.

She shook her head. “I can’t...please don’t make me do this.”

Aimeric made an exasperated noise, a low growl that came from the back of his throat. “Fine, Aralyn. I will choose for you...like always.”

She flinched as his arm slid around her neck to open the cage door. He yanked out the male with the silver eyes and Aralyn moved to the side to get out of the way. Her back was against the wall near the surgeon’s table and she bit her bottom lip, watching Aimeric. Her stomach was tied up in horrible knots.

“What’s your name?” Aimeric asked the man.

“Darren.” The man replied in a sleepy tone and his eyes stared straight ahead.

“Well, *Darren*,” he sneered. “You are going to screw Aralyn until she conceives and then I’m going to kill you

because I cannot allow another man to touch her and get away with it. Do you understand?"

The man nodded, still in his trance and not really comprehending what was going on.

Aralyn's eyes flooded and she felt hot tears roll down her cheeks. Aimeric turned to her, cupping her face in his cold hands. He kissed her mouth several times.

"Try not to enjoy it too much," he said.

Adrenaline rushed into her at the casual tone of his voice and she pushed herself away from him, holding onto the wall for support since her whole body was shaking.

"I can't do this."

"Get over here Aralyn." His voice was low. Dangerous. His eyes narrowed.

She shook her head. "Please."

"My patience with you is running low. I will give you only a few seconds to come to me on your own."

She was still moving, taking small steps away from him. She hit the table with the sharp tools on it and her eyes landed on an old, bloodstained arrowhead. All of his previous threats seemed to have vanished and consequences refused to enter her mind as she reached down and picked it up.

"I would rather die," she said, holding the tip of the weapon to her own throat. She started to slide it, cutting her flesh open and cringing only a little at the sharp pain.

Before it could go too deep, a heavy weight crushed into her, knocking her back against the wall. The tool was thrown from her fingers and Aimeric's eyes dug into hers from only an inch away. His fangs were bared. He looked like a ravenous animal.

"If you try anything like that again, I will do it for you. Only I will make it slow and extremely painful. I could keep you alive for months, even years, your feelings only those of pain worse than you've ever experienced. And besides," he paused, touching the side of her face with a single finger, "did you forget what I said I would do to your father if you killed yourself?"

She looked away, somehow feeling she had betrayed her father. "No," she whispered.

"Don't be selfish, Aralyn. Hasn't he suffered enough by the loss of his wife and daughters?"

She clenched her teeth at the mention of her mother's death. "Yes."

"So let's not bring any more suffering to him, shall we?"

Biting the inside of her cheek to keep from crying, she nodded.

"Are you ready to cooperate?"

"Yes, Master," she said quietly, though she felt as if she might throw up.

"Good." He raised her chin to expose her throat and then lowered his mouth to cover the small cut she had inflicted on herself. He cleaned away the blood and then went to her mouth, kissing her hard.

She almost gagged at the metallic taste of her own blood but caught herself before trying to pull away. As her head began to cloud and she started to feel drowsy, she caught Aimeric's wrists and moved her hands up his arms so she could secure them around her waist for him. She moved her mouth against his, slowly at first and then more urgently.

Aimeric slid the nightgown off of her and then led her to the table with the spikes on the corners. The surface was cold against her naked back as he laid her on it and she gasped once before forgetting about it; she was too concerned with his hands on her stomach and breasts and the feel of his tongue slithering up and down her throat and shoulders to be worried about the temperature of the table.

The heat gathering between her thighs was becoming intense, even painful. She fumbled with Aimeric's pants as she lay under him but he stopped her, moving her hand away. With a snap of his fingers, Aimeric commanded Darren to take his place. Aimeric moved off of Aralyn and stood to the side, watching as she pulled Darren onto her, removing his pants. He thrust into her.

Aimeric watched to make sure they didn't do any more than was necessary. Once Darren spilled his mortal seed into Aralyn's body, Aimeric threw him back in the cage.

He then took Aralyn upstairs where he eased his ache as well.

This happened every night for the next two weeks since Aimeric didn't want to risk his calculations of Aralyn's cycle being wrong. He would lead her into the basement prison where he manipulated and aroused her before letting one of the three men take her. Each time, he watched to ensure the men did only the job he assigned them and not any more. There was no kissing allowed, nor foreplay. And he also made sure the deed itself did not last longer than necessary.

Aralyn's feelings for her sadistic captor remained mostly spiteful—when she was conscious of her own feelings anyway. Sometimes, when he manipulated her, her attraction and desire for him would be strong for hours, even throughout the entire day. And she found herself looking at him differently. What scared her, though, was that even when she wasn't a victim of his mind games and manipulation she felt attracted to him and didn't cringe so much when he would touch her. Kissing him and talking to him and even making love with him didn't disgust her as much as it had before.

She couldn't explain it other than her supposed feelings for him was what remained of the manipulation, kind of like leftovers.

Or so she convinced herself.

Suicide hadn't crossed her mind since that first day she was forced to try and conceive. She didn't want to risk her father's further suffering but not only that, she didn't want to risk harming the child she might be pregnant with. The way it was (or would be) conceived wasn't the child's fault after all.

Morgan continued to taunt her for the next two weeks as well. Only when Aimeric wasn't around, of course. He never touched her, though. He knew better by now.

Claire stuck around, mostly taking joy in teasing Morgan when he antagonized Aralyn, which Aralyn was grateful for. Though she was around, Aralyn didn't see her sister much. During the daylight hours Claire usually slept and then would leave in the evening, even if she didn't need to feed. Aralyn didn't want to think about what she was doing if not feeding.

On the last night of the second week, Darren was once again chosen to have sex with Aralyn. When he finished, Aimeric grabbed him off of her by the roots of his hair and sank his fangs into the poor man's jugular, drawing the blood from his throat violently until there wasn't enough left in him to sustain his young life.

Aralyn took the blanket left for her on the edge of the table and pulled it around her naked, sweat-flecked body, looking at Aimeric with confusion in her purple eyes.

"Why did you kill him?" she asked, only curious.

He looked at her with narrowed eyes and wiped a small stream of blood from the right corner of his lips. The look on his face was one of anger and jealousy.

"He seemed to please you, *my love*." The words came out harsh.

That familiar rush of fear returned to her and her already fast-beating heart palpitated. It had already been pounding in her chest from the round of sex with the male mortal but the fear kept it going.

She took in a breath and calmed the feeling, though. Surely he wouldn't harm her knowing she could be pregnant with the child he had wanted in the first place.

She was right. Instead of threatening her and locking her up, Aimeric took her upstairs and first let her shower and rest for a few hours before he made love to her harder, longer, and proved he was better than any mortal.

At the end of the night Aralyn was so exhausted that she collapsed on top of him with her dark hair matted to her neck and the sides of her face. She fell asleep on his chest.

Chapter Seventeen

The Night Out

The wind pounded violently against the shielded windows. The insistent knocking of hard air against the glass was what woke Aralyn that blustery day in November. It was late afternoon; the sun would be setting in about an hour. She was still lying on Aimeric's chest having not moved since she first fell asleep after their vigorous love making.

He was awake and stroking the lower part of her back around the brand mark. Sporadic pain shot through the burn every few days, but it had mostly healed. She had seen it in the mirror a few times. The mark was about three inches wide and three inches in height. The design was a large W with an A laying over it in the middle. A small cross stemmed from the tip of the A.

Whenever she saw it or whenever the pain returned, even if only for a second, Aralyn's anger and hatred returned for Aimeric. But as soon as he would get near her, all the rage seemed to melt away.

She raised her head now, looking at him. Their eyes met and warmth filled her, the familiar fog clouding her mind. She pressed her lips against his and they kissed for a long, tender moment before Aimeric broke it.

"Would you like to go hunting with me tonight? I think it would be good for you to know how we feed before you become one of us. I'll teach you other things as well."

That night and for the rest of the week Aralyn wouldn't have to try and conceive with the mortal men. Aimeric had decided she needed a break. They would wait and see if her cycle would be on time before continuing.

She smiled and nodded in agreement, kissing him once more before they rolled out of bed and showered. By the

time the sun started setting they had dressed and were ready to leave.

Aimeric ordered all but Claire to take the ferry or the boat and then he made a quick phone call that Aralyn didn't pay any attention to.

After ten minutes or so, a car honked from the driveway and Aimeric led both Aralyn and Claire outside into the chilly, oncoming darkness. There was a black limousine waiting for them, thin wisps of fog swirling in front of the headlights.

Aimeric opened the door and ushered the women inside before crawling in after them. Several strips of dim lights ran along the ceiling, lighting the car up with tiny stars and placing soft glows on their faces.

"Aralyn and I will be stopping at the park," Aimeric said to Claire as the car pulled away.

Ignoring the oncoming conversation, Aralyn crawled into Aimeric's lap and began kissing the cold flesh of his throat.

"I trust you will get along fine without us for a short while?" he continued.

Claire chuckled. "I hardly think I need a companion to hunt anymore, Aimeric. I've done just dandy on my own before."

"So you have." Aimeric curled his fingers in Aralyn's hair, keeping her in place and encouraging her to continue.

Claire crossed her legs, showing off the black fishnet hose she had on beneath the long jacket she was wearing.

"Why the park?" she asked.

"I need a nice, quiet place to explain things first," he paused to meet Aralyn's lips before she returned to his neck. "The club would be too much of a distraction."

"Good idea, I suppose."

They made it to the ferry and the driver—whoever he was—paid for a spot on the flat surface and they were soon making their way to the mainland. After docking, they drove for almost another hour, Aimeric and Aralyn's tongues intertwined for most of the trip. The club they were going to

was in Boston. When the car pulled up to a brick building Aimeric gestured for Claire to leave.

“What, you don’t trust me to have you dropped off at the park, first?” Claire’s tone was one of mock innocence.

“Not with my car, no,” Aimeric replied with an amused grin.

Smirking, Claire opened the door and stepped outside. After a moment of wriggling, she tossed the jacket back into the car and shut the door.

Aralyn watched her strut to the entrance. She was wearing a pair of red leather shorts over the fishnets. Her black shirt was tight-knit with a yellow collar and her hair was piled on top of her head with a few loose curls dangling over her shocking eyes.

The bouncer immediately let her inside.

“It’s all a part of the game,” Aimeric whispered against Aralyn’s cheek.

“What is?” she asked as the car pulled away.

“Seduction.”

She grinned at the word and connected their lips again.

They drove for a few more minutes before the car pulled up to a curb and the engine shut off. Aralyn followed Aimeric out of the car. She shivered under the clear, chilly sky. It was a beautiful night despite the chill. Aimeric placed Claire’s jacket around her shoulders to shield her from the cold and whispered in her ear:

“You are free tonight, my love. I will not listen to your thoughts or manipulate you as long as you don’t give me a reason to.”

Her head cleared and she felt light again. Closing her eyes at the sound of his voice and the erotic way he breathed into her ear and against her cheek, she nodded, glad to be free for the night. Satisfied with her response, Aimeric took her hand and led her to a bench. He put his arm around her and nuzzled her neck. She played along, showing the few people there that they were only lovers out for the evening by

halfway turning to him, exposing her neck and holding onto his arm.

"There is another vampire here besides me. Tell me who it is," he whispered.

Aralyn searched around the large park, peering around the empty playground equipment and through the trees. There was another couple holding hands and walking on the sidewalk. A single man walked towards them, a cold look in his eyes. There was a young woman sitting on a bench several yards down. She was reading a book by the light of a streetlamp. Aralyn noticed the woman was wearing a large silver cross around her neck.

"The man walking alone?" she guessed.

"No. The woman on the bench is the vampire."

"But she's-"

"Wearing a cross?" Aimeric smirked. "It is a cheap piece of jewelry. The only crosses that repel us are those that are genuine, blessed by a Christian church." He kissed her throat and whispered, "Now watch; she has chosen her victim."

Aralyn inconspicuously peered at the female, bringing her eyes up to spy beneath her lashes. The walking man had discovered the woman and was now lowering himself on the bench beside her, an evil look in his eye. He probably thought he had found a woman to take home for the night.

She was beautiful, there was no denying that. But then Aralyn knew the particular sensual lure all vampires had about them; they drew humans to them. Morgan was the exception, of course, at least with her. She didn't understand why that was. Maybe it was just that he was so annoying.

The man was talking to the woman in a low voice. She put her book down in her lap and returned the conversation, smiling an enticing grin but keeping her small fangs hidden. After only a few minutes the two started kissing.

Aimeric laid his cheek against Aralyn's, both of them watching the new couple; Aimeric with a cold, knowing grin on his face and Aralyn with curiosity and a bit of fear.

It happened quickly and without anyone else noticing. The couple holding hands was far ahead on the walk, unaware of the event taking place behind their backs.

The vampire kissed the male's neck, her hands wandering until one finally made its way up his chest and to his mouth. There, she clamped her fingers over his lips to keep him from screaming while she bit into his neck.

"A vampire must replenish the blood in his or her body frequently, usually about once a week or so. If he exerts himself, either physically or emotionally, he requires more."

Aralyn listened in silence, even though she had already heard that part from Virgil. There was no way she would admit that to Aimeric.

"If we starve, we become like zombies;" Aimeric continued, "slow moving creatures with no intelligence, only a raw animal instinct to feed. We can live off any blood—animal or human—but since human blood is tainted with each individual's character, it has a distinctive taste and so, it is their blood we crave. Each human has a different taste but it's always better than an animal's. The more passion a person has, whether passion for good or passion for so-called bad, the richer the taste.

"Excessive feeding is usually restricted; we don't want to deplete our food supply or make the humans suspicious. For these reasons our...feeding grounds...stretch for hundreds of miles. We can run at speeds unimaginable to humans, so it's nothing for us to go so far."

The woman had finished her meal and was now slowly moving her mouth away from the man. He slunk against the back of the bench. The woman turned, looking at Aralyn and wiping blood from her lips.

Aralyn's heart jumped and she looked away, turning back to Aimeric. He was grinning again, stabbing the woman with his intense eyes.

"Don't worry, she won't come near you with me here," he whispered.

“Why?” Aralyn’s voice was barely audible. “She doesn’t belong to your clan.” She wasn’t sure if ‘clan’ was the right word. Aimeric didn’t correct her, though, so it must have been accurate.

“She knows about me.” His tone was arrogant. “There’s a certain, shall we say, aura about me; they know I’m much more powerful than them.”

“Them?”

“There are three types of vampires, my love. I am one of only a handful on this planet: a Master. You will be an Elite, the next down, because you will be my creation. Lessers are the most common and the weakest of vampires, though they are still powerful by human standards. Lessers are created by Elites or other Lessers. All vampires know the class of another vampire simply by looking at them. That is why she and any like her know to fear me.”

“What is she?”

“A Lesser. And now, my love,” he stood, taking Aralyn’s hand and pulling her up with him. He kissed her fingers. “Walk with me.”

They took the walkway leading deeper into the park, weaving in between the trees. As they passed the woman still on the bench, she glared at Aralyn, hunger in her eyes even though she had just fed. The dead man sat beside her, the smallest bit of crimson seeping out of the two holes in his neck. Aralyn resisted a shudder of disgust as Aimeric led her by without a word to the female.

“There are many clans throughout the world,” Aimeric said as they walked. “Most are led by Elites, some by Lessers, and even fewer by Masters. The one on the bench was a stray, either banished or a runaway. Most of the time vampires from other clans do not interact with one another in order to avoid conflicts; it’s kind of an unwritten law. We’re very territorial as well, if a vampire from another clan crosses over the line of our residence, it could mean death. Places like the park, however, are public, not owned by any of us because it is a mutual feeding ground, therefore we must keep our

differences in check. To do this, we usually ignore each other as you saw a moment ago.”

Aralyn was uneasy hearing all of this. It was as if it were becoming definite and getting closer and closer to her damned fate of becoming a member of the walking dead. She was going to lose her soul. Her sense of reality. Her conscious; the difference between right and wrong. What if a vampire took on certain characteristics of the one who created it? Would she become a heartless being like Aimeric? Killing, raping, and torturing without a feeling of regret? She didn't want to become that. She didn't have a choice, though, did she?

Aimeric would wait until she gave birth, but nine months didn't seem too far away for eternal damnation.

They walked a while longer, mostly in silence as Aimeric let her absorb the new information. There was more, he told her, but he didn't want to tell her too much at once. He promised to explain more on the way home.

They finished their walk and went back to the car. When they got back to the club Aimeric led Aralyn right inside, going past the bouncer without even a glance. The bouncer did nothing to stop him.

She was immediately bombarded with loud music, strobing lights, and a dancing and chattering crowd. Cologne and perfume mixed with the nauseating scent of alcohol and cigarette smoke invaded her nostrils and throat. Feeling claustrophobic, she instinctively moved closer to Aimeric, grasping his hand as her eyes scanned the room.

She found Claire sitting on one of the bar stools across the room. She was talking to a young woman. The woman was human, beautiful, of course, and listening to Claire intently. She nodded her head along with whatever Claire was saying.

Aimeric pulled Aralyn along. They climbed a set of twisting metal stairs to a second floor with a balcony that overlooked the entire dance floor. She watched her sister over the rail as they walked towards a corner booth. Claire

was now leaning over, kissing the woman and licking her bottom lip. They stood after a second and crossed the room to a side door exit.

Aralyn didn't want to think about what her sister might be doing to the poor woman. She turned her attention back to Aimeric as they reached the table. It was at the end of the balcony, next to the rail. He gestured for her to sit so she crawled into the booth, leaving room for him to follow.

He kissed her neck as he settled beside her. "Watch me and then wait for my signal. You're going to witness how I feed."

She wasn't comfortable with that idea. Her stomach was already a myriad of twisted nerves, feeling sickened by the realization that she was going to be like him.

She nodded, though, not daring to question his demand.

Aimeric was looking over the rail so she followed his line of vision. He appeared to have his eyes glued to a young man. If he was even a man; he might have still been a boy; he didn't look very old, maybe seventeen at the most. Wasted on drugs and alcohol. His eyes were unfocused and his body was moving to the music in jerky, rapid movements. His head banged to the drumbeats. The chains attached to his pants were convulsing and jingling. The one strung from his nose to his ear also shook with his movements. His hair was spiky and dyed; black with green tips.

"Stay here." Aimeric stood from the table and Aralyn's eyes followed him as he descended the stairs into the crowd.

Movement out of the corner of her eye distracted her from him, however, and she turned her head left, startled to see a man standing against the wall with his arms folded over his broad chest. He hadn't been there when she first sat at the table. This part of the balcony was empty; most of its inhabitants were near the stairs. She hadn't seen the man come up; he seemed to appear out of nowhere.

He noticed her looking at him and his odd colored eyes narrowed as he smirked. His eyes were the color of blood.

Aralyn, come here.

Aimeric was calling to her. She turned her attention back to the first floor and saw that he was standing with the boy, whispering in his ear though his cold eyes were on Aralyn. She hurriedly stood, glancing at the man one more time. He was gone though. There was no way he could have left without her knowing it; she would have seen him going down the stairs. She searched for him in case she was wrong and, for a moment, she thought her imagination had been playing with her. Perhaps he hadn't been there at all. Or maybe he was a vampire and had moved too fast for her to see.

Get down here, Aralyn.

His voice was hard and stern this time; he was getting annoyed with her hesitation. She brushed her concerns about the man aside and rushed down the stairs towards Aimeric's waiting hand. He grabbed her arm, pulling her hard against his side. She grimaced as he started to lead both, her and the boy, to the same exit Claire had gone out.

"What took you so long to come to me?" he asked.

"I thought I saw something...I'm sorry."

"You are to come to me the moment I summon you. Do not hesitate again, Aralyn."

"Okay, I'm sorry," she said in a breathless whisper. The grip he had on her arm was painful.

At her second apology he eased his grasp on her, sliding his fingers down to lock with her hand instead. The boy seemed oblivious to what was going on, off in his own little world.

They slipped outside without bringing unwanted attention from any of the others in the club. They were in an alley that was empty except for a dumpster and several boxes of trash around it. The fog was coming into the city now, laying a thin blanket over the trash and weaving in and out of the buildings.

She felt uncomfortable again, afraid and nervous, knowing Aimeric was going to kill the boy. She scooted up against the wall and hugged herself when Aimeric let go of her, taking the boy near the dumpster. She watched, knowing

that's what she was supposed to be doing; observe the ways of the vampires whether she wanted to or not.

Aimeric ran his hands up the boy's chest and into his stiff hair in one smooth motion before leaning over and licking his throat. The boy's eyes fluttered and he tilted his head back, not seeming to notice the chill Aralyn knew he must have been feeling with Aimeric's cold tongue pressed against his flesh. The boy clutched at Aimeric's shirt, holding onto his sides and shamelessly thrusting his pelvis against Aimeric's thigh. The boy then moved his mouth to reach Aimeric's and kissed him with force. Aimeric humored him for a few minutes, their mouths moving together almost violently.

Not caring to watch this part of the ritual, Aralyn moved her eyes to the dumpster. An ashy hand was dangling over the side of the brown painted metal. Claire's victim. A thin trail of blood ran from her wrist and down her fingers. The walls of Aralyn's stomach clenched together and she had to look away.

She wasn't sure if she would ever get used to this life of death and blood.

Watch. You have to get over that little phobia of yours. Aimeric's voice entered her mind, startling her. Apparently the time was up for her to keep her thoughts private.

The boy was moaning now but it wasn't all out of pleasure. Aimeric had planted his fangs in his throat and was now greedily drawing the crimson into his mouth. The boy's limbs went limp and he was just a lifeless doll in Aimeric's arms now. Deep, animal growls found their way into Aimeric's throat as he sucked at the wound. The sound was frightening. Disturbing. Yet, she couldn't look away. She wasn't sure if the reason for that was because Aimeric was holding her attention or if it was just mesmerizing and her own curiosity, her own disgust, that kept her eyes glued to the connection between Aimeric's lips and the boy's throat.

The boy's body hit the ground with a dull thud and Aimeric turned to her. Red liquid contrasted the pale flesh around his lips, dripping from the corners of his mouth.

“Blood. There are many ways it can affect us. Most of the time it does nothing for us except give us the energy to stay alive as thinking, cunning, beautiful creatures,” he said, looking at her with lust in his eyes. “One can become drunk off of it either by drinking too much or if the blood was poisoned with alcohol or drugs from the stupidity of humans.

“Take this asshole for example,” he kicked the felled body. “His blood was polluted with speed and ecstasy and now, so am I.” He started walking towards her. Slow steps. Cold expression. “But sexual lust brought on from bloodlust doesn’t always have to be from the poisons in the blood. Blood itself can bring on sexual lust. It can also temporarily bring on strength that even we consider extraordinary. The effect only lasts a few hours at the most, but it is usually quite severe.

“There is more.” He held his hand out, now only a few inches away from her. “Touch me.”

She obeyed, reaching for him with shaking fingers. “You’re warm.”

“Yes. Also only a temporary effect.” He pushed his hard body up against her, locking his arms around her waist and drawing her lips up to meet his mouth.

He was rough, hungry. Affected by both the blood and the contaminants of his victim. His hands went to the skirt Aralyn was wearing and he hiked it up around her waist while wrapping her leg around his waist.

Aralyn tried her hardest to ignore the metal taste in his mouth and the warm, sticky drops that were being smeared against her chin from the remains of Aimeric’s meal on his lips. Her head wasn’t clouded this time, yet she did nothing to fight the intense feeling welling up inside of her. Willingly, she moved her mouth against his and helped to guide him inside of her.

It was over quickly, an intense moment of passion. They straightened their clothes and Aimeric licked away the blood that had been smeared on Aralyn’s chin before going back inside the club. They left the body on the ground.

"Where's Claire?" Aralyn asked, searching the room.

"She'll show up sooner or later. Come." Aimeric growled the words and shoved through the crowd, leading Aralyn to the other end where the limo waited outside.

"We're leaving without her?" Aralyn asked.

"She does this all the time."

They pushed through the door and went outside. Aimeric held the car door open for her and she crawled in, settling herself on the seat. She looked out the window, still looking for Claire though she doubted she would spot her.

"Take us back to Prudence," Aimeric ordered the driver.

He nodded his chubby, bald head and then pulled the car away from the building.

"He's not one of you, is he?" Aralyn said.

"No."

"Why do you-"

"Not kill him? Torture him?"

She nodded.

"You never know when you're going to need a ride during the day. Frederick and I have an agreement: he promises his loyalty to me in exchange for my protection."

"Oh." Aralyn hesitated before asking her next question. She was never sure if she was asking too much but he hadn't said anything and she was curious. "Does the sun kill you?"

Aimeric laughed as if it was a stupid question; a low chuckle. "It doesn't kill *me*. Only to Elites and Lessers is the sun lethal. I have to avoid it because it will affect me the same way starvation would. I would become an unintelligent sloth."

"Can you reverse it?"

"Not from the sun, no, which is why I avoid it. Only starvation can be reversed."

"Are the stories and legends true? Do you live forever?"

"All vampires are immortal in the sense that they do not age and will not die from age alone. But there are ways to kill them. As I'm sure you remember."

Aralyn looked down at her lap, twisting her hands together. Of course Virgil had come to mind.

“Lessers can be killed by a wooden stake to the heart, fire, sunlight, and by decapitation. Elites can only be killed by the latter two.”

“...Can anything kill you?” she asked quietly.

He looked down at her and smirked. “Sorry to disappoint you, my love, but there is only one way I can be killed and you will never learn of it. Now, rest. You’re tired and it’s a long way back. You’ve learned enough for now.”

She couldn’t argue with him; her eyelids felt heavy and her eyes burned. Laying her head on his lap, she closed her eyes, her head swimming with new questions. The most important was: What was the one thing that could kill Aimeric? The one that startled her most, however, was not a question but a realization: She no longer desired his death.

Chapter Eighteen

Feelings Revealed

The soft coos of a baby awoke Aralyn. She wasn't in the car anymore and Aimeric was nowhere to be seen. The room she found herself in was strange. Empty. Dark. She couldn't see anything. A soft mattress hugged her weight and as she pulled the covers back her eyes adjusted to the dark. She was wearing an oversized nightgown. Her stomach was still stretched from pregnancy and she suddenly remembered giving birth a few hours ago.

The coos turned to impatient crying, the baby's loud cries filling the room. A single beam of silver light suddenly appeared, cascading over the bassinet in the corner. It helped guide Aralyn to her newborn. She started to reach into the basket to pick up the child.

Startled, she gave a soft yell and drew her arms back. The baby's face was stained with crimson tears, little rivers of blood running down its swollen cheeks. Tiny pointed teeth hung below his upper lip.

Aralyn stared at the screaming monster-baby, not wanting to touch it. It frightened her.

"It's disgusting that you would allow this to happen to your own baby."

Turning around, Aralyn saw the strange man from the club. His eyes were red, the look on his pale face disgusted. She knew of nothing to say except to defend herself.

"I didn't."

"You did!" His booming voice startled her again and she flinched back. "You were the child's protector. He instinctively trusted you because you are his mother and you *let* this happen to him!"

"I don't even know what's happened to him," Aralyn cried in a desperate whisper, glancing at the still-crying baby. "Who are you?"

"You will find out soon enough." The man hissed his words and then disappeared.

With angry tears clouding her eyes, Aralyn spun back around to the bassinet, her fingers clenching the sides. The baby stopped crying upon seeing her. He was now staring at her with a knowing look in his eyes. He smiled and kicked his legs.

Aralyn reached down and touched his soft ivory skin. Maybe she had overreacted before. He wasn't so strange looking after all.

She picked the baby up and kissed his soft dark hair, rocking him in her arms.

"You're beautiful," she whispered, kissing him again.

"Aralyn. We're home."

Aimeric was gently shaking her shoulder. She stirred in her sleep and then opened her eyes, looking up at him in that dazed state between sleep and awake. Slowly, she pulled herself up. Her dream had confused her and she still felt stupid from it.

"What is it?" Aimeric frowned.

"Nothing," she answered, her throat dry from sleeping. It had only been a dream; there was no need to make a big deal about it.

His frown deepened but he didn't say anything else. He led Aralyn inside, keeping his hand on the small of her back. A few of the vampires had already returned for the rest of the night and were lounging in the living room watching a football game. Two males were arguing about a play. One sneered something that earned him a shove. After he steadied himself he shoved the other back and the two were soon rolling on the floor, punching each other.

Aimeric slammed the door. "Knock it off!"

The two men forgot their fight and jumped up at the sound of Aimeric's booming voice and the loud latch of the door. They hung their heads and mumbled in unison, "Sorry."

Aimeric glared at them, keeping them in place by the authority of his cold eyes as he continued to lead Aralyn. They went upstairs.

As soon as they reached the bedroom Aralyn broke away from him and started towards the bathroom to change. He pulled on her arm, yanking her back to him. It startled her. She looked up at him with wide eyes. His jaw was clenched and his eyes were narrowed.

"Why did it take so long for me to get your attention tonight?" he asked.

Aralyn lowered her eyes to the floor. She had hoped he would forget about that. Why did he wait until now to bring it up anyway? She wasn't sure what she should tell him. He would get jealous and even angrier if she told him it had been a man who distracted her. He would think it was because she had been attracted to him. And then what would he think if she told him she had dreamt about that man, too?

"I see." He had gone into her thoughts. Apparently her freedom for the night was over.

Aralyn sucked on her upper lip, waiting for the threats and accusations.

"If he comes near you again, tell me immediately. Do not talk to him; I don't want you having anything to do with him."

She let out a soft breath, relieved that he wasn't yelling at her.

"Who is he?" she asked.

"None of your concern. Go get changed."

Sighing in disappointment that he wasn't going to offer any new information but knowing not to argue, Aralyn continued to the bathroom. She showered quickly and then slipped into a nightgown that went just past her knees. After taking a moment to run a brush through her wet hair, she

opened the door and stood in the doorway for a moment, watching Aimeric. He was standing at the window with the curtains drawn back, staring up at the moon. He was deep in thought, far from where she was. Something was troubling him. Was it the man at the club or something else? Something unrelated? She wished he would confide in her. Though she told herself her desire for that was only to know what he was thinking so she knew where she stood with him; not that she cared about his feelings.

She made her way to the bed and crawled under the covers. There was a long moment of silence. She didn't dare say anything because the look on his face indicated he was in a bad mood; his lips were tight and his eyes were still narrowed.

Finally, he turned and headed for the door.

"Go to sleep," he said gruffly.

"You mean...alone? Are you leaving?" She couldn't hide the hurt tone in her voice.

"Is that a problem?" His voice was hard with sarcasm.

Twisting her hands in her lap and looking down, she shrugged. "I guess not."

Aimeric scoffed, sounding disgusted. "Are you saying you *want* me, a 'monster,' to lay with you? You never did willingly before."

"What's wrong with you?" she asked

He glared. "You're getting quite free with your words lately."

"I'm sorry, Master," she said in a small voice, trying to hold back hot tears. Once more she convinced herself that her hurt feelings were only an after-effect of his control over her for so long.

With another disgusted sound, which he growled from deep in his throat, Aimeric turned and yanked the door open and then was gone, slamming it shut behind him.

She was alone. Left to go to sleep without him. She let the tears fall as she lay back on the pillows, clutching one to her chest. She didn't understand her tears, why she was so

emotional. She should be used to his temper by now. But she didn't know exactly why he was mad or where he was going. Had the man at the club really bothered him that much? He must have. It didn't seem Aralyn was the one who had upset him or he would have punished her in some way.

Maybe this was her punishment, she thought. To lay alone, with no arms around her to keep her safe through the rest of the night and into the afternoon. She had gotten so used to sleeping in his arms that it felt different now, almost wrong, with him gone. But those feelings were only because of familiarity, nothing else. Right?

She denied the answers that came into her mind that night. To have feelings—real feelings—for Aimeric would make her just as sick as him....

She lay there for hours and tried to get to sleep but her mind was too jumbled. Even though her eyes burned and she wanted to sleep, she couldn't. A nagging feeling pestered her until, finally, she stood from the bed and slipped on a robe. She went downstairs with the intentions of getting a snack from the kitchen.

It was raining again. She could hear the icy ribbons of water hitting the windows throughout the house. She looked at a clock and saw that it was almost eight in the morning now.

The house was quiet. Everyone else was sleeping, getting ready for the night. She briefly wondered why vampires had to sleep if it was blood that gave them energy. Or maybe the blood just kept them mobile and they needed rest like any other thinking being.

She poured herself a glass of orange juice and drank it quickly, her eyes searching the room. There was an odd feeling in her gut. Almost like someone was watching her. The feeling she often got after the crash a year ago. Now, of course, she knew that feeling then was because Aimeric had been watching her. But he had no reason to stalk her now, did he? The feeling was coming from something else. Or *someone* else. Now she wished she would have stayed

upstairs. She wasn't comfortable down here; she felt like someone was going to harm her. Aimeric's bedroom was a sanction—she knew no one would try anything there.

After clumsily setting the glass in the dirty sink, Aralyn left the kitchen in a rush, almost jogging. She was just about to climb the stairs when something caught her eye, something near the window by the front door. There was a considerable gap in the curtains so she could see outside. Standing on the porch was the man from the club. His eerie red eyes stared at her and she felt compelled to stay where she was; one foot on the first step, her hand on the rail. Their eyes were locked together; red and violet. Her feet were too heavy to move. Her heart pounded and her blood felt like hardening concrete in her arms.

The man smiled, crimson lips turning up against a pale face that was framed with silver hair. He raised his hand, beckoning Aralyn outside with a finger.

Her head felt as heavy as her feet did, it was almost like when Aimeric was controlling her. Yet she was in charge of her own thoughts, her own movements. It was different yet somehow the same, if that made sense. She felt drawn to him, but it was her decision to go.

She quietly opened the door and slipped outside onto the porch, hugging herself against the wind and cold rain. At least the icy needles were blocked by the roof over the porch.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"My name is unimportant, Aralyn." His voice was soft, kind.

"You know mine."

His face cracked into a friendly smile. "Yes, I do. Fair enough then. My name is Orrin, I was a friend of Virgil's."

That name brought a piercing pain to her heart and she had to take a deep breath to get rid of it. Virgil was gone now. There was no sense getting upset and dwelling on the past.

"What are you doing here? You are a vampire, aren't you?"

"Half, actually."

Aralyn raised an eyebrow. "How can you be a half vampire?"

"The same way you're condemning your child to become half." His tone was now one of stern concern.

"What child? I don't even know if I'm pregnant yet, it's only been two weeks."

"You are."

"How do you know?"

"I can sense another life in you; it's one of my gifts, something even *Aimeric* can't do."

Speaking of *Aimeric*....

"What are you doing here?" she repeated. "You don't belong to his clan, aren't you taking a huge risk in being here?"

He nodded. "I am. I've come here to stop you from making a mistake. You cannot allow *Aimeric* to destroy that child's soul. I'm here to rescue you."

"Rescue? I don't need to be..." She paused. Did she need to be rescued?

"I'll take you away from *Aimeric*, away from this hell. I owe it to Virgil. Just say the words, Aralyn."

Away from *Aimeric*. It's what she had wanted since the first night she met him. He had done so much to her. So many horrible things. Including killing the man she had loved right in front of her.

Yet, she was reluctant.

"I don't even know you..." she shook her head. "I can't trust you."

"I'm offering you freedom, isn't that proof enough that you can trust me?" Orrin took a step towards her. "You don't deserve this supposed life. Neither does that baby you're carrying. You can't let *Aimeric* turn the child into what I am. It's no life to live. I am an outcast, accepted by one clan out of sheer luck and their grace. There is no guarantee your child will be so lucky. I've been beaten for what I am, almost to the point of death. Real death. Please, Aralyn. Come with me."

"I can't..." she whispered.

“Why?” He was getting annoyed, his voice hardening.

“Because, I...I love Aimeric.” The words shocked even her. Her eyes widened and she lost her breath until Orrin stepped nearer, his hands out as if he wanted to grab her shoulders. He stopped, though, as if remembering something and clenched his fists instead.

“You’re under his spell, there’s no way you could consciously mean that; he’s a killer, Aralyn! Once you’re with me and Claire, you will realize that you don’t mean it!”

“Claire? Where is she? You two are in this together?”

Orrin shook his head. Regret was painted on his face; he realized he had said too much. He backed away, mumbling under his breath something that sounded like a string of curse words.

“Please...if you love your sister, forget I said that; Aimeric would kill her if he knew.”

“Knew what?” She was getting angry. Tired of being left in the dark all the time.

“I can’t say any more, please don’t ask me. Just, don’t say anything, don’t even think it, or he will know.”

“Of course. I love my sister, I won’t say anything.”

He seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. “Thank you. Now listen to me, Aralyn: you do not love Aimeric. You only think you do because that is what he’s molded into your mind. Please, for your own sake and the sake of your child, that innocent life...reconsider?”

“No. I know how I feel. I do love him. I don’t know why or how, except that he makes me feel safe now.”

Shoulders dropping, Orrin sighed. He started to protest but, sniffing the air, closed his mouth. With one last desperate look into Aralyn’s eyes, he disappeared, running as an invisible wave off the porch and into the trees, shaking the leaves in the opposite direction the wind was blowing.

Confused, Aralyn went back inside. She was freezing. Her entire body was shaking. She ran upstairs, taking two steps at a time, and crawled back into bed, bringing her knees and the blankets up to her chin.

A second later the door opened and in walked Aimeric. He looked at her with a suspicious eye.

"What were you doing outside?" he asked, taking off a long coat with a hood. He tossed it to the floor.

"I went downstairs to get something to eat and something caught my eye on the way back up. I just went out to see what it was."

"And?"

She looked at him, confused, trying to keep Orrin out of her thoughts. She also tried not to think about the news of the baby. It was too early for her to have known on her own. Aimeric would want to know how she knew so soon. So she kept her mind as blank as possible.

"What was it?" he asked.

"I don't know. It was gone by the time I got out there, probably a cat or something," she lied.

He studied her, a cold grin creeping onto his face as he made his way across the bedroom and onto the bed.

"Is that so?" he asked as he crawled on top of her, kissing her lips.

Is what so? She wondered desperately as she kissed him back and locked her arms around him. What had he seen in her mind?

He pulled away from her mouth and looked down at her for a long moment before continuing.

"Do you want me to say I love you, too, Aralyn?" His tone was mocking and sadistic.

Aralyn averted her eyes, looking past his shoulder, as her cheeks flooded hot with shame and embarrassment. She was disgusted with herself, ashamed at her newly revealed feelings for this horrible creature. However, she was relieved he hadn't seen Orrin in her mind. Turning her eyes back to him, her fingers clawing into the shirt he wore, she bravely said:

"Are vampires even capable of love?"

He smirked. "Vampires are capable of a lot of things. We can be passionate, emotional, even deep. It all depends on the man or woman before. Who they were, what they were like

before they were turned; their thoughts, desires, passions, and fears. A good portion of their vampiric self is a product of who they wanted to be, even their physical characteristics; what they've always wanted to look like. When a person is turned, they become who they've always wanted to be. For the most part anyway. They do take on some of the characteristics of their maker."

She took a few seconds to mull this over.

"So...what kind of man were you?"

His cold grin slithered back into place. "You really want to know who I am?" He moved off of her, sitting up and holding out a hand for her to take. "Come with me and I'll show you."

He was daring her. She could tell by his menacing stare, the way he held his hand out; it was as if he knew she would be too afraid to take him up on his offer.

She tried not to be intimidated by him. Swallowing her fear, she took his hand and allowed him to lead her downstairs to a place she had never seen. She had overlooked it so many times, assuming it was just another closet. A door to the right of the staircase, down a short, dark corridor.

Chapter Nineteen

Psycho

Aralyn's heart felt like it was trying to drill right through her chest. She didn't know what she was expecting to see, but she did know that with Aimeric it could be anything. He had one arm around her waist and was reaching up with the other. He felt around the top of the door frame for a second, retrieving a small key that he used to unlock the door with.

They were unexpectedly welcomed by a rush of gray light. The curtains had been pulled open, inviting the daylight in through the huge picture window that was being pounded with the heavy rain. Aimeric cursed under his breath and muttered what sounded like "Cora" as he rushed across the room, pulling the pieces of navy blue material together. They were swallowed by darkness. A few seconds later the room glowed to dim life as Aimeric adjusted a switch on the wall that lit a hanging lamp over a large mahogany desk.

"Are you all right?"

"Do not ask me such a foolish question," he growled. "Obviously I'm fine."

"Sorry," she mumbled, averting her eyes to search the room.

It appeared they were standing in an office though she had no idea why Aimeric would need one. The desk took up the center of the room, sitting on an expensive looking rug. An office chair sat behind the desk and most of the walls were taken up by ceiling-to-floor bookshelves. The shelves held all kinds of books: fiction, nonfiction, fantasy, fairy tales, horror, even text books. Some of the books were crisp, brand new, and others were so old they looked like they would fall apart if picked up. There was a fireplace on the eastern wall with small statues of fantasy creatures on the mantel. Set on the floor in front of it were larger statues; dragons and

gargoyles. The room was also immaculate like the rest of his rooms.

Aimeric first closed and locked the door they had come through and then went to the bookshelf on the west wall. He took out a book with a dragon's head on the spine, revealing a lever that would release the shelf. He pushed it down. There was a loud click. Aimeric slid the shelf to the side with ease and a new door was exposed.

"Take my hand," he said holding his arm out.

Aralyn obeyed and took the few steps towards him so she could grasp his fingers. Her stomach fluttered with excitement and nervousness.

"This is my secret," he said in a low voice. "To you and everyone else here this place does not exist. Do you understand?"

She nodded, noting the underlying warning in his tone.

He opened the door and she saw a long path that descended far underground, consumed by impenetrable darkness. Her throat closed up as Aimeric started to lead her down the stairs. She was somewhat claustrophobic and hated the idea of being wrapped up in total darkness without knowing where she was or what might be accompanying her. Unconsciously her fingernails dug into Aimeric's hand with how tight she was gripping it. They reached the bottom of the stairs and walked on. She couldn't see. She couldn't breathe. Her stomach was tight and her legs felt heavy. She thought she might pass out and even stumbled a few times.

Aimeric shoved her against the cold, stone wall and pressed his body hard against hers, keeping her from moving.

"You are in no danger here, Aralyn. I can see everything, hear everything. There is no one else here. Now calm down." He touched his lips to hers in several reassuring pecks.

She heeded his promise and took in a few calming breaths, taking comfort in the feel of his body against hers, as if he was protecting her; he was her shield.

Though calmer, she was still uneasy and felt vulnerable and weak in the thick blackness she was trapped in. She

needed Aimeric. He was her eyes, her strength. She didn't know where to go or how to get out of this place.

She closed her eyes, wrapping an arm around his waist and laying her head on his chest. With her eyes closed it was as if she was in control of the darkness. In her mind, she knew that all she had to do was open them again and she would be able to see everything. Keeping her eyes closed gave her more of a calming feeling.

Neither of them said anything else as they continued. The air was thick with the odor of dirt and mold. The musty smell was nauseating. Her bare feet trudged along the dirt floor. Small rocks clung to her heels and toes. She wished she had known to put on shoes before coming down here.

Finally, they stopped and she heard the release of a door. The thick, metallic scent of blood invaded her nose and once more her stomach churned as she thought of what Aimeric might be showing her.

"Brace yourself," he said as he let her go.

She stood in place and waited. Aimeric moved away from her and she heard him pull on a chain and then a soft click that lit a light bulb dangling from the ceiling. They were standing in an old storage room. It wasn't very big. It was cramped with a metal desk, chair and dented file cabinet. The ceiling rafters were covered with soil and dust.

"It's a dangerous little room, a fire hazard, with only one way out," Aimeric said, thoughtfully. "But this is where I used to spend a lot of my time. I came here to think, brood, feel sorry for myself. That was a very long time ago, of course."

Aralyn barely heard him. Her eyes had discovered the walls. There was something very strange about them. They had an odd texture and were an unusual color. There were messages written all over them. Most of the words were indecipherable as if they had been hurriedly scribbled. She stepped closer to the western wall, trying to make out one of the messages.

To live is to die was one of them. *Darkness is my light* was another.

The ink was crusted, dried out. She ran a finger over the word, *'live,'* and her blood seemed to curdle in her veins as she realized what it was. The ink wasn't ink. The messages were written in blood. But that wasn't what terrified her, what sickened her the most. When she had touched the wall it felt rubbery.

She wiped her hands on her clothes in frantic strokes, trying to rid her fingers of the blood and the feel of the wall.

"Hu-human," she stuttered as she worked to wipe her hands.

Aimeric came up to stand behind her, nodding in nonchalance. "Yes, human flesh." He braced his hands on her shoulders. "Preserved and sewn together with wire laced with their hair to make the perfect wallpaper."

She covered her mouth with her hand to keep the contents of her stomach from spilling out and she turned, trying to shove away from him so she could go sit down at the desk. He stopped her, hooking an arm around her waist.

"I did this before I was turned," he continued.

"You're...disgusting," she mumbled.

He laughed. "Yes, that's what the stable boy said when he found the room I had in Norfolk. He died shortly after, of course."

She remembered now why she was supposed to hate him.

"You see, Aralyn, even as a mortal I was...different. Psychologists these days would probably say that I didn't get enough love as a child. That is true, I was ignored most of my childhood but I don't believe that's what caused my...unique idea of art."

"This isn't art, it's mental disturbance," Aralyn said. She was hunched over his arm, trying not to look at the walls.

"Do not raise your voice to me, darling." He was surprisingly calm.

She pushed at him again and this time he let her go. Weak with disgust and halfway blinded by her tears, she felt around the desk and made her way to the chair.

"I wouldn't if I were you," Aimeric said.

She looked at the chair and scoffed in abhorrence when she saw that it, too, was upholstered with human flesh. Instead, she sat on the desk, bringing her knees up to her chin and closing her eyes, trying to imagine herself out of this place. Aimeric leaned over her, petting down her hair and continuing with the story of his former life.

"I was born Aimeric Easton Wells. I was always fascinated by human flesh. I thought it was beautiful but, unfortunately the beauty of skin doesn't reflect the individual person. People—humans—are greedy, self-loving creatures. Most of them don't deserve to be beautiful. Back then, I thought I was doing the world a favor by ridding it of its evil hosts. I put their beauty to good use. I made the really abhorrent ones feel how I cut away their skin, doing it to them while they were still alive. They screamed for hours until, finally, death took them."

"God..." Aralyn groaned and leaned away from him.

He didn't seem to notice her disgust with him as he continued without even a warning glare.

"I preserved the skin so it wouldn't dry out, crack and deteriorate. Then I sewed it together and plastered it onto my walls. I know it's hideous to you. It was to everyone else who found it, too, though none of them lived long enough to tell anyone about my room. Don't worry, though," he touched her cheek, delicately sliding his fingers down it. She flinched. "You won't become a part of my collection."

"You really are a monster," she whispered in response, not thinking of the possible consequences.

He didn't get angry, though. She heard the smirk and irony in his voice as he responded:

"A monster you fell in love with."

She shook her head though she couldn't verbally deny it.

He chuckled a sardonic laugh and leaned down close to her face, whispering against her ear, "Don't lie to yourself. You can't help but love me no matter what I've done in the past; it's the human in you." He kissed her cheek and then

straightened his back, continuing in a louder, informative tone.

“I changed when I met *her*. I haven’t used human flesh to decorate ever since. Her name was Caitlin. I fell in love with her only a few weeks before my mortal body died. We met at a Christmas party. I believe I was twenty-eight at the time but after four hundred years my memory is a bit lacking. She taught me that, in spite of the ugliness a lot of people held inside themselves, most also had at least one good quality.” He laughed again. “It sounds a bit trite hearing myself say it now but it’s the truth. I learned that the raging drunk had a soft side where his children were concerned and would do all he could to protect them. Or the gossiping woman had a warm heart for her sick neighbor, that kind of thing.

“Caitlin and I used to sit under the stars and talk intimately with one another for hours. She had such a kind and warm personality that I then realized she could never find my room, not because I would have to kill her—I would never—but because I knew she would be horrified just like the others. For the first time since I had put up the first patch of skin, I felt ashamed.

“It was then that I decided I would never take another human life again and never would I use their flesh to paper my walls or anything else.

“Not even a week after that night that I made that promise to myself, I died. It was an accident, of course. One of the family horses had gotten out of the pen and was walking on the frozen lake. She hit a weak spot and fell through the ice. I tried to save her but ended up drowning as well. I went to hell, of course. The things I had done were not so easily forgiven. But I was not yet ready to leave earth so I begged Satan to send me back. He agreed but on the condition that I would become what I am now.” He paused and Aralyn looked up at him, her cheeks wet with tears. He was smirking down at her. “A monster as you say.”

She didn’t respond.

“I loved my new life so much that I went to Caitlin in order to turn her so we could be together for eternity. But she refused me. In tears, she begged me not to take her and damn her soul.”

Aralyn watched him closely as his eyes locked onto the ceiling. His mind went back in time, to that night. With *her*. With Caitlin. Stupidity and embarrassment burned her cheeks. Here she was in love with this creature—though she was still unsure if it was her own will—and he still loved this girl from so long ago. Aimeric didn’t love Aralyn, she was merely a replacement.

“I did love her,” he said in response to her thoughts. “She was beautiful; hair the color of sand, skin like porcelain. She had a heart of pure gold. But don’t mistake my motives, Aralyn; you aren’t a replacement. Had I only been looking for a replacement for Caitlin, I would have found one long before now.”

She didn’t say anything, only gritted her teeth and turned away, trying to pretend that she didn’t care what he had said.

“I came here to Rhode Island in 1846. This mansion had been abandoned long before I claimed it. I became home sick after the first few years here; I felt alone even though I already had a few companions with me. I made this room as a way to deal with my loneliness. I wasn’t breaking my promise, not really, because I was no longer mortal. Becoming a vampire reawakened my fascination with hearing the tortured screams of a human being—that is the reason for my pets in the basement and the reason I was able to plaster this room with flesh. I only did this room, though. I haven’t skinned a human for wallpaper in well over a hundred years.”

Aralyn turned back to him when he stopped speaking and saw that he was looking at her thoughtfully, waiting for her to say something. She didn’t so he continued.

“That is who I was. This is who I am. I may be disgusting and a monster in your beautiful eyes, but that doesn’t mean I cannot love. My love for you is stronger than even my love for Caitlin.” He touched the long strands of ebony that

curtained her shoulders and raised her chin so he could kiss her mouth.

"I would gladly die all over again for you," he whispered against her lips.

She flinched back, sliding off the desk and making her way to the door.

"I want out of this place. Now," she said quietly.

Aimeric frowned, a gleam of anger in his eyes. He opened the door and she waited for him to switch off the light. She would have run down the corridor on her own if it weren't for the fact that it was still dark and she wouldn't be able to find her way out. He took her by the upper part of her arm and started to lead her away.

"You won't have to return to this room," his voice was hard, angry. "But remember, *you* wanted to know who I was; you asked, Aralyn."

"I wish I hadn't," she said through gritted teeth.

He didn't say anything else, not even a threat. All the way back to the room, Aralyn stifled the sick feeling in her stomach, inwardly cursing herself for admitting and allowing Aimeric to hear that she loved him. How could she? Maybe she should take Orrin up on his offer.

When they reached the bedroom, she jerked free of his grasp and ran to the bathroom, spilling vomit into the toilet. For a moment she wondered if she was sick from pregnancy but immediately brushed that thought out of her mind. It was too early for morning sickness.

She didn't want to go back out to him so after she rinsed her mouth out, she slid down to the floor, laying her head against the counter and closing her eyes. She was still crying.

Aimeric rapped on the door.

"Come out of there, Aralyn. You can't hide away for ever."

She didn't respond or make a move to get up so he opened the door and pulled her to her feet. She was reluctant but knew better than to argue. He led her to the bed and lay down with her, draping an arm over her waist.

“Go to sleep now.” He kissed her neck.

Aralyn closed her eyes, not bothering to say anything in response to him. She was soon asleep.

Her dreams were filled screams of the innocent, blood dripping from the walls and human flesh hanging from the ceiling.

Cold lips now pressed against the flesh of her neck. Aimeric was trying to wake her up by kissing her and running his hand up and down her side through the silk material of the robe she was still wearing. Once he saw she was awake, his kisses became more intense against her throat and shoulder and he rolled her over, placing a leg between both of her legs. He went to kiss her lips but she shoved at him and rolled back over, putting her back to him.

“Are you denying me, Aralyn?” he asked in a warning tone.

She didn’t respond.

“Giving me the silent treatment? Perhaps I should have waited to show you my room. Forgive me, I thought you could handle it,” he sneered.

She still didn’t say anything.

“Very well, I will play your game but only for a little while. When I come back, I expect you to respond to me. If you don’t, well,” his voice hardened, “consequences must be considered.”

He rolled off the bed and buttoned his shirt. She could feel his eyes on her back. He was angry with her. The air was tense and it was deathly quiet except for his dressing.

“I’ll be back later,” he snapped, slamming the door shut.

As soon as he was gone she looked at the clock on the wall. It was a little after seven in the evening. She had slept all day. She was still tired, though, so she closed her eyes.

Someone knocked on the door several minutes later and then opened it before giving her a chance to tell whoever it

was to go away. She looked over her shoulder and groaned as Morgan came into the room, carrying a tray of food.

“What, did he send you to watch me again?” she snapped, irritated as she sat up.

“Nope. He sent me to feed ya.” He chuckled as he stepped inside.

She hadn’t seen much of him in the last couple of weeks. Not that she was complaining.

He set the tray over her lap and then gestured at it as if she might not have noticed.

“Eat up,” he said.

She stared at the tray filled with fresh fruit and vegetables, a piece of baked ham and a serving of scrambled eggs. A tall glass of milk sat in the corner of the tray.

“I don’t like milk,” she said.

“I don’t care. Aimeric said to make sure you eat healthy an’ that’s what I’m doin’.”

Aralyn glared and sneered, “You’re such a little lap dog.”

He looked angry at first, but then smirked. “Look who’s talkin’.”

She was tempted to throw the milk at him. But she knew she needed it. Not for her but for the life growing inside of her; she needed the calcium. Holding her nose, she took several drinks. To her, milk smelled like the cow it came from and tasted what she imagined the stomach to taste like.

Once she finished eating, she ordered Morgan to take the tray and leave the room. He did as she said, finally learning that she now had some authority over him. He smirked at her the whole way out though.

After he left, she took a quick shower and then went back to bed. She didn’t have anything else to do and she was still tired anyway.

She lay there thinking about everything that had happened to her in the last several weeks. Especially the pregnancy. She hadn’t wanted it at first but now that she knew she was pregnant, she felt different. She wanted the baby and was glad to have it.

Another hour passed by before the door opened. She had her arm over her eyes so she moved it to see who it was. Of course it was Aimeric; there hadn't been a knock before the door opened. He was looking back at her as he closed the door and then casually started to unbutton his shirt. He pulled it off and tossed the material to the floor before working on his boots.

"Are we talking yet?" His voice was sarcastic. He threw his boots to the side.

"Do you *want* me to talk?" she asked just as moodily. She regretted the tone she used. But luckily he didn't seem to notice.

He smirked as he worked on his pants. Aralyn let her eyes roam his body and as he stood at the end of the bed, fully exposed, she felt aroused. That feeling sickened her. Just the sight of him naked was enough to send an electric pulse through her body. She wanted him against her, inside of her again, despite all she knew of him.

He crawled onto the bed, kissing her hard.

"Talking isn't really what I had in mind," he said.

She pushed at his chest but her heart wasn't in it.

"You want this just as much as I do, Aralyn. I know you do because I can hear your thoughts." He nipped at her bottom lip while he worked on undressing her.

She whimpered against his mouth, a half-hearted refusal, and he rolled them both onto their sides, bringing her leg up to wrap around his waist. He kissed her hard, thrusting his tongue into her mouth. She gasped loudly as he pushed into her and then, as they started to move together, she whimpered and moaned melodically.

"Don't be ashamed to admit what I do to you," he growled.

She tried to ignore his words but she couldn't ignore what she felt. Her fingernails dug into his shoulders.

"Scream for me, Aralyn."

She gave in, unable to control her feelings. She was disgusted with him, yes. And she did believe he was a

Dead Seed

monster. Yet she couldn't help but love him or respond to the pleasure he gave her.

He was cruel. Disturbed. But she didn't think she cared anymore.

Love can blind a person. Even if it's false love.

Chapter Twenty

Accusations

The first real sign of Aralyn's pregnancy came to her three weeks after the night she shamelessly screamed out during Aimeric's making love to her. She had been sleeping in his arms when she was violently awakened by the sick feeling in her stomach. Barely making it to the bathroom, she threw up twice before flushing the mess. She rinsed her mouth and washed her face before going back to bed, drowsily holding onto her mid-section.

Aimeric was awake and sitting up in bed, watching her with curiosity in his icy eyes.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She nodded, crawling back into bed.

"Are you pregnant, Aralyn?"

"Yes," she whispered, snuggling against his bare chest and closing her eyes. He kissed the top of her head.

"Good. We will release our men tonight."

Aralyn wasn't really aware of what he was saying. Her eyes were still heavy and she wanted to go back to sleep. Not that it mattered that she wasn't listening; he was talking more to himself than to her anyway. She was back to being asleep in only a few minutes.

When she woke again it was because a chill brushed her skin. She went to pull the blankets back up around her and realized Aimeric was no longer in the bed. He wasn't even in the room anymore. Curiosity woke her the rest of the way up and she slid out of the bed. She had a bad feeling.

Slipping on a robe, she left and wandered the halls upstairs first. She didn't find him so she descended to the first floor. She started to go to the basement but, seeing the door to Aimeric's office, she detoured to it. She knew it would be locked and didn't want to just burst in anyway, so she softly

knocked, trying to put out of her mind what was behind the bookshelf inside.

There wasn't an answer so she turned around. She was startled to see Mabel standing right behind her. She gasped. Her heart palpitated.

"What are you doing?" Mabel asked.

Aralyn composed herself and held her head high, not wanting to show she was afraid of her. "Looking for Aimeric."

The woman smiled devilishly and said, "He's in the basement," before turning on her heels and skipping to the front door, slipping outside into the night.

The bad feeling returned, clutching at Aralyn's windpipe. There was only one reason why Aimeric would be in the basement.

She rushed for the door and flung it open, running down the stone steps. The prison door was already open so she went inside. The stench of blood and rotting flesh hit her and she slowed her steps, peering cautiously around the dank, dark room.

Aimeric was standing with his back to her and in front of him was one of the two remaining men that had sex with her. He was chained to the wall. The second man was hanging from the ceiling by a noose. He was still alive, but barely. Blood dripped from multiple wounds, forming a puddle on the floor.

She covered her mouth to keep from screaming.

The first man started yelling, drawing her attention back to him. Aimeric was using a pair of pliers and twisting fishing wire around the man's fingers so tightly that it cut into his skin and was working on the bone. Three of his fingers were already cut off, only stumps protruding from his sweaty and bloody palm.

She gagged and had to look away, even more sensitive now that she was pregnant.

"Did you enjoy your time with her?" Aimeric was saying.

“You made us do it, you sick fuck!” the man yelled in between gasps of pain. Saliva foamed at the corners of his mouth.

“Aimeric, please stop,” Aralyn said quietly, making her way towards him and trying to keep her eyes off the bloodied men.

“Get back upstairs, Aralyn. This doesn’t concern you.”

She took his arm. “They only did what you told them to, please,” she whimpered.

He turned to her, eyes aflame. “I said in the beginning that they would die for touching you.”

“So kill them but don’t torture them.” She knew she was risking a lot by talking back to him but she didn’t believe he would do anything to her knowing she was carrying the child he wanted.

“Please,” she continued. “They can *feel*, Aimeric. I can’t imagine what they’re going through.”

“Are you asking me this because you care for them?”

“No. It’s nothing like that. I promise.”

He hesitated, glaring at the man from the corner of his eyes. The man glared back.

Aimeric pushed Aralyn to the side and then jumped forward, sinking his sharp fangs into the man’s throat. The back of his head hit the wall and his eyes met Aralyn’s as Aimeric began drinking from him. He mouthed “thank you” to her right before his body went limp and his eyes rolled into the back of his head.

Aralyn looked away, closing her eyes again.

A few seconds later she heard the release of a rope followed by a loud thump as though something heavy hit the ground. Cracking an eye open, she saw that Aimeric had dropped the second man to the floor and was standing over him, now attached to his neck. The first man was dead in the chains, his body drained of all its blood.

Aimeric finished with the second man and then stormed up to Aralyn, grabbing her by the shoulders and leaning his

face down close to hers. She flinched back and held her breath, the smell of the blood on his lips making her sick.

“Do not ask anything else of me anytime soon. I was generous today but do not expect me to wrap myself around your little finger just because you’re pregnant, Aralyn.”

She nodded in compliance, eyes wide, as the familiar feeling of terror from staring into his enraged eyes returned to her; they showed something to be feared. That white-hot flame concealed in his dark pupils. Such a small blaze yet one so powerful that it made her insides melt and cower before him.

Satisfied with her brief response, he pivoted in another gesture of his anger; jerking his body around. He left her there in the basement and she waited for the fear to subside, her feet too heavy to move. After a few minutes, she heard the front door slam shut and found she was able to move them again. She ran upstairs to the bedroom and flung herself on the large bed.

Questions flooded her mind and lulled her to sleep: she wondered again why she felt anything for Aimeric.

She questioned her heart.

Most of all, she questioned her own sanity.

Aralyn woke up a little while later. Someone was softly stroking her hair. She sat up, expecting to see Aimeric. She let out a soft gasp as she jumped to her knees and threw her arms around Claire. Her sister hadn’t been back since that night at the club.

“Oh, there, there. Did you miss me?” Claire asked in a tone that was almost mocking as she patted Aralyn’s back.

“Yes, I did.”

Claire smiled and then took Aralyn’s arms, checking her over for cuts and bruises.

“I see he’s taken better care of you this time,” she said, her voice now grim.

Aralyn nodded and Claire's mood reverted to cheerful; she smiled widely and grasped Aralyn's hands.

"I hear we're having a baby," she said.

Guilt struck once more though Aralyn didn't understand why she felt it, what exactly she felt guilty for; bringing a child into this dark environment of violence and blood or if it was because she wasn't upset about it—she was happy.

"Yes," she said quietly.

Claire lowered her voice to one of concern and said, "And do you have any idea what Aimeric plans on doing to you and the child?"

"No." Aralyn frowned as her stomach hardened.

"Oh, well..." Claire shrugged as if the subject were now unimportant.

"Tell me, please."

"I don't think it's my place to tell you."

"Then why were you so concerned a minute ago?"

"Easy." She shrugged again. "I'm dramatic."

"Come on Claire." Aralyn sighed. "Stop playing games and tell me what he's going to do. And who is Orrin?"

"Shh!" Claire threw a hand over her sister's mouth, her eyebrows pulling together and her lips tightening. Her voice was barely audible as she said, "Be careful what you're saying around here."

Aralyn shook her chin out of Claire's grasp. "Aimeric isn't even here right now."

Claire sighed heavily. "You just don't understand do you? He doesn't have to *be* here to hear *you*. Besides, you never know where he is for sure, not to mention who might be listening on the other side of the door so they can report back to him. Do not mention Orrin again; do not even think of him. Do you understand?"

"Yeah, I guess."

Claire shook her head as if exasperated. "I'll talk to you more later, okay? You'll know what's going on soon enough, I can promise that much."

“Kay.” Aralyn whispered her short response, annoyed that she was once again being kept in the dark. She felt foolish, like a child sheltered from the world.

Claire kissed her forehead and flashed a smile before leaving the room. Briefly, Aralyn wondered where she was going and if she would be gone again for several weeks or longer. But the pieces of their previous conversation entered and cluttered her mind. What did Aimeric have planned now? Surely whatever it was wouldn’t harm the child. Even Aimeric wouldn’t hurt a baby would he?

He was cruel and seemed heartless most of the time. She knew that. But there was also a different side to him, a softer one that no one else had seen. He never kept children in his prison. He had never mentioned feeding off babies.

She didn’t believe their child was in danger.

The door opened and Aimeric stepped into the room. His appearance startled her: he looked weak, drained of energy and it seemed he was barely able to hold himself up. Blistering burns covered his arms.

Her first instinct was to jump from the bed and run to him, help him walk, but she remembered how he had reacted the day the curtains were open. If she tried to help him, he would be insulted and get angry.

“What happened?” she asked instead and tried to keep her concern masked.

“It’s nothing, I just got a little too close to the fire.” He closed the door and went into the bathroom, turning on the water in the sink. A few minutes later he came back out, wiping his hands on a towel. The burns already seemed less severe.

“What fire?” she asked with caution.

He glared. “I torched my room.”

Brows furrowing, she opened her mouth to ask why. She couldn’t find her voice, though, and was left with only a dumbfounded expression.

“After I left the prison, I began thinking about things.” He still seemed annoyed but at least he wasn’t as mad as

before. "I was angered, maybe even a little jealous that you showed concern for the mortal men." He threw the towel back into the bathroom. "I know that some of the things I do upset you. My room disgusted you the most so I torched it." His eyes narrowed again and his voice hardened. "But only because I don't want you upset right now and risk harming the child."

All she could do was look at him.

"I'm also going to release the prisoners but only until you have the baby. After that, I will fill the cages again."

Finally, the shock lessened and she was able to respond. She smiled.

"Thank you."

"Don't make any wrong assumptions here, Aralyn. The room is gone but the other changes will only be temporary."

"I know." She stood from the bed and went to him, embracing him with gentle and loving arms. She laid her head against his chest as he tightened his arms around her.

She knew he would never change into a warm and loving man. How could he? He was a damned being. But what effort he had made to please her, even if only temporary, had shown her the other side she knew was in him. Maybe even a bit of a human side.

Even if these thoughts and feelings weren't her own, she was content. She had found the tiniest spark of light and happiness in this dark world she had once been trapped in and had fueled that spark into a warm fire within her. She no longer wished to escape therefore she was not trapped. She was pleased. Comfortable. Even in love.

And she would stay by his side for eternity.

Chapter Twenty-One

Betrayal

It was several months later. Aralyn was only a few weeks away from her due date. Her belly had swelled to the size of a large watermelon, her ankles were always swollen, and she found it difficult to even move. She was always tired, always taking naps. Her mind felt muddled a lot of the time (even more so than usual), and her back ached more often than not. She was tired of being pregnant. After so long of feeling the baby move and kick inside of her and feeling the warm connection between them as her baby grew, she wanted more and more every day to just hold it in her arms. See its face looking up at her with knowing eyes. She wanted to stop calling the baby “it” and know to call it “him” or “her.”

True, the child hadn’t been conceived in a desirable way; she hadn’t gotten pregnant as a result of mutual love nor even the traditional way of making love with the child’s father. But that didn’t matter to her now. The baby was hers and Aimeric’s no matter how it was conceived.

He had done as he said he would. The basement was free of prisoners and he hadn’t brought another human to the mansion to torture since. That wasn’t to say he wasn’t cruel to his victims on his nights away from the mansion. But at least Aralyn didn’t have to see or hear them. Aimeric himself wasn’t as cruel as he used to be—not to her anyway. Though he was warmer with her, he was still in charge and made sure she knew that. His domination over her didn’t bother her that much anymore, though. She wasn’t sure if she had just gotten used to it or if she just didn’t care.

Orrin hadn’t shown up since that first night. Not that Aralyn was disappointed, just curious as to why he had seemed so concerned and then gave up so easily. The thought had crossed her mind that Aimeric had found out and killed

him. She hoped that wasn't the case but she didn't dare ask him about it. She had asked Claire several times, though. But Claire just brushed her off, repeating "you'll find out soon" or "don't worry about it." Aralyn was usually too tired to argue and knew that it wouldn't do any good to keep asking her about him.

Claire had also changed. A little. She was more considerate of Aralyn's feelings and didn't leave the mansion for long periods of time like she did before. They had become closer in the last several months, almost as close as they had been when Claire was human. They spent a lot of time reminiscing about the past, mostly on the days when Aralyn felt especially tired and had to stay in bed all day. Claire would sit with her and they would talk, even laugh.

The other vampires had grown accustomed to Aralyn being there. A few, especially Sadie, would glare at her every now and then but they mostly ignored her, going on with their nightly routines.

Morgan was a little braver than the others—or more foolish. He still antagonized Aralyn on occasion but only when Aimeric was out. She had learned to ignore him for the most part but there were times where she would smart-mouth him and tell him to fuck off, to which he usually gave her a sarcastic and crude response. Whenever Aralyn would ask Aimeric why he kept Morgan around he would always tell her it was because he was a good servant; the kind that cowered and did as he was told. Not that she wanted Aimeric to torture and kill the sniveling vampire but she had been curious as to why he put up with him. And she wouldn't be disappointed if Aimeric ever banished Morgan.

The mansion had received a makeover. Aralyn had convinced Aimeric that it wasn't a suitable environment to raise a child in with all the dirt, dust and other hazards. So he ordered it to be cleaned. The floors had been polished, old carpet removed and replaced with new, the walls had been spackled where there had been cracks and holes and had either been painted or freshly wallpapered. The windows

were now covered with shutters or heavy curtains instead of the tin foil and boards that had been placed in some of them. The large house was now livable by human standards.

Aralyn was now sitting in bed. It had been one of those days that her back ached and her ankles were too swollen to do anything productive. It was night. Aimeric had gone downstairs to get a tray of food for her. Claire was out feeding.

She was more tired than usual these days and wondered, as her eyelids grew heavier and started to close, if she would be able to stay awake long enough to eat the food that Aimeric would bring her.

The only change to this room was the basinet now sitting in the southwest corner. Since she didn't know what the sex of the baby was yet, she had decorated it with a black skirt and gold lace; suitable for a boy or girl.

"Aralyn."

She looked up at the doorway, opening her eyes and forcing herself to stay awake, when she heard Claire's whispered voice. Aimeric was behind her, carrying the tray.

Aralyn drowsily sat up as they entered the room. Aimeric set the tray on the bedside table and Claire came to sit beside her.

"What is it?" Aralyn asked seeing the concerned look in her sister's bright eyes.

"Your sister has some potentially upsetting news," Aimeric said in an even tone. He sat on her other side, kissing her neck and wrapping an arm around her shoulders.

What could upset her now? She didn't know anyone outside the house anymore, her baby was obviously okay—it was kicking at that very moment—and Aimeric and Claire weren't in danger. She didn't think she cared about anyone else.

"I was in Middletown tonight," Claire said in a slow voice as if to break the news gently. "I went to our old house. It's dad, Aralyn. He's dead."

Aralyn gasped softly, bringing a hand to her mouth. Aimeric's arm tightened around her.

"I thought about waiting to tell you," Claire continued, "But Aimeric thought it would be better for you to get it over with now."

"How?" Aralyn whispered as her eyes filled with tears.

Claire hesitated a moment and then sighed softly. "Swallowed a bullet."

Aralyn's face dampened with hot tears and she leaned into Aimeric's shoulder, squeezing her eyes shut. What bothered her most wasn't that he was dead but that, until now, she had forgotten about him. She had been so busy getting ready for her and Aimeric's child and adjusting to her new life that she hadn't thought of her past that much in the last several months or what she had been forced to leave behind. She felt guilty for that. How ungrateful of her to forget the man responsible for her existence. But at least he was at peace now. Claire didn't seem bothered either, only concerned before with how to break the news to Aralyn.

"Look," she sighed, patting Aralyn's hand. "I'm not too good with this kind of thing so I'm gonna leave you two alone now. Don't feel too bad, though, okay? It's not good for you or the kid." Her hand slid away from Aralyn's and a few seconds later the door closed.

"Don't dwell on this news, my love. There's nothing you could have done for him."

An anger with Aimeric returned to her that she hadn't felt for a long time; the kind that heated her blood and made her muscles clench. Of course there had been something she could have done. Her father probably killed himself because he felt he lost everything since his only remaining daughter had disappeared without a clue or explanation where she had gone or if she was alive. If she had been with him, he might have felt he had a reason to go on living. Though, she reminded herself, he had been miserable then. She remembered the way they argued and yelled at each other that last year. Maybe this was the best thing for him.

She still felt pained and didn't have much of an appetite that night, though. Her crying ceased but she refused to leave Aimeric's arms. She fell asleep with him holding her while the food sat untouched on the tray beside the bed.

* * *

The next night, while Aimeric and Claire were out feeding, Aralyn found herself wandering outside the mansion. All evening her thoughts had been on her father's death and her former life. She wondered for the first time in a long time if her feelings for Aimeric and her happiness now were really her own. She didn't know for sure but she felt melancholic nonetheless.

The garden was in full bloom now that it was late summer. A sea of colors waved at her in the gentle night breeze as she lowered herself on the bench of the lifeless fountain. She hoped Aimeric would fix it one of these days; a calming cascade of water would complete the serenity of the garden. She stared into the colors and breathed in the fresh scents of perfume scattering off the petals.

Wanting to rid her mind of the depression she felt, she thought of the vampires she lived with instead of her previous life. She didn't mind that most of them ignored her and even wished that Morgan would follow suit more often than he did. There was only one of Aimeric's creations besides Claire that Aralyn enjoyed the company of: Cora. She was friendly and didn't even seem like a vampire. She never looked at Aralyn with lust in her eyes; blood or sexual. She seemed a little off in the head at times but not in a threatening way. The girl was harmless.

Unfortunately, Cora and Aimeric didn't get along very well. A lot of the times they couldn't even be in the same room together without arguing. That was why Cora lived alone on the third floor. She didn't get along with anyone it seemed, except for Aralyn. The problem wasn't that she liked to fight but that she was so different from the others. She

showed no interest in drinking the blood of humans, she rarely went out at night and spent most of her time in her room or in Aimeric's library—with his permission of course.

Aimeric explained to Aralyn that Cora was worthless; one of the newer creations that hadn't been very receptive to her new life. She didn't show an interest in much of anything, only astrology, reading, and painting. Aralyn had had the privilege of seeing her work. Her dreary room was filled with canvas paintings, mostly of a macabre nature. Aralyn's favorite was one of a young woman with folded hands in prayer and crying bloody tears underneath the light of a moon that was on fire. She guessed it was a depiction of Cora's interpretation of her new undead life.

Cora was a Lesser, not directly created by Aimeric. Her sire had also been a Lesser, created by Morgan. He had abandoned Cora and the rest of the clan shortly after her turning. She didn't seem to care that he had left, though; she was already distant and withdrawn even then.

During the last several months, Cora usually sought out Aralyn to keep company with while the others were out. They would talk until Aimeric returned, sometimes of odd topics of Cora's choice such as the blue whale or the surface of mars. Aralyn didn't mind though; it was nice to have such light conversations.

However, in the last couple of weeks, she hadn't seen much of Cora. The girl was hiding more often than usual and seemingly avoiding Aralyn. She wasn't sure why. To the best of her knowledge she hadn't offended the girl.

Maybe she should go to her instead of waiting for Cora to come to her.

Coming to this decision, Aralyn stood from the bench and went back into the house, heading to the third floor. No one else was home, not even Morgan. The house was silent except for the whirs of the small motors in ceiling fans and the creak in a floorboard here and there.

She reached Cora's door and balled her fist to knock but stopped before her knuckles touched the wood. Voices were coming from inside the room.

"She's only got a few weeks left." There was no mistaking the dreamy sound of Cora's wind-chime voice as the first one spoken. The second was more urgent and belonged to a man Aralyn didn't recognize.

"I know that, Cora!"

"What if she goes into labor and you aren't here? Are you sure you can make it back in time?"

"Labor can take many hours, even a day or so, especially with the first child. I'm sure I can make it back here in time as long as you keep in touch."

It wasn't Aimeric speaking. But who else would be concerned about Aralyn going into labor if not the father of the child?

She knew she should stop, she didn't normally agree with eavesdropping, but she couldn't tear her ear from the door. She strained to listen more closely.

"You should probably just move in here, Orrin. You can sleep on my floor but you'll have to share with the spiders. Don't worry, though; they're friendly." Cora's voice was genuine, childlike as she offered to share her room.

Aralyn's breath caught in her throat at the mention of Orrin's name. What were they planning?

"Thank you for the offer, Cora," Orrin said in a friendly voice. "But I can't stay here; Aimeric would know."

"Yes. That makes sense."

"Don't worry. Everything will work out. We'll get to Aralyn as soon as she goes into labor, that way Aimeric can't turn her."

"I don't understand, Orrin. Why are we waiting? Why don't we just do it now or after the Master turns her?"

"Because," he was gentle with his words, as if speaking to a small child, "we can't just take her away from here; he would find us eventually. If we wait until during the chaos of her being in labor, he will be easier to catch off guard and I

want to get it done before he turns her because I don't want her baby to be turned into what I am."

"Oh, I see."

"I really must be going now, Cora. Aimeric is probably on his way back now. I'll be back soon, though."

"Alright, Orrin."

Aralyn felt a rush of panic as she realized Orrin was on his way to the door. She ducked away and hid behind a protrusion in the wall where a closet was, hoping she was concealed in the dim light. She forgot that darkness didn't restrict a vampire's senses.

Orrin exited, closing the door softly behind him. He paused as it latched, looking around the corridor, and then said in a whispered voice:

"I know you're here, Aralyn."

She stayed put, halting her breath. He took a few steps in her direction.

"I smelled you a few moments ago. I know you're still here. Cora probably knows, too, she just hasn't thought that you might have heard us speaking."

Cautiously, Aralyn stepped out. "What are you two planning?" she asked.

"You aren't supposed to know, it would complicate things even more than they already are."

"Tell me or I'll tell Aimeric that you've been here and are planning something."

Orrin smiled and took a few steps forward. He put his hands on Aralyn's shoulders and the look in his eyes was one of sadness. He shook his head.

"No you won't. You're still human; you're not that cold and heartless."

She looked down and he moved his hands in a hurry as if remembering Aimeric would be able to smell his scent on her. He looked like he regretted the gesture but knew he couldn't take it back, only hope that he hadn't had his hands in place long enough to leave an obvious scent.

Aralyn knew he was right. She wouldn't turn them in because she knew what Aimeric would do if he found out they were planning anything. He would be angry just to know Orrin had been in the house again. She then wondered how Orrin was able to make these visits without Aimeric smelling him anyway. Maybe because Aimeric never came to the third floor.

"Fine, I won't," she finally said, looking into his bloody eyes. "But I want you to know something Orrin: I'm no longer here against my will. If whatever you're planning involves 'rescuing' me from Aimeric, you can stop because I love him and I'm not going anywhere. If you force me to leave you'll be just as bad as he used to be."

Orrin scoffed, disgusted. "*Used* to be? Why can't you see that he is still the monster you used to hate?"

"I think you should leave now." Aralyn turned without waiting for him to respond, heading downstairs. She would visit Cora later.

She heard Orrin sigh and then the sound of a window opening. As she started downstairs, she looked over her shoulder at him. He was outside now, on the roof and closing the window he had exited from. Their eyes met for a mere second; his seeming concerned and hers angry.

She went to the bedroom to wait for Aimeric.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Lesson to be Learned

A comfortable blue sofa had been moved into the bedroom at the foot of their bed. Aralyn sat curled in the corner of it, thinking of her short conversation with Orrin. She was afraid, but not for herself. Whatever they were planning, they wouldn't win, why couldn't they understand that? Aimeric was stronger than both, Orrin and Claire, even together. She wasn't concerned that they would succeed; she wasn't concerned for Aimeric. But if they went through with whatever they were planning, Aimeric would torture and kill them both. She didn't want that to happen. She had to try everything in her power to keep that from happening. She had to convince them to give up.

The door opened and Aimeric entered. She put on a fake smile and pushed her worries out of her mind. She had opened the curtains since it was dark out. The gentle beams of the moon bounced off Aimeric's jet black hair as he came inside.

"Why are you sitting alone in the dark, my love?" he asked. Normally she would have a few candles lit or the lamp turned on.

She shrugged. "Just thinking..."

He paused a moment to unfasten the first three buttons of his shirt and then he sat down, drawing her into his arms. One hand went to her belly and he nuzzled her neck. He was warm having just fed. She snuggled into his chest.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked.

She hesitated, a small clip of Orrin and Cora's conversation going through her mind, and then lied: "Names for the baby."

“I see,” he said thoughtfully. He sat straight up. “And why is it you feel the need to lie to me when you’ve done so well for such a long time?”

She pulled away from him, her eyes widening. “What do you mean?” she whispered.

He grinned coldly, a sneer she hadn’t seen on him in a while.

“I’m not going to get angry with you. I know it’s just your human heart trying to keep them safe.” He leaned over and kissed her lips several times, softly, lovingly. But the sneer was still in place. He wasn’t going to get mad because he had something else in mind.

“Stay here,” he said against her mouth, kissing her one last time before standing up.

“Aimeric, wait, please,” she said desperately trying to follow him.

“Ah,” he pivoted on his way to the door, holding a hand out. “I said stay here. Let’s not start the threats again, my love.” He smirked, a malevolent gesture as if he were overjoyed at the knowledge of someone going against him. He probably was. He hadn’t had a real excuse to punish anyone since he freed the prisoners.

Aralyn sank back into the cushions and, covering her face with her hands, cried silent tears.

It was a few hours later when she woke up again. The sun had risen and was now shining with its blinding light, penetrating the windows panes. She hadn’t remembered to close the curtains. A surge of panic quickened her blood and pumped her heart, fearing Aimeric was in the room and now hurt by being exposed to the sun. She jumped from the sofa and rushed to the window, pulling the curtains shut as fast as she could move them. The rings that held the material slid across the metal rod, sending a scraping sound throughout the room.

She turned around, letting her eyes adjust to the darkness and called out Aimeric's name, her voice quiet and shaking with concern. He didn't answer.

After a few seconds she could see the outlines of the furniture, dimly illuminated by the small amount of light that broke through the few cracks in the curtains. She made her way to the dresser and found the cigarette lighter, using it to bring a few of the candles to life so she could see better. The candles let off vanilla and rose petal aromas.

Aimeric wasn't in the room. She sighed in relief knowing he hadn't been harmed by her forgetfulness but his absence brought curiosity and she now wondered where he was.

There was a dark feeling tugging at her heart, a warning. Something was wrong. Things were about to get worse.

She left the room and slowly descended the stairs, holding the weight of her stomach in an attempt to help her aching back.

She was halfway down the stairs when she heard Aimeric's voice roar through the house.

"Let this be a lesson to all of you! Witness what happens to those who think they can turn against me and get away with it."

Aralyn hurried the rest of the way downstairs, afraid of what he might be doing. When she reached the last step, she saw every vampire of Aimeric's clan gathered in the living room. They were facing the largest window and all of them were silent, immersed in what Aimeric was saying to them. She searched over the many heads and found what they were looking at.

Aimeric was standing next to a makeshift platform directly in front of the window. Tied to a stake was Cora, looking like a frightened child, her eyes clouded with pain and squinting in discomfort. She was struggling, but not violently; her movements were sluggish.

Aralyn knew what Aimeric intended to do to her and adrenaline pushed her forward, though she didn't know what for. She wouldn't be able to stop it. But still she tried. She

shoved through the crowd, pushing at them and weaving in between.

“All of you in the front might want to step aside,” Aimeric said casually, his hand on the thick cord that would open the curtains.

The crowd divided down the middle, separating the vampires into two rows on either side of the window. Aralyn was left in the center, directly standing in front of Cora. Their eyes met; Cora’s wide and flooded with tears, Aralyn’s confused and helpless. What could she do? There was no stopping Aimeric, especially not with all the help he would have in restraining her.

All she could do was plead with him.

As she opened her mouth to beg him not to kill her, he pulled the cord. The sun crashed through the window like a tsunami engulfing a shoreline, throwing the bright rays onto every head in its path. Aralyn covered her eyes with the hook of her arm as the orange light touched her. A few of the vampires hadn’t moved far enough and she heard them hiss in shock and scuttle out of the way.

“I told them to move, didn’t I?”

She lowered her arm at the sound of Aimeric’s amused voice. He hadn’t been talking to her, though. Morgan was standing beside him, a smug look on his face as he nodded in agreement.

Aralyn turned back to Cora. The poor girl was crying and whispering, “It burns, it burns.” She looked at Aralyn, her beautiful eyes shining brightly, lit by pain and innocence.

“Make it stop, Aralyn, please.”

Aralyn didn’t know what she could do but she was almost positive that Aimeric wouldn’t harm her right now, not when she was pregnant. There wasn’t enough time left for the poor girl for Aralyn to stand there and contemplate her possible punishments. She ran forward, wanting only to help the girl. To stop her pain. To free her from her binds.

She reached the platform, one foot up and then the other. It wasn’t difficult since it was only a few inches off the floor,

though it would have been less difficult if she weren't almost nine months pregnant. Her hands stretched out and her fingers grasped at the rope that bound Cora's wrists behind her back, around the pole.

It was hard to see through her own tears. Her hands were shaking. One of her fingers brushed up against Cora's hand. It was hot, searing, almost as if it were a scorching skillet on top of a stove. She gasped in pain but continued untying.

All this happened in only a few seconds.

Before she could even loose the knot, she felt Aimeric's hands grab her from behind. He dragged her off the stage and off to the side so quickly that the sun didn't have a chance to affect him. He didn't say anything to her; no warnings, no threats. But he did turn her so she could see.

He didn't force her, though. Not as he had done with Virgil. She could have turned into his chest and not watched, but she wasn't able. It was as if she was paralyzed. Her eyes were glued to the scene, landing on Cora's face.

Thin wisps of smoke rose from her skin. She was sobbing, afraid. She was in pain and probably didn't understand why.

"How can you do this to her? She's like a child," Aralyn whispered, still unable to look away.

"She knows what she did was wrong," was all he would say.

"Please stop! Stop! It's hurting me!" Cora screamed.

The young vampire's skin was literally melting off of her frame. The next breath that Aralyn tried to inhale choked her. Her insides churned, waves of nausea crashing against the walls of her stomach. Cora's eyes bulged in their sockets until they finally imploded. What was left of her eyes ran down her cheeks in liquid form.

That was all Aralyn could stand to watch. She had to get away. Her head was clouded with guilt and disgust. She needed room to breathe, room to think. She could barely hold herself up but she tried pushing Aimeric away anyway. He held her in place. She felt too weak to fight; her own

limbs felt like they were nothing so she stopped pushing at him and instead closed her eyes so she wouldn't have to see the heinous sight before her.

Just because she couldn't see didn't mean she was safe, though. Cora's terrified screams and pleas still gripped her heart.

A few more seconds passed and those screams died out. She heard the curtains fall back into place and the room went dark again. A few of the vampires murmured in approval of the public execution. Morgan chuckled.

Aralyn risked a look up and saw a pile of ashes beneath the window. She grimaced and turned away again.

"I'll say it again since *some* of you came in late," Aimeric said. This speech would be for Aralyn's benefit. "It seems the late Cora was plotting against me and trying to have me killed. She wouldn't tell me who was in on this little plan of hers with her, but I found out anyway due to her extremely feeble mind." He paused a moment and then continued. "Our old friend, Orrin, was planning on helping our feeble one, along with someone else." Another pause. This time it lasted longer so Aralyn looked up at him in question. He glared down at her and the next sentence came out harsher than the others. "My precious Claire wishes for my death."

Aralyn's heart palpitated and stole her breath. She was relieved that Claire wasn't there right now.

"If any of you see either Claire or Orrin, tell me immediately. Do not harm them; they will be for me to deal with."

Tears sprang to Aralyn's eyes as the others mumbled agreements. They didn't care that Claire would be hunted and killed the same as Cora.

Aimeric dismissed the vampires, allowing them to return to their beds for the day, and then led Aralyn up to their own bedroom. He gently pushed her through the door and then followed, closing it behind them.

"Crying for your betraying sister, Aralyn?" The words came out as a sneer.

She glared at him a moment and he at her. Exhaustion had claimed her again just from the journey down and then back up the stairs so she took a few seconds to lower her body onto the sofa before answering.

"I don't want you to kill her."

"You would prefer she kill me?" he hissed.

"No," she said, raising her voice. "I don't want anyone to die and I especially don't want to choose between you and my sister."

"There were a lot of 'I don'ts' in that sentence. Aren't you being selfish?" He scoffed and trudged across the floor to stand beside the armored window as if he could see through the heavy material covering the glass.

"Not wanting people to die is not selfish," she whispered, averting her eyes to the floor so she wouldn't have to see the enraged look she was sure he would give her for talking back to him.

"Are you implying Cora's punishment was unjust?" His voice was malicious.

"Yes."

"Well," he sneered. She looked up at him now, seeing the malice in his eyes. He was taking slow steps towards her. "You do not have the authority to make that call, do you?"

"What you did to her was disgusting."

She gasped as he pulled her head back by a fistful of hair. Leaning close to her mouth he said, "Do not think that just because you're pregnant you can talk back to me, Aralyn. I still own you, just as I own everyone in this house." He released her hair. "Don't make me do something to you that I might regret later."

"Please don't kill her," she whispered, ignoring his threats.

He jerked away from the sofa and paced the room, his hands clasped behind his back. He was deep in thought, looking angry. Yet, there was the slightest hint of guilt in his eyes, or so that's what it seemed to be. Aralyn wouldn't

believe he was feeling ashamed for what he had done to Cora, though.

Finally, he looked at her, eyes still narrowed and cold.

“I won’t promise not to kill her if she returns on her own. She has betrayed the entire clan in her plot to...*try* and kill me.” He smirked. “Death would be a just punishment for her. However, I won’t hunt her since you’re so concerned.”

She forced a small, appreciative smile. “Thank you.”

“Get some rest now, you’re looking tired.”

Feeling only a little reassured, Aralyn leaned back against the cushions and closed her eyes. A few seconds later Aimeric sat next to her and pulled her against his chest. Even though she feared for Claire, she felt comforted in his arms.

She didn’t sleep well. There was a deep aching pain in her back and she couldn’t get comfortable. In only a short time, an hour or so, she started feeling contractions. The intense pain woke her for good. She had been having practice contractions all week in short intervals.

This time it was the real thing.

Chapter Twenty-Three

A Beginning and an End

Several hours later she was yelling in pain, gritting her teeth and taking short, gasping breaths. Each contraction was more intense and lasted longer than the one before. It wouldn't be long now before she would have the baby in her arms. That was the only thing that kept her going, the comfort in knowing she would be able to hold her child—the pain would be worth it.

Aimeric was standing beside the bed. He dabbed at her sweat-flecked forehead with a cool damp cloth in between contractions. He was sickeningly calm, ignoring the harsh words that frequently found their way out of Aralyn's mouth.

"Stop touching me!" she hissed in between breaths. Glaring at the end of the bed where Morgan was standing, smirking, loving every second of her pain, she added, "And get him the hell out of here!"

"Morgan, leave."

"I need to talk to you, Master."

Aimeric glared. "It can wait."

"N-no, I don't think it can." Morgan was nervous, looking at Aralyn and dreading the reprimand he would probably get for talking back.

Aimeric sighed, annoyed. He looked at the female vampire on the other side of the bed that was assisting in the labor and soon delivery.

"How long?" he asked.

"Not long. Fifteen minutes at most."

"Fine." Aimeric kissed the top of Aralyn's head, promising he would be back in only a minute or two. As he left with Morgan, he said to him, "Make it quick. And this better be important."

When they reached the hallway, he pulled the door almost closed.

“I didn’t think I should say anything in front of her, but don’t you think you should be doing it soon, Master?”

Aimeric sighed again, rubbing his temples as if in exasperation.

“How many times must I tell you before it penetrates that thick skull of yours, Morgan? I have to wait for *exactly* the right moment or I risk killing the child.”

“Okay, okay. I just thought you might need a reminder...what with all the stress you’ve been under-”

“I hardly think I could forget about this!” Aimeric opened the door and, lowering his voice to a whisper, added, “Now keep an eye out for that treacherous bitch.”

Morgan nodded and pivoted towards the stairs as Aimeric went back inside to Aralyn.

“Aimeric, watch out-”

Aralyn’s terrified words were cut off as Orrin held a cold blade to her throat. Aimeric started, the look on his face one of surprise as if he couldn’t believe Orrin had slipped under his senses. Aralyn didn’t have time to warn him about Claire. She jumped on Aimeric’s back, locking her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck as she tried to sink her fangs into his throat.

They had appeared in the room as soon as Aimeric left. Aralyn suspected Morgan was in on it with them, the decoy to lead Aimeric out of the room to give them time to take control. She didn’t know how they had been able to sneak in. Maybe Aimeric had been too distracted by her labor. Or maybe it was something else; maybe they had been able to disguise their scent somehow. She wasn’t sure but she was scared. Her heart was pounding wildly, the contractions still strong. She felt like she was going to pass out from the pain and the fear.

“You shouldn’t have left her alone,” Orrin said, his voice flooded with triumph.

The female assistant now lay dead on the floor, a wooden stake protruding through her back from where Claire had pierced her heart from behind. She would soon be a pile of dust.

Aimeric's face contorted with anger. He growled with the ferocity of an angry predator and rammed his back into the nearest wall, crushing Claire in between. She grimaced but held tight, her fingers clawing at his neck.

Aralyn could sense Orrin's worry by the way his hands shook. The knife grazed her throat a few times with the tremors. She didn't fear for her life, though; she knew Orrin wouldn't kill her. However, she was worried about Claire. There was no way Aimeric could be overpowered, it would take more than the two of them to bind him. He couldn't be killed. The most their plan could involve was to dismember him and they weren't strong enough. What had they been thinking taking him on alone? They must have been at the very bottom of desperation. This poor attempt hadn't been thought out very well. She knew Aimeric wouldn't forgive Claire, she knew he wouldn't let her off. And she was in no condition to help her sister. All she could do was watch and hope Claire could escape.

The door burst open and Morgan rushed inside with a candelabra. He used it to hit Claire on the head. She hissed and lost her grip on Aimeric. He kicked her the rest of the way off his back and she started to fall to the floor. Steadying herself, she spun around and turned on Morgan with her claws out and thirsty for blood. Before she could hit him, though, Aimeric snatched her arms and threw her against the wall.

"Claire!" Orrin said, eyes wide with fright.

"Don't kill her!" Aralyn screamed at the same time.

Aimeric shot her an angry look over his shoulder as another contraction hit her. Briefly forgetting the scene before her, and the knife at her throat, she threw her head back against the pillows and clawed at the bed sheets as her uterus tightened once more.

Aimeric started to go to her but a punch in the back of his head from Claire changed his mind. He turned around, slapping her hard across the face as Morgan kicked her side. Orrin was glancing from Aralyn to Claire, trying to decide if he should risk losing his leverage with Aimeric in order to help his comrade. Aimeric didn't seem worried he would kill Aralyn, though, so his using her to threaten the master vampire was probably useless. Orrin decided this and left Aralyn there on the bed, rushing to help Claire. The knife was raised. He went to punch it through Aimeric's neck, perhaps hoping it would stun him and give him and Claire the chance to escape.

As the knife came down, Aimeric spun around and knocked it from his hands. It flew to the floor, scraping across the wood.

Aralyn watched from the bed, her vision somewhat blurred from the pain she was feeling. Though his face wasn't clear, she could see Aimeric's expression. He had never looked so angry before. His fangs were bared, eyes on fire, wrinkles of rage in his cheeks. He locked his fingers around Orrin's throat, shoving him up against the wall beside Claire, who was being held in place by Morgan, using one of his hands to twist her arm around her back. His other hand was around her neck.

"Did the two of you really believe you could kill me? Or do you have a death wish?"

"It may have been a useless attempt but it was worth it. At least we can say we died trying to kill you instead of cowering in your shadow." Orrin's face was content.

"Why did you wait so long to try and kill your father?" Aimeric growled.

"I wasn't about to let you destroy two more lives! We've wanted to kill you for quite some time now; it only seemed right to try and save Claire's sister and *her* child. Not only that, but this seemed to be the perfect opportunity, when you were most distracted and we would have a better chance. And

you, Aimeric, may be my wretched creator, but you are not my father.”

Aimeric’s only response to him was a malevolent leer. He then looked at Claire.

“And you? I thought you had forgiven me. I must admit you hid your thoughts well, props for that, my dearest.”

“I’ve always hated you for what you did to me. I’ve been playing along all this time, waiting for the chance to get even. Even if you kill me now, it won’t matter; at least I’ll be free. I was in so much pain; I had already lost my mother, I wanted to die. But you took me anyway and for that, I can not forgive you.”

He laughed coldly. “That’s all this is? A grudge? You’re angry with me, Claire, for giving you eternal life?”

“You gave me eternal hell.”

“And you, Orrin,” he turned around, ignoring Claire. “You are angry because I prolonged your pathetic life and gave you all the powers of a vampire and none of the weaknesses?” He ‘tsked.’ “Such selfish children.”

“You gave me a curse!” Orrin said. “To suffer twice as long in this world of greed, discrimination and segregation.”

“You hate this life so much?” Aimeric jerked him off the wall by his shirt collar. “I can take it away just as easily.”

It happened too fast for Aralyn to see the gruesome act until it was already finished. Aimeric sunk his fangs into Orrin’s neck and moved his teeth so quickly around the length of his throat that in only a second Orrin’s head was half severed from his shoulders. His head fell backwards and Aimeric snapped it the rest of the way off, throwing it to the floor. The headless corpse shuddered violently as a bundle of nerves reacted and then it fell to the floor, spurting blood all around it until it was drained.

“You son of a bitch!” Claire screamed.

“Aimeric!” Aralyn cried desperately from the bed, too much in pain to be distracted by the death. She could feel the baby was ready to be born, not able to wait any longer.

Aimeric made it to her side and sat beside her, brushing her long, black hair out of her eyes and away from her throat. He talked to her in a soothing tone.

“Aralyn, my love, are you ready?”

“Yes, please, do it,” she begged, wanting the pain to stop.

“No! Aimeric stay the fuck away from her!” Claire yelled, struggling against Morgan. He elbowed her in the back and knocked her to the floor, holding her down by keeping her arms twisted up around her back and holding his foot on the small of her back.

Aralyn’s breathing was heavy, her face drenched with sweat. It felt like her stomach was being ripped apart from the inside. She was almost in hysterics.

“Calm down,” Aimeric whispered, lowering his lips to hers.

A cool feeling washed over her and she felt at ease until another contraction broke the serene feeling. Her muscles tensed in response and she grit her teeth. Aimeric grabbed her hand and she squeezed it as she waited for the pain to pass. Once it did, she was calm again, his mouth over hers. He let his fingers graze her face to hold her in the trance as he moved his lips to her neck.

The peaceful feeling was once more broken when she felt the prick of his razor sharp fangs as they penetrated her neck. Her uterus squeezed again as if in protest and she whimpered as he drank from her. The combined pain was blinding. She thought she was going to pass out. Her vision blurred and then darkened and she cried out once. Tears streamed down her face, her fingernails clawed at Aimeric’s arm, drawing blood. She writhed beneath him. This had been a mistake. She didn’t want to be turned anymore. What was she doing to the child?

After a few more seconds, she became numb to the pain. Her muscles relaxed, her fingers slipped from his arm, and her breaths slowed to the point of barely being there at all. She found it hard to keep her eyes open. The lids were heavy and needed to be shut. All noise was fading. Claire’s

screaming protests became muffled as if far away. She could barely make out Aimeric's figure as he pulled away from her. She was losing consciousness.

Aimeric bit his own tongue and a second later, she felt him in her mouth. She tasted blood as the drops rolled from his tongue to hers. The warm liquid ran down her throat and she at first protested in her own mind but didn't have the strength to push him away. A second later she felt stronger and felt her way up to Aimeric's face, holding him to keep him in place. She sucked his tongue, drawing her own blood from his body, which was now infused with his preternatural strengths and weaknesses.

Once he decided she had had enough, Aimeric pulled away. Aralyn sat up quickly in bed, sprung up by a new energy and pain. She screamed and gasped and pushed as hard as she could.

A baby's cries filled the room.

"No," Claire said, moaning a sound of defeat as Aralyn fell back on the pillows.

Aimeric picked up the child, cleaning it off and wrapping it in a sheet.

Aralyn's pain was not yet over with. She cried out several times, her body writhing as it started to die. Aimeric's blood was working through her system, poisoning every organ inside of her. Immense pain shot through her veins and stabbed at her eyes. Hot tears rolled down her cheeks. She rolled over on her side and dry-heaved, her entire body shuddering. Her nerves were on fire, her muscles were shriveling.

Finally, she gave up. Darkness consumed her and she let go of her last breath.

* * *

Aralyn's eyes shot open a few minutes later. She woke feeling energized, more so than she had ever felt before. The pain was completely gone, nothing to even indicate it had been

there to begin with. Her vision was clear. Sharp. Slowly, she drew herself up into a sitting position and gazed down at her body. She was thin, her skin flawless and resembled porcelain. She lifted the nightgown she was wearing and peered at her stomach. No sign of ever being pregnant. Her belly was flat and free of stretch marks where before the thick scars had plagued the flesh of her navel.

She brought up her arms, eyeing them in amazement. The scars from where Devin had cut her so long ago had vanished. Her legs were smooth, flawless. Breasts were perky and round, though not too large. She caught her reflection in the mirror across from the bed. Her hair was still dark as night but now had midnight-blue streaks that framed her perfect face. The flesh on her cheeks and around her mouth was smooth and unflawed. No blemishes.

Becoming a vampire was different for each person. Aimeric had said they became who they wanted to be, what they imagined to be perfect. In her own eyes, she was perfect. *This* was perfect.

“How do you feel, my love?”

Aimeric had allowed her a few moments of silent contemplation. She looked up at him. He was standing beside the bed, holding a bundle of blankets in his arms. She grinned and fell back on the pillows, giggling softly.

“I feel...great.” She sighed in content, feeling high.

Claire’s hurt expression caught her eye and she turned her head slightly to stare face-to-face with her sister. She was still being held down by Morgan, looking defeated. Hopelessness spread across her face. Her jaw was clenched as she glared back at Aralyn with tears in her bright eyes.

The next few seconds seemed to pass in slow motion:

Claire’s eyes flashed red and became full of hate, looking first at Aimeric and then at Aralyn. Somehow she managed to throw Morgan to the side—perhaps it was adrenaline that made her able to overpower him. She jumped to her feet and for good measure slashed her claws over Morgan’s eyes. He screamed in pain and stumbled, blinded. Claire sped to where

the dead assistant lay and yanked the stake from her back, turning her murderous glare on Aralyn.

Aimeric made a move to stop her but he wasn't fast enough with the bundle in his arms.

Claire flew onto the bed, straddling Aralyn's midsection to pin her down. The stake was plunged deep into Aralyn's heart and then Claire snapped her neck.

Aralyn never even felt it. She fell into darkness once more....

Chapter Twenty-Four

Tortured Souls

Intense heat coiled around her body and suffocated her. Her lungs felt closed up and stuck together, sweat dripped from her chin and rolled down her cheeks. Screaming. There were torturous screams in the background of wherever she was. The basement? But where was the heat coming from? Her body ached. She was lying on stone, jagged bits of it digging into her arms, her stomach, her legs; everywhere.

Cracking an eye open, she saw rocky walls bathed in an orange glow, the only light allowed in...wherever she was. The ceiling was thirty or more feet high and bulged with rocky stalactites. Smoke consumed the air. Hundreds of pools of liquid fire occupied most of the room; she was on a narrow bridge, barely safe from the searing fluid and licking flames.

Aralyn coughed and pulled herself to her feet. She felt weak, tired.

Inside the fiery ponds were thousands of men and women, the source of the screams. They were all struggling to get out of the fire. The ones nearest to the edge clawed at the rocky sides with mutilated hands and arms; the flesh was burned and falling off the bone in chunks, revealing stringy tendons and tissue.

Aralyn looked at them with her lip curled up in disgust. Their faces were the same as their hands: the skin falling off, eyes bulging. Boils and burns consumed the flesh that hadn't melted yet. Their screaming felt like someone was taking a knife and twisting it around in Aralyn's ears; it was an awful noise. Once every inch of flesh had melted away from their bodies and they were just skeletons, their skulls would sink beneath the fire for only a moment or two. Then they would pop up, back to the surface, fully regenerated; beautiful faces.

They were unscathed for only a second or two before the whole process would start over and they would start burning and melting again. An ongoing cycle, never to end. This was eternal punishment; this was eternal hell.

“Welcome to the Lake of Fire.”

The voice seemed to come from the smoke. No one was around except for the tortured souls of those stuck in the pools. Aralyn searched the premises until a being began to materialize from the thick cloud surrounding her. It was a man. Tall, pale, perfectly sculpted. If she could only use one word to describe him it would be “breathtaking.”

His hair was sectioned in silver and black, falling to his waist in a smooth silk curtain. Two wings were folded over his back; one black and bat-like, the other feathered and white. His eyes, which never left Aralyn as he made his way towards her, never stayed the same. They flashed as a slide show, going from silver to ice blue, to hazel green, to red, to brown, and then finally to black before going back to silver. When they were black, his pupil’s were tiny orange flames that danced in the coals. Under his pale flesh, Aralyn could see his veins. The rivers flowing within were not made of blood, but of lava and pulsed every second, making his flesh bubble in places.

He smiled at her, a cold and sadistic grin, as he continued:

“The ultimate punishment for a rebellious soul; those like me, who challenged *God* and fell against His wrath.” His tone was sarcastic and laced with disgust. “The only difference between them and myself is that they have become *my* pets; my prisoners.” He stopped only inches from her.

“Who are you?” Aralyn asked.

Chuckling, he leaned against the stone wall. “You mean you don’t know?”

She could guess and that’s what she intended to do. But the screaming was distracting her; she couldn’t think properly. The man sensed her irritation at the noise and raised a hand. The room became silent.

“There now. It’s just you and me.”

Aralyn looked at the pools. The people were still screaming but their voices had been muted.

"This is hell," she observed.

"Very good."

"So that would make you Satan?"

He shrugged. "That's one name. But I have many." He pushed off the wall and took an exasperated breath. "I've been called Lucifer, Beelzebub, The Dark One, the First Fallen, and many other names. The most popular, of course, is Satan."

"What name do you prefer?" Aralyn asked. She was in awe; she never knew that this place really existed. And 'Satan' did not look at all as she would have pictured him. But then, what little she knew of the Bible, he had been described as beautiful. A former angel of God.

He grinned again. "Call me Angel."

"Angel?" she was dumbfounded by the irony.

He smirked, letting that be all the answer she received. His ever-changing eyes were penetrating and sent a wave of fear through her entire body, even worse than she had first felt gazing into the piercing eyes of Aimeric. But she was braver now.

"Do you know why you're here?" he asked.

All that had happened returned to Aralyn. Her own sister had betrayed and killed her. She hadn't even had the chance to find out if she liked her new vampiric life. Claire had stolen it from her. If she waited long enough, she might be able to have her revenge on her murderous sister. Aimeric was probably furious and killing her at this very instant. Claire may be joining her soon.

Clenching her fists at her sides, Aralyn nodded. "I was murdered."

"That's not what I meant. Aren't you curious as to why you ended up here, in my clutches, rather than ascending?"

"You mean to Heaven? I'm assuming that exists since you're real?"

"Yes."

"I don't know. I haven't thought about it."

"Allow me to enlighten you?"

She nodded and Angel smiled.

"You are here because you willingly chose the damned life of the undead; you allowed yourself to be turned by a demon. You had sex with a vampire on many occasions, the first few times against your will but then it became consensual. And the greatest sin you committed, dear Aralyn, was assisting in the defilement of an innocent. You took part in half-turning a child into a damned being."

Aralyn grinned, crossing her arms and swaying from side to side in nonchalance. "Yes, I did do all of those things, didn't I?"

Angel nodded, amusement shining in his eyes.

"So now what?" she asked.

"Now, you have a choice. You can accept that you belong to me and become my genuine follower in which, one day, you may become a true demon and rank among my highest officers. Or," He sighed and waved a hand towards one of the pools. "You can whine, say you don't want to be here, and I will revert you back into a mortal soul where you will be condemned for eternity and thrown into a lake...with them."

She looked to where he was pointing and saw the silent-screamers, still melting and sinking beneath the fire. She stared at their agonized expressions and watched the curve of their mouths as they grimaced and the way their lips widened as they screamed.

"Why am I being given a choice? Did they get to choose?"

"Only a small fraction of them chose their fate. Because you died as a vampire, you get a choice, unlike the mortals sent here who God deemed as sinners not capable of salvation. You, as all vampires and other undead, have the choice in returning to a mortal form and tossed into my lake or becoming a demon warrior."

"Why would they choose to suffer like that for eternity?"

He smirked, watching her gaze pathetically at the men and women. “The few who choose to revert to a mortal believe they have a chance at being redeemed, that God will descend one day and save them. What they don’t realize is, once you’re sent here, there is no going back.”

Aralyn returned the smirk, finally bringing her eyes back to him. “Didn’t you just reveal a secret that will influence my choice?”

“I knew your choice before you did. You weren’t even going to consider becoming one of them.”

He was right about that. Why would you willingly throw yourself into a boiling pot of eternal torture? Aralyn wouldn’t. Besides, she had a plan.

Giving a graceful bow, she said, “I’m all yours. But may I make a request, first?”

“Tell me.”

“I’m already a loyal follower. I will request to join your army but when the time is right. Let me go back to earth, enjoy my new life, spend time with my husband and meet my child. While on earth, I will recruit potential members for your army, in moderation of course. And when it’s really my time to leave, I’ll return here.”

“And?” Angel asked, knowing she was thinking of adding yet another request.

“And let me teach my dear sister a lesson if my husband hasn’t already done the job.”

He chuckled softly as if amused by her desire to get even with Claire. Then his expression became serious and he eyed her hard for a long moment.

She was brave under his scrutiny, not blinking, not showing that she was fearful.

Finally, he sighed. “You know, Aralyn, normally I wouldn’t even consider allowing one of my souls to go back to earth for fear of them changing their minds and turning to *Him*,” he turned a glare upwards as if seeing into Heaven.

“But?” Aralyn asked hopefully.

“But, you were sired by one of my most evil creations.”
His pointed teeth showed in a wide grin.

“Yes.” She smiled.

“As long as you are with Aimeric, I don’t believe I have to worry about you, and I must say revenge is a good reason to temporarily let you go. I’m curious to see what it is you will do to poor Claire.” Angel chuckled again.

“So am I,” Aralyn said bitterly, biting her bottom lip.

He eyed her again. “Very well, Aralyn. I will send you back. For how long, I do not know. My decision will depend on your behavior.”

“What do you mean?”

His eyes became a warning as he narrowed them down on her. “If I think for even one minute you might betray me, I will send my Death Riders after you and you will be brought here and cast into the fire.”

She scoffed sarcastically. “You don’t have to worry about that. I want to be with Aimeric and my child; I wouldn’t do anything to jeopardize my time with them.”

Angel nodded his approval and she stepped forward, ready for her journey back to earth. Back to Aimeric.

He smirked again. “Think happy thoughts.”

She grinned.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Julian

Morgan was terrified. It was obvious by how wide his cobalt eyes were as he rushed to snatch Claire off of Aralyn's body.

"Aimeric! Did you see what she just did?" he cried, heaving the struggling Claire to the floor.

"Morgan, let her go." Aimeric's voice was calm, not at all concerned that Aralyn had just been killed. He was looking at his newborn son with warmth in his eyes, letting the baby grasp his finger.

Claire stopped struggling and both, she and Morgan, looked at him with shocked expressions. Eyes confused, lips parted, momentarily paralyzed by his lack of concern.

Morgan obeyed, though. He released Claire but she didn't move. She was still looking at Aimeric in disbelief.

"What do you mean by this, Master? Are you not angry?" Morgan's words came out slowly, cautious.

Aimeric chuckled. "Why would I be angry?"

"She's just killed Aralyn! The woman you turned into one of us so she could be yours for ever! I figured you would go on a killing rampage, starting with this wench!"

"Why do you seem so concerned about her, Morgan?" Aimeric snarled, jealous accusation clouding his eyes.

"I- I don't, I guess."

"That's what I thought. Claire, darling? Come here." Aimeric beckoned her with a finger.

She looked like she wanted to run away but knew better. Slowly, she made her way to him, walking past Aralyn's body on the bed and coming to stand beside him.

"Why did you do it?" he asked in a soft tone as if speaking to a child.

"I, uh," she stuttered her words, glancing at the stake impaled in Aralyn's chest and then up to her broken neck.

"You wanted to save her from me, right?" He grinned and took his eyes from the child, looking down at Claire, waiting for her to confirm his guess. She didn't say anything so he added, "Or, perhaps you were jealous of Aralyn?"

Claire eyes darkened and she glared at him. "Why would I be?"

"I believe you were jealous of our relationship, despite your claiming preference of women. Tell me what your feelings for me are, Claire."

She looked indignant at first at the insinuation that she had any kind of loving feelings for him after what he had put her family through. But then, her frown and glare turned into a seductive grin and she curled her fingers around the thickness of Aimeric's free arm.

"You're right. I was jealous of her. I wanted you all to myself. I wanted the child. I thought if I killed her, I would have a chance with you again, I never realized how much you meant to me before you brought her here."

"Ah," Aimeric took Claire's chin, looking at her with stern eyes. "Before *you* brought here, darling."

"At your request, unless you're forgetting," Claire said.

He grinned.

"Anyway, I thought perhaps I could be a replacement to you...and the child."

The grin stayed in place, widening as she said this. He took his free hand and used it to grasp Claire's dark hair and pull her up to his mouth.

"If that's what you desire," he whispered, connecting their lips.

He kissed her a moment and when they pulled away, Claire smiled, clearly surprised at his response. She didn't think he would believe her.

The moment was short-lived, though.

Her smile instantly disappeared when he yanked her head back as far as it would go without breaking her neck.

“Do you honestly expect me to believe that pathetic story?” He hissed the words against her lips and then pushed her away before glaring at Morgan. “Take her downstairs. I’m sure Aralyn will want to have a few words with her when she returns.”

Morgan hesitated. “What do you mean, Master?”

Aimeric sighed in annoyance. “Oh, Claire, don’t try and escape, you know you won’t get away.”

She had rushed to the door, trying to open it. Morgan jumped on her and restrained her arms at her sides, holding her in place.

“Of course Aralyn will return,” Aimeric continued. “Now take her downstairs.”

Morgan nodded and pulled Claire out the door, heading to the basement. She had given up on fighting him. She knew she couldn’t escape Aimeric now.

Once they were gone, he looked at Aralyn’s corpse. Her eyes were closed and her neck bent at an odd angle. He didn’t take his eyes away from her for a long moment, contemplating her death in his mind, looking as if he were unsure she would really be back. For a brief moment there was a look of concern in his eyes.

The baby fussed, drawing his attention back to the nameless baby boy. He let him grasp his finger again and the baby closed his eyes; one violet, one blue. His hair was jet black, thick on his small head.

Aimeric took him to the bassinet in the corner and gently laid him on the soft mattress.

“Just go to sleep now. Your mother will be back soon,” he whispered before turning back to Aralyn’s body.

He waited.

After a few seconds of dead silence, her body sprang into a sitting position and she instinctively took in a loud breath. She heaved and coughed a few times. When she looked at Aimeric, her eyes were burning, showing nothing but pure hatred.

“Where is that bitch?” she hissed.

Grinning, Aimeric made his way to her side and held out his hand.

“There are more important matters at hand, my love. You can deal with your sister later; she’s not going anywhere. For now, come and meet your son.”

She hesitated at first, her raging expression softening. She took his hand and he helped her stand. Her legs shook at first but after a second of her walking, became steady. Energy returned to her and she couldn’t believe how good she felt. She felt as if every nerve in her body had been recharged and every cell was new and fresh.

Aimeric took her to the bassinet and she peered down at the tiny life she had been a part of creating. After a moment of observing, she said in a sickened tone, “It’s disgusting. Get rid of it.”

She was violently spun around and met with Aimeric’s infuriated eyes. He was baring his fangs and his fingers dug into her arms. It was painful but she didn’t flinch. She was no longer afraid of him or his outbursts. All she did was smirk, daring him with seductive eyes and a malicious grin.

“You better not mean that,” he said.

“Of course I don’t. I wanted to be sure of how *you* felt about him.”

His grip on her loosed and he scoffed. “A dangerous game, my love.”

She pushed herself up so she could kiss him, barely touching her lips to his before turning back to the baby. As if sensing his mother was near, the baby opened his eyes and began to fuss up at her. She reached down and picked him up, cuddling him to her chest and kissing his head. She went to the bed to feed him. Her breast milk was anything but normal. Her new body somehow knew she had just given birth and that the child needed more than milk so it had produced a small fraction of blood to mix with the milk. Aralyn would have to feed more often than the others in order to replenish the blood.

While she was feeding him, she spotted a mark on his neck. It was in the shape of a tiny fang.

She started to ask what the mark meant when Aimeric interrupted her.

“It is his mark, showing he is only half.”

“Only half,” she parroted thoughtfully. “Did Orrin have one?”

“Yes.”

She was quiet, thoughtful. Aimeric sighed.

“You want to know about him, don’t you?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“He was my son in the same way this one is.” Aimeric took the baby’s hand. “A little over forty years ago, I went into a slight depression and refused to feed. I starved myself almost to the point of becoming a zombie.

“One night I was in the park, my desire for blood overwhelming. There was a woman sitting on a bench, pregnant and looking very afraid. She was alone and distressed. I approached her and asked if I could help her. The scent of her blood was intoxicating. She said her husband had left to call for an ambulance because she was in labor. She was frantic, frightened at being in labor and alone in a park with me. She could tell I wasn’t normal. I used my charm to calm her down but my thirst was too great. I bit her and fed from her. But I took too much. I couldn’t care less about the woman but I’ve always felt compassion for children and didn’t want hers harmed. I did the only thing I knew to keep the child from dying. I turned her. She delivered the child the same way you did this one. Orrin was born, thus making him partly mine. Because of that experience I knew how to do it this time.” He leaned down and kissed her but she didn’t respond.

Her mind was going over everything and she was irritated. The baby finished eating and Aralyn pulled him up to her shoulder to gently pat his back, moving away from Aimeric.

“And I suppose this woman became your whore? Where is she now, Aimeric?”

He chuckled. “Now, now. Temper, my love. Are you jealous?”

“No,” she snapped.

He looked skeptical but didn’t push it. “She’s dead. She became power hungry after three years and foolishly started killing vampires from other clans. She was killed.”

“And Orrin? When did he start hating you? And why?”

“About ten years ago. His physical body was thirty years old, but he only appeared fifteen or so, as was his mentality. Half vampires age slower than humans,” he explained. “He was burdened with questions and in turn burdened me with them, asking about his real father and blaming me for taking him away from him. He also blamed me for his mother’s death, saying it was my fault.”

“What did you do to him?”

“I told him to leave and he did. I let him go yet he became accustomed to telling everyone he came into contact with that he ‘escaped my tyranny.’ He found a new clan that accepted him because they felt sorry for him. He’s lucky I didn’t just kill him.”

Aralyn looked at the ash pile on the floor that used to be Orrin and, her voice hardening to a warning, she said, “I hope you don’t intend on killing our son if he ever questions you.”

Aimeric sighed, taking the baby from Aralyn’s arms. “This one will not be a disappointment.”

He stood from the bed and Aralyn followed him to the bassinet. She watched as Aimeric laid their son down.

“He needs a name,” he said.

“Julian.”

“Why Julian?”

“I want to name him after my father.”

Aimeric kissed her forehead. “Julian is fine.”

They walked back to their bed, holding hands. Aralyn caught sight of the dead female that had assisted her in labor. She frowned, confused.

“Aimeric?”

“Yes?”

“Why did she not turn to dust?”

“The Lessers don’t; they revert to mortals when killed with a wooden stake.” He brought her hand up to his lips and kissed her knuckles before gently pushing her down on the bed. “Get some rest now. Your body is still transforming, that’s how Claire was able to kill you. Once you’re complete, you can’t be killed so easily. I’ll take you out to feed in a little while.”

She pulled on his arm. “I don’t feel like resting. I can sleep later. Besides,” she sat up on her knees, playing with the collar of his shirt, “you can protect me.” She kissed him, running her tongue along his bottom lip and pulled him down on the bed with her.

He kissed her back with what seemed like starved passion. They made love until the sun rose and Aralyn fell into a deep sleep, allowing her body to rest and complete the transformation. Aimeric slept beside her, protecting her from anyone that would try and take advantage of her vulnerability.

When she woke up, she could feel the change was complete and felt strong enough to do anything.

She went to the basement and now stood in front of Claire, who was chained to the wall. Her hatred for her sister was now stronger than the love she had felt for her as a mortal. Knowing Claire had been the one to kill her was more agonizing than anything she had ever felt before. That agony was what fueled her hatred now. What added to it was the knowledge that her sister had allowed her to suffer before. She had brought her to Aimeric, she allowed her to be tortured and raped.

Aralyn loved Aimeric now and she didn’t blame him for all that he had done before, but, for some reason, she held a grudge for her sister.

Claire's eyes were closed. She was asleep. After a few seconds, though, she sensed Aralyn there and opened them. They widened.

"How are you alive?" she whispered.

Aralyn curled her lip in disgust. "Alive?" she repeated. "Why, dear sister, wasn't it you who told me once that vampires aren't technically alive?"

Claire glared. "Yes. I meant, how were you able to return?"

"What's the matter? Disappointed? Did I spoil your chances for taking my son? That's why you killed me, isn't it? You're jealous that I have a child and you lost your chance."

"I am not jealous. I was trying to save you!" Claire's fists clenched in the shackles.

Aralyn scoffed. "Save me?"

"Yes. This is not a real life. It's a curse. When I realized I couldn't save you from being turned, I thought you would be better off dead."

"And abandon my son? Or did you plan on killing him, too?"

She was silent, a guilty look consuming her.

"You bitch," Aralyn whispered.

Claire opened her mouth to spew out some sort of defense but Aralyn backhanded her, cutting her off.

"Don't you dare make excuses!" she screamed. "How could you even think of harming my son?"

"This is no life," she repeated through clenched teeth. "For you or the child. If you kill Aimeric, it could all be stopped; you would be free."

Aralyn laughed coldly. "You just don't get it, Claire. I couldn't be happier right now. Aimeric turning me was the best thing that ever could have happened to me. I feel like I have a reason to go on in this world now. I'm not depressed anymore. I have a baby, a man who loves me. We're a family." She lowered her voice and narrowed her eyes. "And I don't need you. If anyone deserves to die, it's you."

"Then do it. Kill me."

“No,” Aralyn shook her head. “You don’t deserve to get out of this so easily, you need to suffer.”

“Do whatever you want to me but don’t expect to get away with it,” Claire snarled.

“And what is that supposed to mean?” Aralyn asked.

“Orrin. Aimeric killed him, breaking a mutual law of the vampire clans. Terek will know shortly, if he doesn’t already, that Orrin is dead. He will declare war with Aimeric.”

Aralyn wasn’t worried. “What’s that got to do with you? You aren’t a part of their clan.”

“I was going to be.”

Rolling her eyes, Aralyn put her hands on her hips. “Big deal. Let them come.”

“They will.”

“And I’m so terribly worried,” she muttered, turning to the surgeon’s table. “Now, what shall we begin with?” She had never tortured anyone before but she had seen Aimeric do it enough that she doubted she would have any trouble.

“Aralyn,” Claire’s voice shook with fear. “Think about what you’re doing. This isn’t you! I only meant to save you before.”

“I thought you said to do what I wanted? That you didn’t care? Or were you bluffing?”

“The Aralyn I know wouldn’t hurt anyone.”

“That Aralyn is dead now. You of all people should know the Blood changes a person. I am Aimeric’s creation.” She smiled at the thought as she went through the blood-stained tools. “I think I like me better this way.”

She picked up a razorblade and examined it for a minute. “Too common.” She let it drop to the metal surface and picked up the next option: a rusted roofing nail.

“Good choice. For your first time,” Aimeric said, coming up to stand behind her and kissing her neck.

Aralyn turned around to face him. “What did you do with Julian?”

“I left him with Morgan.”

“Morgan?” Aralyn’s voice raised in disapproval.

“Yes.” He kissed the top of her head. “He’ll be fine, he’s sleeping. I couldn’t let you play with your first toy without me.”

Aralyn smirked, turning back to Claire and raising the nail.

“One day, you’ll pay for all that you’ve done,” Claire said to Aimeric through a sneer.

He grinned as he wrapped his arms around Aralyn’s waist and laid his head on her shoulder. “I’m sure I will.”

“But for now, dear sister, it’s your turn,” Aralyn added.

Quivering breaths found their way through Claire’s lips as Aralyn pushed her head back, placing her hand on Claire’s forehead and raising her chin, keeping her steady so she could work. Ignoring her sister’s painful gasp, she pushed the end of the nail into the skin just above her nose. Slowly, she slid it down, over her nose, lips, all the way to her chin. Blood dribbled its way down Claire’s face and her eyes watered, but other than that and the initial gasp, she refused to show proof of the pain she was feeling.

Aimeric watched and helped guide Aralyn along for the next twenty minutes or so while she placed cuts and punctures all over Claire’s body. She even carved tiny pictures into her skin; puppies and kittens, dotting the depictions with squeals of delight.

As Aralyn inflicted such agony on her betraying sister, she did not feel even a hint of remorse. No guilt. Not even a grimace. She truly believed Claire deserved the pain and eventually death for trying to ruin her happiness and come between her and Aimeric.

After a short while, though, she noticed the first cuts were already closing up. She sighed in frustration and tossed the nail to the floor. It wound in a circle several times before finally stopping.

“This isn’t fun anymore. You heal too fast.” Aralyn pouted her lips and glared.

“What should we do about that?” Aimeric asked, nibbling her ear.

She turned in his arms and kissed him deeply. “Kill her and then get more that won’t heal so fast and ones that scream; Claire’s boring.”

He smirked, kissing her back. “I knew I loved you.”

They turned back to Claire. The look in her eyes was murderous as she stared back at them.

“Are you ready?” Aralyn asked with mock sympathy.

“One day, Aralyn, you’ll wake up from this trance and realize what you’ve done.”

Aralyn giggled. “I don’t think so.” She smoothed the mess of curls from Claire’s face and licked away some of the blood that oozed from the cuts. “You’re kind of bitter, dear sister.”

Aimeric chuckled.

After glaring at her sister for a long moment, Aralyn jerked Claire’s head to the side, exposing her neck and the dead vein underneath the flesh. It didn’t pulse, it wasn’t warm; yet it was still inviting. She stared at it for a few seconds, hesitating. The minute remains of her soul that was left in her blood urged her to consider what she was about to do. Even with the change she had undergone, was she still capable of killing her own sister?

Of course she was. Claire hadn’t thought twice about killing her, why should Aralyn?

“Go on, drink,” Aimeric whispered, his tone enticing.

If Aralyn’s heart was still alive, it would have been pounding hard. She could remember the way her mortal body used to feel, how it would have tensed, how it would have seemed her heart was trying to leap from her chest and flee from her. Her legs probably would have gone weak and her eyes would have been lubricated with tears.

That wasn’t her. Not anymore. She was a different being now, a stronger being. She would never cry over stupid things again. She wouldn’t be afraid. She wouldn’t be weak.

Her lips parted into a cruel grin and she whispered “Goodbye, Claire” before plunging her fangs into her sister’s throat. Her razor-teeth tore through the skin and she drank

deeply, pulling the cold blood onto her tongue and reveling in the feel as it slid down her throat as a smooth, metallic stream.

Claire moaned in pleasure and pain.

Once Aralyn had had her fill of the blood, she stepped backwards, hitting her back against Aimeric's chest.

"Finish it," she said to him.

Aimeric brought up the axe he had used to kill Virgil so long ago and used it to swiftly remove Claire's head.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The Battle

“**T**here better not be one hair out of place on that baby’s head when I return or you’ll be thrown into the basement,” Aralyn yelled as Aimeric led her out the front door.

“Yes, Mistress,” Morgan said in a dull tone, annoyed that Aimeric had ordered everyone to address Aralyn with that title from now on.

“Julian will be fine,” Aimeric promised her, pulling the door closed.

They turned to face the small army waiting for Aimeric in the front yard. The entourage was made up of half of the clan, mostly the stronger ones. They had been ordered to fight, to meet Terek and his clan head on in surprise defense rather than risk the enemy storming the mansion and destroying it or harming the newborn.

Just in case Terek had thought of this, Aimeric ordered half of the members to stay, Wes among them and specifically chosen to be Julian’s bodyguard along with Morgan.

Aralyn stood by Aimeric’s side, raising her chin proudly; a queen by her king.

“Remember,” Aimeric said, addressing his children. “Do not fight until I give the order. Once I have given it, do as you wish. Kill them or capture them but do not allow any to get away. And remember, *keep them away from the mansion*. If my son is harmed, it will be taken out on each and every one of you.”

The vampires nodded in obedience.

“Good. Now let’s go. I can feel Terek’s presence on the island.” Aimeric walked with Aralyn off the porch and, together, they led the vampires down the drive, each carrying

a weapon capable of removing a head. Aimeric carried a large bag on his shoulder that contained more weapons.

As they walked, Aralyn asked, "How strong are Terek and his clan?"

"I don't know, I've never met him. All I know of them is what Orrin used to rub in my face when we confronted one another during feeding. From the way he used to talk, I could tell they feared me. Don't worry, my love," he kissed her hand. "They won't be much of a threat."

Aralyn smiled up at him.

"However," Aimeric's tone hardened and he pulled her closer against his side. "You're still too new to this life and you've never fought before. I want you to stay by side; do not go far from me, do you understand?"

She sighed, annoyed.

"Aralyn." It was a warning.

"Alright, fine."

He stopped suddenly, holding his arm out so she couldn't take another step. The vampires following behind stopped, too, sniffing the air. Aralyn smelled it, too. Or rather, *him*. She breathed in the scent deeply, in awe at her new senses. She had never felt so powerful before, so free. She could smell Terek. New blood. Just by his scent, she could tell he wasn't very powerful; the scent of his blood was nothing like Aimeric's. He was probably only an Elite, not a Master.

They were in the road. The forest on either side of them swayed in the night breeze. The air was deathly quiet in anticipation of the upcoming battle. Not even the chirp of an insect interrupted the silence.

Aimeric searched the trees but was unable to find him so he said in a loud voice, "Terek! Why don't you just come on out so we can get this over with?"

One set of hands broke the silence. Clapping as if hitting two stones together. Out walked a tall man wearing a long brown coat. His hair was so blonde it was white and his eyes were two small coals set into a hard face, a pointed nose in

between. His mouth was set in a firm line above a square jaw. He looked angry.

“Very good, Aimeric,” he said.

“I’m surprised you know me.”

“Orrin had many things to say about you—though I can’t say he was bragging. I feel as if I know you personally.”

“I’m not interested in chatting,” replied Aimeric.

“Where’s the rest of you?”

Terek frowned again, snapping a finger and a thumb. A dozen or so vampires stepped out of the trees several yards ahead, meeting Aimeric’s clan with vengeful eyes.

“Tell me, Aimeric,” Terek said. “I know you two had your disagreements, but what made you want to kill your own son?”

Aimeric smirked. “I don’t owe you or anyone else an explanation.”

Terek’s eyes shifted to Aralyn. “And you? Does he not owe you an explanation? Or are you not concerned that this *thing* will do the same to the child you gave birth to? The very child Orrin died trying to save?”

“No.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because Julian is *our* son and he will have no reason to hate Aimeric, therefore there will be no friction between them.”

Terek chuckled in disgust. “You are a foolish woman.”

Aimeric snarled, ejecting a large hunting knife from under his sleeve and catching it in his hand. He raised his other hand in the air. That was the signal, allowing his clan to begin fighting without restrictions unless directly ordered by Aimeric on the spot.

The vampires scattered and the battle began.

Aimeric went right for Terek, throwing a punch with his left hand and swiping the blade near his face with the other. His fist grazed the blonde vampire’s square jaw. Terek ducked the wrath of the knife. Three Lessers came to their Master Terek’s aid; two of them attacked Aimeric from

behind, the other tackled his right side like a football player. Terek took advantage of the distraction and ran, his eyes set on Aralyn.

When the vampires first started scattering, Mabel had tossed Aralyn an axe to defend herself with. She now held it high, bloodlust clouding her eyes. She wanted to help Aimeric so she ran forward, slicing the head off one of the ones attacking him. He killed the other two with ease and two more came at him.

The once quiet forest now rang out vibrations of battle; steel on steel, fists colliding with bone, blood curdling screams. The blood of the undead painted the forest floor and the sides of the road.

Aralyn kept her promise, staying close to Aimeric for most of the fight, but it seemed he was hogging all of the killing, slicing the throats of his attackers so deep with his dagger that it beheaded them with one swipe. It was boring. All she was doing was standing there with an axe.

Over-confident in her new strength and promise of immortality, she left him, going to find her own fight. A female stormed up at her, two swords in her pale hands like a pair of huge scissors. She went right for Aralyn's neck, rage burning in her glass-like silver eyes.

Aralyn ducked out of the way and swung the axe up in a half circle, burying it in the woman's side. She screamed, dropping one of the swords and used the other to swipe at Aralyn's face. The tip of the blade ripped through her cheek and she felt cold blood run down her face. One hand flew to her face, touching the thick liquid, and she glared at the woman with hate in her eyes. In one cruel motion, she yanked the axe free. Not waiting another second, she took off the woman's head and grinned a grin that resembled her maker.

Aralyn searched the battlefield. Most of Terek's family was dead. One was fighting Sadie. He had her against a tree, clashing his sword with hers violently. She didn't appear to have the upper hand. Her eyes were wide with fear and her

movements shaky. Aralyn smirked. Sadie was getting what she deserved. The two hadn't gotten along since the first day they met. Sadie was jealous that Aralyn had Aimeric's full attention.

Aralyn wasn't at all upset when Terek's vampire took off Sadie's head. She smirked as the headless corpse fell to the ground. The vampire took a moment to smile and rejoice his kill, leaving an opening for his own death. Aralyn took it.

As soon as his head fell, she sensed someone behind her. She spun around, kicking a female in the chin before another vampire grabbed her from behind. The woman was stunned for a second and then her eyes widened in anger. She punched Aralyn hard in the face while the second attacker held her down, keeping her arms confined to her sides.

She knew she could yell and Aimeric would be at her side in a moment's breath. But she didn't want to do that. She wasn't weak anymore; she could handle this. All that was needed was the opportune moment when she could catch them off guard. The vampire couldn't hold onto her for ever.

They dragged her through the trees, far from the fight.

As soon as she saw him, she knew what they wanted. Terek was waiting for her, hands clasped behind his back. He had ordered her to be captured and brought to him. The two vampires shoved Aralyn forward in front of him.

"What the hell do you want?" she asked.

"Allow me a few moments to tell you about the vampires?" Terek's voice was smooth and confident.

"Aimeric's already told me about them."

"He's told you his side. Please, just hear me out."

She glared, crossing her arms, but gave him the okay to continue. Whatever he had to say wouldn't sway her way of thinking now. But she was curious.

"There is another side, a true side, that Aimeric neglects to tell you. It is my hope that I can influence you before he can completely corrupt your young mind."

Aralyn rolled her eyes.

“Vampires were never intended to be these greatly feared killing machines,” Terek began. “Dominant, yes. We are superior to humans and we were put on this earth by Satan, sent to gather his army for the Great Battle between Heaven and Hell. But to those of us who desire redemption, it is not far from reach. We can be saved and give our souls back to God.

“Aimeric tortures and murders for his own pleasure. We drink the blood of the living but only when necessary, only for nourishment. We are not supposed to be evil creatures that haunt the dreams of our human brethren. He has poisoned your mind. He kills his own clan members, his actions even led you to kill your own sister, Claire.”

“I have no sister,” Aralyn growled.

“Aimeric made you believe she didn’t care for you, that she killed you out of spite when all she was really doing was trying to save your soul.”

“By sending me to hell. How contradicting.”

“You refuse to accept the truth of things, Aralyn.”

“Had she really cared, she wouldn’t have killed me. If what you say’s true and vampires can be redeemed, she should have left me alive and given me the chance to change my mind and give myself to God.” She smirked. “Not that I would have.”

Terek moved his head, slowly from side to side. “What has he done to you?” His mellow voice and concern reminded her of Orrin.

“Why is my life and soul so important to you anyway?”

Terek moved his eyes up so they locked with hers. “To be honest, and not to sound cold, but they aren’t. It’s not that we’re so worried about saving you as we are concerned with stopping with Aimeric. If we can convince you that what he’s doing is wrong, then-”

“You think I can convince him.”

“No. There is no hope in convincing him. We want you to kill him.”

Aralyn's mouth had been set in a firm line. Now it curved into a cold smile. She dropped to the ground, out of the way, as a flaming arrow flew through the trees and burrowed itself in the back of Terek's head, blowing it off his shoulders.

Aimeric threw the crossbow he had used to launch the arrow to the ground and reached into the pack on his back, taking out two sabers as the two vampires who had brought her to Terek reached down to take Aralyn hostage. Before they could touch her, he cut off their heads, one right after the other.

Propped up on her elbows, Aralyn laughed softly as Terek turned to gray flakes and fluttered in the wind at the same time the other two bodies hit the ground. She still didn't understand why the Lessers didn't turn to ash when they were killed; Aimeric hadn't explained that part, just that that's how things were. Maybe they somehow got their souls back when they died, though she didn't know why they would. But that was the only explanation she could come up with as to why their bodies would remain.

Aimeric walked up to her, putting the sword back in the bag. He went to stand over her and offered a hand. Aralyn accepted it, her soft laughter now hysterical giggles.

He slammed her back into the tree and the laughter faded. She smirked, looking into his cold eyes.

"I told you to stay with me," he growled.

"I got bored."

"And look where it got you. Terek could have easily overpowered and killed you and I doubt you would have been able to return this time," he sneered. "You're not as strong as you think, Aralyn; you're still just a weak little girl when it comes to battle."

"I knew you would show up, I wasn't worried."

"Don't be so stupid. He could have killed you the second he had you in his possession."

"Terek's too much of a pussy. Nothing happened so lighten up."

His grip tightened. He shoved her harder into the tree, the bark scratching the flesh of her back through her shirt.

"You think this is a game?"

"What do you want me to say?" she snarled. She was angry now; he was treating her like a child, his words condescending.

"Admit that you were foolish and will obey everything I command as you did before I turned you into what you are now. I'm still your Master and will not hesitate to punish you if I think you need it and now, Aralyn," he used his fingernail to make a small cut on her neck. She half grimaced, half smirked. "You cannot die from a few mortal wounds."

Taking his finger into her mouth, she sucked on the tip of it for a few seconds in an obscene gesture, licking away the few drops of her own blood.

"I was foolish and will never disobey you again, *Master*." Her voice was low, seductive.

He grinned his approval and they kissed, their tongues dancing together in a long moment of passion. As she pulled away, Aralyn asked, "Did we win?"

"We're not dead, are we?" he asked sarcastically.

She smiled widely, tracing a finger along the collar of his shirt. "In what way?"

He kissed her finger before pulling her away from the tree and leading her out of the forest.

"Come. We'll go check on Julian and then come back out to feed."

She snuggled against his side, holding tight to his arm. "I can't wait."

Epilogue

It was a crisp autumn night. The moon was shining brightly. Silver light flooded the cemetery, covering the gray headstones in breathtaking elegance and beauty.

Aralyn was running, dodging in and out of the carved stones. Her laughter echoed through the otherwise quiet night. Brown leaves crunched beneath her bare feet. It was cold, but she didn't notice. Cold didn't bother her anymore. The soft laughter of an innocent child joined in with Aralyn.

She paused at a gravestone that mimicked an obelisk, searching the cemetery for her young son. He was now four years old though he only looked two. His hair was to his shoulders and his eyes were as striking as his parents'. He had a cute, plump face with crimson lips and tiny, needle-like fangs that showed when he smiled. She couldn't see him anywhere but she could still hear him.

She gasped as she was pulled to the ground, but then the intake of surprise quickly turned to soft laughter as she hit the hard chest of her lover.

"He's waiting for you to give up, my love," Aimeric whispered against her ear.

She nodded, suppressing laughter as the two of them waited on the ground. A few minutes later the small boy appeared, jumping into both of their laps, screaming in delight and then giggling. Aralyn kissed his soft hair and hugged him tightly.

In only a few seconds the boy's energy seemed to deflate and he was quiet in Aralyn's arms, eyes closing. He was asleep soon after.

"Should we take him home? He's had a long day," Aimeric said.

She shook her head and leaned into his chest, holding the child tightly in her arms. "Not yet." She wanted to relish this

moment because she knew it wouldn't always be like this. It wouldn't always be happy. The nights would come and go quickly.

"What are we going to do when he..." she couldn't say it.

"I knew something was bothering you." Aimeric kissed the top of her head and stroked Julian's hair. "When his time comes to leave this realm, we will leave with him," he whispered.

"It feels like it will be tomorrow."

"We have a few hundred years. And, my love, don't think of it as death; think of it as relocation because we will be reunited shortly after that time comes. For now, though, let's just enjoy our time here."

Aralyn nodded again, turning her head so she could kiss him. He was right. She didn't have to worry about losing Julian, not for good. And they still had many years of nights like this left on earth.

"Let's go home and play with some of the prisoners," she whispered, pulling away from his mouth and grinning.

He grinned. "I love you."

The End

Dead Seed

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<http://myspace.com/vampiresdontexist>

Dead Seed

In loving memory of
Felicia Ann Jewel
February 7th 1982 – November 5th 1997

R. Vance



R. Vance writes fantasy and horror. She lives in Oklahoma City with her boyfriend and cat. She writes books, short stories, and poems. In her spare time, she likes to clean and cook. Music is her main muse.

Dead Seed

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Dies Irae (Day of Wrath) Book One (fantasy)

(a contributor to) *Sinister Landscapes* (short story: *My Elf*)
(amazon.com)

“*Words from a Darkened Heart*” (poetry—all genres)

Upcoming Works

(a contributor to) 2008 Ladies of Horror (two short stories:
Death Riders and *Harper Ridge*)

Dies Irae (Day of Wrath) Book Two (fantasy)

Dementia (horror)

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