



Amira Press

Anastasia Rabiayah

# Blood Angel

Book Two: Charon

**Amira Press**

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Blood Angel Book Two: Charon

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ISBN: 978-1-935348-16-0

Amira Press

Baltimore, MD 21216

[www.amirapress.com](http://www.amirapress.com)

## **Dedication**

For Christopher, who held me and understood without words. There can be no other who has touched me as deeply as you, who held that connection only two souls on the outside can comprehend and forgive when they embrace one another. The scent of leather, the feel of your body against mine, and the colorless shade of your eyes will forever haunt me—with unspoken love.

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## **Prologue**

Tommy wasn't getting any better. Every night, long after he'd gone to sleep and I'd sated my thirst for blood without taking life, I sat beside him in bed and watched him suffer nightmares while muttering my name over and over. "Angela, Angela..." I couldn't help but think I was the cause of his suffering, that because of me, the grief over losing his first wife had rooted in his heart and refused to give him peace. Could the darkness in me engulf him? Destroy him? I couldn't bring myself to explain why I was only able to be with him at night and why I was no longer like him. I could not tell my lover I was a vampire. Moreover, I could never, ever, change him to be like me.

Worse yet, when I slept beneath his daughter's bed during the day, I dreamed. My own visions haunted me, most unlike the nightmares a human suffers. The spirit who visited me and plagued me with images of blood and death continued to appear despite my efforts to abate the dreams. Her name was Karada, and I truly think her soul haunts mine. I killed her—not that she deserved to live, vile thing that she was. She tried to make me her pet, and I would not have it. Each time I slip my eyes shut, I see her leering. I hear her voice whispering in a lilting cadence, "I will have my revenge, little angel."

It was one such day I awoke to the sound of pots and pans clattering in the small kitchen of his apartment. Tommy must have been making breakfast. The murmurings of soap operas

sounded from the TV. He didn't have work that day, and had only been working a few days a week, able to keep up with his job from home on the days he stayed away from the office. Karada's voice spoke in my ear although my consciousness could not be denied. "I'll send *him* for you ... bitch." The whisper sounded real, the maliciousness undeniable.

I rolled onto my side to face a small doll Serena had left behind. I missed Tommy's daughter and needed the comfort only the innocent embrace of a child could bring. Shivering from the ghost's threat, I wondered about the reach Karada might still have over the world. I wondered who she was referring to.

Since becoming a creature of the night, I saw many things differently. Ghosts appeared to me, but seldom spoke—until Karada. Auras showed me humans' moods, which gave a clue as to what they might taste like should I choose to feed from them. And when my hunger becomes too strong for me, the night sky bleeds red, signaling my impending loss of control. I seldom let myself go so far. I need to be strong, to remain steady for Tommy. I need him to come back to me, to return from the darkness he battles within himself—a darkness much unlike mine.

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## Chapter One: Charon Waking

*Mt. Pilio, Greece*

A voice edged into my consciousness, calling to me.  
"Charon?"

I opened my eyes. Between the world of the living and the land of the dead, I lay staring up at a ceiling that swirled with the moonlight reflected from the river near my window. This sight soothed me, having spent so many years atop the water's surface in my boat. Things had changed since I had left my appointed duty. I had languished among the living—tormenting them at times, lusting after them at others—until as I do from time to time, I get bored and rest. I have many names in many tongues, but the one I prefer to be called is Charon, for it is the oldest and the one associated with the most mystery, and it was this name the spirit called me with, having repeated the single word to gain my attention. As I watched the light dance and sway, slowly letting awareness of awakening settle over me, I felt the familiar touch of a soul I once knew.

Karada's spirit came to me that lonely night and wafted along the edge of my consciousness. She had few words to offer, being a selfish creature in her living years. She was no different now that death had taken her. It saddened me to know that I could never again play with the wonder of her body or toy with her childlike mind. She begged for revenge and sent me visions of a young vampire, dark of skin and bearing a most rare gift—feathered wings like those of the



angels on high. This image whetted my lustful appetite, something dormant for many years now. The beauty of my ex-lover's murderess could not be denied. I rolled on my side while I contemplated this vision.

"Why do you ask for revenge from me, of all creatures within your power to visit?"

*"You owe me,"* was all her soul said.

She had a point. She had me at that. I owed her for all I'd done, all I'd stolen from her. She hadn't had much of a life to speak of when I found her in Egypt. A pleasure to look upon and to fuck, she'd have gone the way of the whores before her soon enough. But she amused me, so I made her mine and taught how to amuse me further on dark nights when the souls passed my way before they entered the next plane. Karada had been a skillful, if not demanding, lover.

I did owe her for the years I had stolen from her, even if she left me in the end. It hurt to think of that morning, of waking to an empty bed and every piece of pottery in my home shattered across the marble floors. She had a nasty temper, and breaking my collection was the surest way to hurt me without slitting my throat ... not that I could die. Death had abandoned me long ago and took with it all my humanity.

"Very well," I muttered and pushed my tired form from the mattress. Dust had settled in my bedchamber. It puffed in the air when I brushed at my sleeping clothes. "I will find this one you want me to kill and see if her time can come sooner."

Souls sometimes appear in colorful shades like the auras of the living. Karada's, a dark space in my room, shifted to a

golden hue for three bright seconds before she vanished. I imagine the current bearer of souls would have a time leading her across. No doubt she would try to bribe him for a second chance, or fight him. It was her way. I can't blame her for being what she was.

I stripped off my clothes and padded through the dark hall to my bathing chamber. The soaps had sat, untended I assumed, ever since I went to rest. Forgotten as I was, they, too, were covered with a layer of dust.

I slipped into the steaming water, natural hot springs that were fortunately on my estate, and arched my back to hear the bones crack. The muscles along my body eased. I reached for the soap and soaked it in the water to rid it of the filth before I cleaned my skin.

Sleeping for such long periods allowed me time to contemplate my existence and to wonder what purpose I served now. I had no job, no important duties to attend to. At first, it had been a wonderful freedom for me, having been responsible for a task for so long. The sex was the best part. No one found me attractive in the form I had in my prior appointment. The skull and robe were a bit much, but I had to keep up appearances.

*Appearances.* I laughed at the thought. I could be anything I wished, a woman, a man, a falcon high as the clouds overlooking the forest below. But for now, I remained in my favorite shape, the guise of a young Greek man with olive skin and jewel-like hazel eyes—my true form before He took me into his service.

I dipped below the water's surface and scrubbed my face clean. I washed my hair with a concoction left by Galatea, my prior servant. I wondered if she was dead now. I had no concept of how long I had rested in my estate, and judging by the dust, my beloved toy might very well be gone the way of all souls who meet their end. I had not felt her passing, so I held hope that we could once more play the night games I so reveled in.

Bathed and fresh, I walked from my sleeping rooms to the higher balcony of my home and stood there to watch the sun rise over the olive orchard. Unlike the vampires I had sired, the light of day did not hinder me. I found it beautiful and glorious in its colors and magic. The day woke all the living in most cases and set them about their duties, their purposes. "I have no purpose," I told the rising sun. "I do not matter."

But now, that was not completely true. A soul had asked a favor of me. Although I was under no obligation to provide it, I did have a purpose this morning. *Revenge*. I would find this Blood Angel and exact Karada's revenge.

I smiled.

A womanly figure emerged from Galatea's cottage down by the river. She walked along the water's edge wearing a long skirt that caught the breeze. Her dark hair fluttered in the air as well. Perhaps I had not been asleep as long as I imagined.

I shouted down to her, excited at the prospect of being with her once more. "Galatea!"

The woman paused, turned ever so slowly, and looked in my direction. Although distance parted us, I knew she was not my servant. The maiden dropped the bucket she had

been carrying and, remaining there for a long while, watched me.

I waved at her to come to me.

With stilted steps, she did so. By the time she reached my overgrown courtyard, the stiffness with which she had begun her walk had subsided, and now her hips swayed in a gentle dance. She was not my Galatea, but certainly there was a striking resemblance. She held her hand over her eyes to block out the sun as she took me in.

"Father?"

My heart stilled for a dangerous moment. Could it be true? Could this vision of beauty and Grecian grace be of my line? I swallowed back a thousand questions and asked the only one I could think of. "Where is Galatea?"

Her full lips tensed for a moment before she answered in Greek. "Mama died two years ago. She told me to stay here in case you awoke."

It could not be true, could it? I studied the narrow shape of her face and saw her mother there. Her mouth looked a little like mine in my human form. Her eyes ... I wanted to get closer to see if indeed, she could be my child. "Wait there," I ordered.

I hurried down the marble steps to the courtyard and approached her at a run. When I reached this beautiful creature, it was apparent to me she held as much curiosity about me as I did her. "What is your name?"

"Mahsa."

I chuckled. "She gave you a Persian name. Ah, my Galatea, always the contradiction. Did she suffer before her

time came?" I held out my hands to the young woman. She took them in hers and continued to stare at me with a dumbfounded look.

"She died in her sleep. She was not ill before. There was no warning."

"Mmm, at least she went in peace." Embracing her, I kissed both her cheeks as was the tradition in the country. Her warm smile lit up her face after that. The color of her eyes mirrored mine. She might very well be my daughter.

Her small fingers entwined with my large ones, and together, we walked down to the river. She smelled like Galatea, like lavender and lemon incense from the little Orthodox Church in the village. I wondered what day it was. "Is it Sunday?"

"Yes, Father," she answered, stealing a conspiratorial glance at me. "Mama said you like church. Will you come with me today?"

I nodded.

As she dipped her bucket into the river, I watched the thick curls of her hair flutter in the breeze. I missed my old lover. I longed for her now. Galatea had touched me in a way no human woman ever had. She revered me, worshiped me, and in her own strange way, she loved me. Tears welled in my eyes at the thought of her. I regretted, not an emotion new to me by any means, that I hadn't turned my toy into a creature of the night. At least then when I woke, a chance that she would still be alive would give me hope. It was too late for all that, too late to find her.

"How do you know I'm your father?"

Mahsa stood up straight and made her way along a worn path in the high grass. "Mama took me to see you when I was very little. After that, she said I should not visit your bed, that you were tired and needed to sleep."

"That's true," I murmured, remembering the pull of weariness before I had reclined on my bed. The world had lost its color, and even then, my plaything could not stir my lust as before. I had grown bored. I had wished for an end which would never come.

"She visited you every day, washed you, cared for you. I didn't understand what was wrong with you or why you would not wake." She opened the door to her cottage and entered.

Memories flooded my mind. Torrid visions of coupling with Galatea on the wooden table in the kitchen, on the planked floor, against the wall by the window. Remembering, I closed my eyes as I stood in the open doorway.

"Nico said when a man sleeps like how I described you, he is in a coma."

I nodded. "Who is this Nico?" I opened my eyes and shut the door behind me.

"A young priest at the church." She blushed and looked away.

There was more going on than the counsel of a priest. I knew it without asking because she had not used the man's title. I ran my hand through my hair and seated myself on the bench by the kitchen while my child poured water into a pot.

"Father," she asked, glancing at me sheepishly, "do you want me to dress you? Mother saved a chest of your clothes

here. She used to hold them in her arms some nights and cry."

I nodded, somehow touched by the image of Galatea missing me. Mahsa was my Galatea with an innocence that defied her mother's experience and worldliness. I imagine she had been sheltered here in this old place where few villagers dared trespass. Galatea would have taken her to church though. She'd have done so knowing it would be what I wanted. All souls needed a basis for what is and what will be. That my child had that and perhaps no other formal schooling was good enough for me. It was all she needed, a touch of God to direct her on the right path. Everything else would fall into place for her with faith. I knew the truth of the theory.

"Will you stay awake?" she asked, returning to me with a set of clothing.

I stood while she dressed me, just as my former lover used to do. She pulled up my underpants and my loose-fitting pants with care. She buttoned my shirt, and lastly, after I had sat down once more, my child combed through my dark hair in deliberate strokes. She braided it and tied it the way I liked it kept.

"For a time," I said, answering her question.

Mahsa's face warmed with another smile directed at me. She took up the last piece of clothing she'd brought, an orange wrap for my hair. I bowed to allow her to arrange it atop my head. Galatea had taught her well.

"Will you stay here with me?" she asked.

I must be honest. Part of me wanted to stay. I longed for this new sort of companionship, this blind devotion she

showed. But did I deserve such a thing? I had no capacity to love her. She was grown and not in need of a father in her life. "I have a task I must complete first. Then, after I have done what I was awakened to do, I will return here to you, my only daughter."

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## Chapter Two: Tommy's Sister-in-Law

*Morgan, Florida, United States*

"Hello?" The phone felt cold in my grip. While I listened to the caller, I stared at Tommy on the couch. He wore shorts this evening, and the blank look on his face evidenced his inner pain.

"Hello. You must be Angela," the woman said.

"Yes. How can I help you?"

"This is Marianne Anderson, Genevieve's sister. I wanted to know if I could stop in to see Tom. I'm heading back to Alabama to visit my mother. I wanted to see Serena, too."

My heart ached. I missed the little girl, the child who held me close for so many nights and had faith in me. She thought me her guardian, but I had failed in that respect. "Oh yes, of course. I think it would be good for him." I scribbled down the dates she would be in town and made a promise to talk to Tommy about it when he wasn't in one of his funks.

"I'll let him know you're coming to visit," I said. "He's not available to come to the phone at the moment, but I'm sure he'll be happy to see you."

We said our good-byes. For some reason I couldn't explain, this woman's voice gave me hope. I went to sit beside Tommy and slipped my dark fingers into his fair ones. He really did need to get out more. He used to be tanned, but lately, he looked pale and drawn. "Honey?"

He turned to face me, his mouth a curved down in a frown. "Hey. I was just thinking about Gen." Tears pooled in his

eyes. He leaned forward and, pulling me to him, kissed my lips. I kissed back, always hungry for his attentions. Before long, he had me entangled in his arms and legs across the couch. His warm mouth tasted me, and our tongues tested and teased in a familiar way. "I can't lose you, Angela," he murmured in my ear. "I can't lose you like I lost her."

The bulge in his pants pressed against my crotch, filling me with desire. Now was not the time to tell him about Marianne. It would only sadden him and dredge up more memories. I let him pull away my T-shirt and shorts. He plucked the band of my bra open and threw the silken undergarment aside. Fingers delved into my panties and tested my wetness.

Our kisses turned desperate. Whenever he broke away to breathe, he managed to blurt a desperate phrase about losing me. I held him close. "I'll never leave you. Never again."

His eyes glittered with emotion. He wanted to believe me, but something held him back. I imagined it must be the desperation of having lost me twice before and then losing Genevieve to cancer. His faith was shot.

I pulled down his shorts and boxers so we could be naked against each other. "I'm always yours, no matter what happens. You need to know that. You need to believe I love you."

"I love you too, Angela. I've always loved you. I'm sorry I'm so worthless lately. It's just..."

I touched his lips with two fingers. "I know. I understand. It takes time to heal. I'll be here for you. I'll take care of you ... forever if it takes that long."

He smiled but it was so sad I nearly cried. "Who called?"

I bit my bottom lip and contemplated if I should answer or save it for later. "Just someone from work, nothing important."

He nodded and kissed my cheek.

Thirsty for blood, I nuzzled his neck, and the thought of our heated coupling caused my dark urges to surface. "Do you want me?" I whispered, teasing him. "Do you want me to take you right now?"

"Mmm, yes." He rolled onto his back, gazing up at me with those piercing blue eyes. "I always want you."

I sat up and reached between us to grasp his length, guiding him inside me in a slow, tortuous way. Leaning back, I closed my eyes and treasured the sensation of being filled by the only man I could ever love. His hands closed over my hips, but neither of us moved to do more. The sweet moment of being one with him made me feel alive. I hoped he would give me a child again, a baby we could love together. My hopes are impossible though. I know that, but it never keeps me from trying to make them true. He had started a child in me once before. Maybe it was a fault of nature, maybe not. But that chance had been stolen from me by Karada.

When he thrust, driving into me farther, I bore down and kept in time with him. We made love at a gentle pace, unhurried and meaningful. Although there were times when our lovemaking was urgent and wild, it was these serene moments I treasured most.

I felt him tense before he came inside me. His eyes slipped shut and his mouth formed a rounded O in his bliss. We

remained there long after his release, locked together if only to prolong our joining. I belonged with him. I knew it then and had known it from the first moment I stared at him in high school so many years ago.

Afterward, we snuggled close. I held him until he drifted to sleep. The sweet *thump-bump* of his heartbeat lured my lips to his neck. I pushed my will into his mind and forced him to continue sleeping when my fangs pierced his skin. His blood flowed into me, another sharing of his soul, a delicious taste that felt sinful to take. Too fearful I would damage him or lose control, I never drank much from him.

My thirst barely quenched, I sliced the top of my tongue over a fang and sealed away the two small injuries I'd caused. I lay beside him for an hour more and wondered if there was any way I could be human again. "You can't be what I am," I whispered. "I can't bring you to this darkness."

He mumbled my name in his sleep.

I rose. The night was still young and I needed to feed properly or else risk doing something I knew I would regret. I dressed and left the apartment, locking the door behind me with a turn of my mind. The tricks my maker had borne were coming easier to me now. I practiced shielding my mind from others like me. There were not many and most left my city once I crossed paths with them. Vampires are territorial, solitary predators. I had not seen a pair together since my making, which led me to believe my experience with Rory was unusual, to say the least.

I swore after I killed Karada that I would never again let another vampire dominate me. I had no desire to be a pet or

a toy. My mind was my own now, and I could see far back into my past. When Rory had controlled me, he had stolen my memories and had kept me from knowing who I wanted to be. I can't imagine doing that to another or ever having it done to me again.

In the hall, I nodded to a woman who passed my way. She hardly noticed me as I stepped away. Once I was certain I was alone, I entered the stairwell leading to the top of the Morenci Apartment building. No one used it much anymore, preferring the elevators.

The hairs on the back of my neck rose. Goose bumps prickled my skin. Something was amiss. Someone was following me or watching me. I felt a presence. Pushing open the service door to the roof, I glanced over my shoulder. Shadows greeted me, silent and still. Maybe I was imagining it, or maybe my need to feed might be heightening my awareness.

I crossed the cement roof to stare at the boundaries of my territory. I claimed the city and some of the outer stretches of suburbia beyond. Enough to sustain me. All I wanted was just enough, never more than I needed, to remain invisible to the eyes of the living. I tried not to kill, only to take what my body required to sustain itself. I slipped off my T-shirt and tucked it into the back of my shorts. Summer had warmed the air, and the Floridian humidity settled on my skin with its warm, sticky touch.

My wings pushed through my skin, growing and fanning wide. Their weight no longer burdened me. I spread them and leaned forth, ready to fly over my city and hunt. My fangs

lengthened in anticipation. Only a hint of red bled into the blue-black sky.

I jumped and just as I did, that damnable ghost spoke in my ear. "He's coming for you. He'll make you his toy and you will know what it is to suffer as I did."

I faltered midair and spun before catching myself. "Go away, Karada. Go and be where the souls of the dead belong."

I steadied and flew higher than most humans would dare look at this hour. Below me, cabs and pedestrians looked like miniatures as they went on their ways. The ghost said nothing more. Her threat irritated me. I don't know who she spoke of. Rory was dead, and I knew very little of Karada's past.

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### **Chapter Three: Flying**

I said my good-byes to my daughter. Mahsa cried for my leaving, which touched me in a way I can't explain. She had no knowledge of who I was before our first meeting. I can only imagine that her mother made up stories for her. Stories in which I was some benevolent man who cared for the both of them. Lies to make up for the truth. Mahsa waved at me from the side of the road when the little omnibus took me away from our village. The ride gave me time to contemplate what changes had happened in Greece, new roads, new buildings, more people and cars. Time slipped away, and before I knew it, I was standing before the airport in Athens.

As a rule, I do not care for airplanes, as much as I love to fly. I know this makes little sense, but being trapped inside the cabin of a massive jetliner, cramped into a seat beside strangers, and forced to sit there for hours on end can hardly compare to taking to the sky of my own volition on the strength of my wings. Nevertheless, I made do, boarding with an old passport and Euros, a currency new to me.

I left behind the beauty of Greece, the garishness of my enduring Athens, and resigned myself to suffer for the twelve hours it would take to get to the Americas. Indeed, I had not set foot on the Land of the Free for such a long time that the prospect of being there excited me.

I watched a movie flicker across the screen, and my mind wandered to Karada. The first time I had taken her, she had fought me, a terrible mistake on her part because I have a

quick temper. I beat her that night, beat her beyond my usual cruelty.

The following night she stood before me healed and in wonder at her abilities and gifts as a vampire. Such trivial miracles no longer amazed me. I wanted her, and I would have her, willing or not. That was my way then. Most often, my lovers were unwilling. Only my last had truly wanted me. I hoped I would find another like her one day.

I slept, wallowing in the past, until we landed in Amsterdam. There, I meandered through the throng of people to the next gate, the next flight, and the long boredom of waiting. I had an idea of where my target might be, for Karada had weakened in her time apart from me and had sent me rambling love letters from a place called Florida. She would write to me in our own secret language, a jumbling of Greek and hieroglyphs no other living person would be able to decipher. We were old then, and yet both such young fools in the art of love.

She had found someone she didn't want to kill. It amazed me then. I remember tearing up the note she had written, the jealousy too painful to bear. She had indeed fallen in love, something she could never do with me. It still burned my heart that I could not break through her walls, childish and self-serving as she was.

The plane touched down in Minneapolis at noon. I stepped into the airport with a weary sense of déjà vu. True, I had been here many years before, and much had changed, but as I walked past the people in the waiting areas and watched



reunited lovers embrace or families saying their good-byes, I felt like I did not belong.

How could I? I had been human once, a young man when He called me to serve, but I barely remember that life. It was a time before machines and so many languages, an era of simplicity. I longed for such a time, but it would not come again. That is the way of time. It passes, and one must not miss the happenings or one will be forever lost.

My gaze fell on a middle-aged woman. She bent to drink from a fountain near the bathrooms. She bore the mark of an angel called Laethus. I knew that I should not acknowledge her, or much worse, do anything to harm her, but my freedom made me do forbidden things. I licked my lips when she stood straight and wiped her hand across her mouth. She smiled at me and flushed a charming shade of pink. Her blonde hair was piled at the back of her head in a bun, a few curls framing her rounded face.

"Hello," I said, my accent thick and exotic.

"Hi," she replied, standing in place.

The mark intrigued me. It blazed in the shape of the angel's hand just at the right side of the woman's neck. I doubt she knew that she bore it or that the mark was the reason I wanted her.

I stepped inside the men's restroom to relieve myself and wash my face. Staring back at me in the mirror was a Grecian youth. I suppose I took the form most often because going back in time, this had been me once. This was me before I was changed and set to my task. There was truth in this form. I straightened my shirt and smiled at myself. I am a

handsome devil, and I never tire of witnessing that truth. Narcissism suits me.

*I won't go looking for her if she's already gone,* I thought. It seemed fair enough to give her a sporting chance. But as was the way of Fate, the blonde stood not ten steps away from where I'd left her. Watching a line of televisions, she read over the codes there.

I strode toward her and, deliberately bumping her shoulder, knocked her off balance. She dropped her carry-on bag, its contents spilling out onto the tile floor. She fumbled to retrieve everything.

"I'm so sorry," I blurted, not really sorry at all as I lifted a notebook which had fallen from her bag and held it out to her. "Can I buy you a drink to make up for my clumsiness?"

"A drink?"

The mark blazed. I grinned, showing off my debonair smile. No woman could resist, not to mention the nudge I sent to her mind. Fighting my hold, she blinked a few times. With a nibble to her lower lip, she agreed. "All right. My flight has been delayed. I have an hour to kill."

"That's all we need." I winked.

Her resolve melted.

Soon after, we sat across from each other at an impossibly small table in a bar. Next to us a window displayed airplanes taxiing in and out of the port. I sipped at my vermouth while she tipped her second glass of wine.

"Charon," she repeated. "That's an unusual name."

"It's Greek." I set my glass down and wiped my lips on the napkin. Her mouth looked delicious, a kissable pout of full,

ripe lips and a small pink tongue that darted out to taste a droplet of wine. She sipped and waited for me to say more about myself.

"I was born in Egypt though," I finally explained. "Lived there in my younger years and later moved to Greece with my parents."

"Have you been to the Acropolis?" She leaned forward, interested for some unknown reason, and set her glass beside mine.

"Of course." I reached across the small space and rested my hand atop hers. She was warm, her skin in contact with mine setting a soothing vibration through me. Laethus always chooses those with a touch of healing in them. I wondered at the strength of her gifts and if she had any idea what she would one day be. "Have you been there too?"

"Oh no, but I've always wanted to go. Maybe one day ... I could go for a honeymoon."

"Are you engaged?" My eyebrow rose. If she were and I had lured her astray so easily, my talents were indeed at full strength.

"No, nothing like that. Just wishful thinking."

"Where are you headed?" I hoped she would say Florida. It would certainly make my time go faster if I had a target in the meantime. I could wheedle my way into sitting beside her, seducing her slowly with my words and unspoken promises of pleasure.

"Alabama. My mother lives in Mobile. She's not well..." Tears pooled in the woman's eyes. Here she was revealing personal facts to me and I didn't yet know her name.

"I'm sorry," I murmured, placating her with a concerned look. I squeezed her hand and she sniffled.

"Cancer. She has cancer. Just found out last week. But she's the type ... who neglects herself, you know..."

I nodded and offered her a napkin. While she dabbed at her eyes, I stared at her breasts, large mounds of flesh begging for my attention. They peeked up at me from her low cut blouse. Mobile wasn't far from where I needed to go. A detour seemed in order and could be easily arranged.

"I don't even know your name," I said.

"Marianne." She blew her nose. "Life's so wrong sometimes. I just lost my sister six months ago to cancer as well. I figure ... it's only a matter of time before I find out I have it too."

I scanned her and listened to the rhythms of her aura and her soul. Nothing seemed amiss. "I think you're safe from it."

She smiled through her tears. "Thanks."

A silence settled in while I watched her, and she became uncomfortable, avoiding my intent gaze by staring out at the sky beyond. "What about you? Are you off to someone important?"

"I'm going to Florida."

She faced me. "Really? Whereabouts? My niece is there, and I was hoping to drive down with Mom to see her."

I wasn't at all sure where I was going. I scanned her mind, tracing her thoughts like a reader underlining text. A vision of a small child and a dog hung in her mind. I asked for the name of the city and her walls could not keep it from me.

"Miami."

Her green eyes sparkled with distrust. I may have gone too far, allowed too much coincidence to grow between us. "Wow," she said, "that's not far from where I'm going."

I shrugged. "My brother is a doctor in Miami. I haven't seen him for a few years. Thought it would be nice to meet my nephew."

This put her at ease. She placed her other hand over mine. I had breached the barrier of distrust. My body came alive at this prospect. For years, I had slept in a state of limbo. I missed the taste of a woman, the feel of a warm sheathe for my growing hardness. I no longer cared that an angel had chosen her, had marked her for a higher purpose. I wanted this woman, needed to claim her for myself, to use her and screw her, and to take pleasure in fucking up the plans of the higher ones.

So I played the game. I pushed a lurid thought into her mind. The two of us in a men's bathroom, crammed into a stall, half dressed, my cock buried up inside her sweet wetness. She flushed bright red and pulled her hands away.

"Um, gee, I better get going. I don't want to miss my flight."

I had overstepped my bounds. Forcing a hurt look, I said, "Did I offend you in some way?"

"No, no, not at all. I just think ... I better go. It was nice meeting you, Charon."

I nodded and watched her escape. Sipping my vermouth, I knew we'd bump into each other again very soon. I willed my plane ticket to change right down to the seat number. Fate likes to play games like that, and she and I go way back.

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## **Chapter Four: Nightmare**

Tommy's parents had taken temporary custody of Serena, and it really was for the best, but I knew he needed to have that little girl back in his life. She had been my light in the darkness, had stayed my hand from lashing out against her mother and reclaiming her father when I had the chance. His daughter might be just what he needed to fight the depression swallowing him up. Children are always full of hope. "Get up." I nudged him. "I want you to take a shower and go for a walk today."

He opened his big blue eyes and sighed.

"Your doctor said you need to go outside every day. The sunlight will help."

"Come with me."

I wanted to. I wished I could do that one small thing, walk hand in hand with my lover beneath the sun, surrounded by life, but I couldn't. "You know I can't. I'll cook you some lunch. It'll be ready when you come back. Just go around the block. Okay?"

"You look so tired, Angela." His fingers closed over mine and squeezed. "Let's sleep all day. I want to hold you close to me. I don't know what I'd do without you." He smiled, which melted my resolve, but I knew that if I caved in and let him sleep again, he'd only sink further into himself. If I let him fall far enough, I knew he'd never be able to get back up.

"Shower." I jabbed him in the gut with my free hand.

He groaned and rolled off the bed. Trudging away, he scratched at the back of his head. He needed a haircut.

"How come you're not at work today?" he called from the sink.

"I have to go in soon," I said, lying. "I wanted to make sure you got up and moved around." I made the bed and picked out clothes for him. "I'm gonna start lunch."

"Okay."

I waited for the shower to start. When I was sure he was in there cleaning off two days of moping, I went to the kitchen and started a pot of pasta. I wasn't a good cook and didn't think I ever would be. Food didn't taste good to me anymore. I could eat if the moment called for it, but I didn't care for it. Blood was the only thing that could slake my hunger.

When I turned on the faucet to fill the coffeepot, a voice whispered by my ear. "He's coming. You'll pay."

"Shut up," I said back to it. Maybe I was going crazy too. Schizophrenia or something.

Karada's laughter rolled out in the back of my mind. Cold air rushed past me. I turned, but saw nothing. I *felt* her though. Racing down the hall after the spirit, I wondered if a ghost could affect Tommy. Could he sense her? Could she speak to him? I hurried through the bedroom and went into the bathroom. Water misted the air and fogged up the mirror. Lines grazed across the glass, lines made by fingers trailing over the moisture.

Tommy let out a hoarse cry.



I opened the shower curtain and found him balled on the tub floor clutching his knees and rocking. At once, I pushed into his mind and shielded him from anything that might do him harm.

He raised his face, frowning. "I heard someone. Sounded like a woman's voice. She said you..." He shoved his hand into his hair, curling his fingers.

"What? What did she say?"

His face grew pale. "Nothing. I imagined it. Nothing."

Shampoo remained in his hair so I took hold of the sprayer and rinsed it away. "Everything will be all right," I told him. "You have to be strong. You have to fight this. I'm here with you now, and I'm not leaving you ... ever again. Believe that."

I dried him off with a towel and held him against me. With the heat from the shower gone, the mist left the mirror and evidence of Karada's visit vanished. He smelled good when he pulled me against his naked body. Clean. Hot. The Tommy I'd fallen in love with.

"Sometimes I feel like I'm in a nightmare, Angela. I feel like I'm in the dark, and you're the only one here I know. I don't think I can get better or that I can get out. You should give up on me."

"No." I snuggled my face against his damp chest. "No, don't say things like that. I can't give up on you. You're all I have—the only thing that ever happened in my life to make me happy."

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## **Chapter Five: The Touch**

Marianne and I squeezed into the small lavatory at the rear of the plane. She kissed me first, though I willed her to do it. There really wasn't enough room in there to have sex in any sort of satisfying way, so I pushed my hand down her slacks, past her silky panties, and fingered her while her tongue danced with mine. God, I was lonely. I tried not to press against her too much so we wouldn't bang around in there. But it was difficult not to.

She came in a rush of small cries. I managed to slide two of my fingers up inside her wet pussy.

Breaking contact with her mouth so she could pant, I planted hot kisses over her neck.

Blood. Oh how I missed the taste of the warm liquid. Her vein pulsed at my lips. I couldn't remember when I'd last partaken of this sinful delight. Now was hardly the time to indulge, but in that euphoric moment, my dick rock hard and a woman quivering from my fingers' magic touch, I didn't much care.

My fangs lengthened in anticipation. I broke past her skin and sucked hard enough to leave a mark of my own. She tasted like Laethus smelled—spicy, oily, delicious. The angels and I have a tangled past with each other. They used to play tricks on me, sending souls to cross and then tugging the silver lines of life back, stealing my passengers before I could ferry them across. I know He probably ordained it, but it still pissed me off. I drank and gorged myself on Marianne's

richness. I tasted *good* in her, truth and a familiar loneliness like my own. Only I had borne mine so much longer and with such intensity that it would have killed a frailer creature such as her.

She whimpered. Her mind entangled with mine for a brief, ecstatic moment. This is the part I crave most, the bonding, the intermingling of souls, thoughts, essences. A mere mortal can't understand the pain I bear, the emptiness of having a piece of my soul torn away. I seek to fill that emptiness, but I know it can never be done. When her mind wavered at the cusp of unconsciousness from my suckling, I stopped. I drew my fangs across my tongue and sealed her wounds with my own blood.

"Marianne?"

I lifted my face from her neck and withdrew my hand from her slacks. Her eyes had shut, and her lips were slightly parted. She looked peaceful, close to the edge of death, but still so far. The mark of the angel's hand glared at me in a blue shade. I didn't care. They couldn't touch me, not anymore.

Hoping she'd wake, I shook her. The last thing I wanted was a bunch of people trying to help her if I opened the bathroom door and we spilled out of the small space. It was then that I truly regretted not flying the distance. I could have done it, but it would have drained me. I didn't want to risk falling back asleep now, not after I'd been resting for so long.

I held her to me, her bulbous breasts pillowed against my chest, her face pressed to my shoulder. Her warmth filled my cold heart for a time.

When she came to, her lashes fluttering against my neck, I drew back to study her face. Still flushed from what I'd done to her, she looked even more beautiful to me than she had when I saw her in the airport. Fate had connected us for more than my selfish reasons. I knew that, felt it then, and wondered what game my old mistress played at now. Fate knew better than to offer me something so beautiful. I always destroy such things.

"Charon," she whispered, her eyes clearing from my hold. "I don't know why I did this."

I shook my head and frowned at her. "It's my fault. All my fault."

Her forehead creased. "No, I told you to do this to me."

"And I did as you said," I whispered before placing a well meant kiss on her lips. "You seem so tired. Let's go back to our seats. I'll hold you and you can rest."

"All right." She looked bewildered, but the brief moment, her mind had meshed with mine and had allowed me to feel her emotions. I put her at ease for whatever reason, and beyond the forced will of my own doing, she truly felt attraction for me.

I walked out first, and she held to my hand as I led her up the narrow aisle to our seats. I had the window, which pleased me to no end. Marianne settled in beside me, her cheek on my chest and my arm holding her close. When she began to breathe heavily, I too, closed my eyes and eased

into a light slumber. I allowed myself to follow her dreams, gray images of memories and worries. They bored me after a while, as all things do.

When I woke, the plane had landed in Mobile. My new lover was not at my side. I stood and stretched myself as much as possible in the cramped place. People were already disembarking. Her carry-on was gone. I couldn't see her face in the crowd of people at the rear or the front. *She's left me. Strange*, I thought. Disappointed and a little angry over this new development, I exited the plane and booked my next flight to Miami. I didn't want to play with the marked one anymore. It would only lead to trouble.

For the short flight, I flipped through onboard magazines and spent my time staring at the people around me. I watched a woman tapping away on a laptop computer. She never once turned her head, not even when the steward offered drinks. The world had become a strange place. People had diversions. Before long, I figured that they would have no need of gods and demons. They made their own as it was.

I drummed my fingers on the armrest, closed my eyes, and reached out with my mind. A grin curved my lips. I felt Karada on the outskirts, just at the edge of the living world. Her soul had been pulled, but she had resisted. My toy always was strong in her own way. She did not speak to me though, so I went against my better judgment and reached out for Marianne.

At once, a blue shield closed over where I wanted to mind-seek. The angel knew what I'd done. He had pulled his ward

into the safety of his hold and now kept me from her mind. "No matter," I mumbled. "It was just a game anyway."

The loneliness washed over me, swept through my broken soul, and burned the edges of rational thought. *"You're a bastard, Laethus. How dare you do that to me?"* Far in the reaches of my mind, the angel chuckled.

"Would you care for a beverage?" the steward asked. He had a drawling accent and tired eyes.

"No, thank you." I waved him on and stared again at the woman with the laptop.

Not long after, weary of the boredom, I breathed a relieved sigh when the plane touched down. Already I felt the rush of souls in the busy city. But it was not Miami I needed to be in, not unless Fate pushed Marianne toward me a second time. I needed to get to Larissa County and a certain plantation house where Karada had found love, or what she thought was love. I had no doubts that she'd gotten more than she bargained for with the man she called Rory.

I lingered in downtown until night spread across the sky. Unbuttoning my shirt in an alley, I willed my wings to grow. They split the skin above my shoulder blades in a sweet agony. They unfurled, great dragon wings with taloned tips. They were not as beautiful as an angel's and rightly so, for I am nothing of that ilk.

For a time, I fanned out the thin skin to accustom myself to the weight and strength of my wings. With their emergence, there came the pain of hunger. Marianne's blood had satisfied me only slightly. I wanted more. My body needed more. I flapped my way up into the cool night sky.

Humidity made dew form on my skin. The tail of my shirt fluttered from the back of my pants like a small cape.

I take no joy in killing. In fact, I find it more of a challenge to let my victims live, to leave them with the memory of my feasting. Drinking in their fear gives me a certain high. I like it. A woman stood on the street corner beneath me. She was waiting for the light to change so she could cross. I swooped down, a bird of prey, a dangerous predator snatching her up from reality into the mystic dreams of my kind. She screamed. But who could hear her above the din of cars and life?

We settled atop a building where I buried my teeth into her neck and suckled like a babe starved. She struggled, incensing me with a hunter's need to end her life. I resisted, drawing in her blood as fast as I could. When she slowed her thrashing, I set her down before me and pushed down my pants. I was hungry for something else and though no flicker of desire burned in her eyes, I could make the fire grow there.

I pushed into her mind and filled her with lust. She arched and writhed in her weary state, moaned with all the delight of a creature in heat. A beautiful woman with black hair and tanned skin, she regarded me with glassy eyes. I knew she didn't really see me, not like Galatea had. She saw a vision of what turned her on, no more, no less.

I parted her legs and slipped my hands beneath her long skirt. Her cotton panties were soaked with moisture. I slid them down and wasted no time. Pushing into her tightness, I groaned and closed my eyes. Enfolding us, my wings closed

out the rest of the world and slackened the garish noise of the city below.

Time had taught me to go slow, to savor the moment of unions. In my youth, I had taken what I wanted and had left my victim broken and unsatisfied. Now I liked to leave them broken and longing for my return. Sex is a game to me. Love is a fleeting emotion I do not trust or understand.

I pumped myself into her body. She curled her legs up and around my butt, lured me in deeper, guided me toward the bliss she craved. Sex with a stranger felt anonymous and secretive. She came before me, her throaty voice blaring a song of unbridled passion and release. With her satisfied, I increased my pace, pounding into her.

But my release would not come. My skin crawled and my wings itched. I tried for a long while until the toy of a human beneath me began to cringe and whimper with pain. I didn't want to hurt her, so I pulled out and sat back on my haunches, confused. Something had gone wrong with me. Before this moment, I could fuck anyone and get off. I scratched at my chin and watched the blood trickling down the side of her neck.

"How sloppy of me," I grumbled. Nicking my thumb with a fang, I knelt over her and sealed her wound.

She blinked and stared up at me with doe brown eyes and a crinkle in her brow.

"You've had a bad dream," I told her.

She nodded, taking in this suggestion. Her mind would make it fact and not allow her to understand that she'd mated



with a creature of darkness atop a building in the midst of the city. Such a reality would lead to insanity.

I abandoned her there and glided away from Miami. This new development angered me. My body burned with the need for release, but it had not come. Still hard with arousal, I left the city behind to seek out the last place Karada had lived.

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## **Chapter Six: Hunting**

I walked out of the apartment that evening, leaving Tommy to rest. He had talked in his sleep and cried as well. Wishing that I was not a vampire, that I was just Angela again, poor and hopeless, but human, I lay there and wiped tears from his cheeks. I soothed his mind by pushing my thoughts into his. I knew such touches might have adverse effects, but I couldn't let him suffer. He needed rest. He needed peace. He needed to let go of the sorrow he bore.

Outside, cars zipped across the busy street. Lights glowed gold against the reddish tinge of the sky. I needed to feed soon, before the sky went dark red as fresh blood. Then it would be too late, and I might kill any person who crossed my path.

I walked for over an hour to stretch my legs and clear my head. It was chilly out but still humid. The night calls to me as it has since the night I was turned into what I am. Darkness comforts me in its own way. A man meandered across the street. He wandered aimlessly and I heard his mumblings—the ramblings of a drunk. His clothes bespoke wealth, so he wasn't a transient.

I crossed to his side and followed.

"...Mary that I didn't mean it. I didn't. She has to understand. She has to take me back..."

He stopped and, clinging to a light pole, stared with a blank expression at the closed pawn shop beside him. I seized

this moment and edged to his side. "You need help getting home, sir?"

He spun to face me, wide eyed, startled by my sudden appearance. Tears glistened on his dark cheeks. He wiped his sleeve against his nose and sniffled. "I'm not drunk."

"No, of course not. But do you need help finding your way home? There's nothing open here this time of night. Are you lost?"

His full lips twitched. "No. Not lost. Mary made me get out of the car. That's all. She left me. Told me to get the hell out." He placed both hands at his temples and started to cry hard.

The last thing I needed was another man's sadness, even if he was wasted. I took hold of his arm, dipped my face to his neck and bit past his skin. His mind slowed and he stilled, relaxing into my feeding. I tasted whiskey in his blood, a trace of cocaine and the thick regret of infidelity. This man had cheated on his wife and confessed. He had hoped for her forgiveness, but she had pushed him away instead.

Sometimes, I like to know my victims, to taste who and what they are when I feed, but this was not one of those times. I didn't want to feel his guilt and shame. I drank as much as I dared, sealed over the wounds, and pushed away from him.

He gawked at me while I slipped back into the shadows of an alley.

"Mary! I'm not drunk ... didn't mean to do it..."

Among the trash and rats, I sat down, hugged my knees, and cried. I listened to the man stumble away. *I have never*

*felt so alone. Please, God, what can I do? I need Tommy to get better now. I can't keep living like this. I want my old life back.*

No higher spirit had ever reached out to me until that moment. The light touch of feathers grazed my bare arm. Through tear-blurred eyes, I looked up, but saw no one. The sky above had faded to a navy color, the stars obscured by the city lights. I didn't feel alone, yet I was. Spectral fingers traced my forehead before pressing to my cheek.

"Hello?"

No one answered, but I felt a presence. The touch faded as quickly as it had come.

Standing, I searched the alleyway. A cat strolled across my path and ran past the sidewalk. I traced my face where the phantom had made contact with me and wondered if it was a ghost of another sort. I had killed many in my short years. Maybe another soul besides Karada's had come to haunt me. But I felt no menace from whatever had visited me.

Brushing off my jeans, I started out of the darkness. I needed to get home, to hold Tommy until dawn when I would feign leaving for my *job*. His money would run out, and I had planned to move us to Rory's estate if Tommy wasn't able to go back to work full-time. I didn't want to revisit that place, but I could think of no other option.

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## **Chapter Seven: The Address**

I had memorized the address on the letter Karada sent me years before. The Southern plantation-style mansion stood among a manicured lawn with squared hedges and ancient trees. Part of me wanted it to be decrepit and in ruins. I am a jealous creature. I didn't want to think of my former lover's happiness here. I wanted to think of her time with me, not with any other. I turned the lock with my mind, took hold of the handle, and let myself in to whatever mysteries would lead me to my target.

Servants kept the estate clean and organized. I could smell their scent though they were not here at this late hour. Even though the place had been cleaned several times over, I still tasted Karada's unique scent in the air. I strolled through the foyer and a rather ornate sitting room. It's former owner's tastes were for the unusual and cruel antiquities of history. A large collection of paintings depicting slaves in the South covered the walls. Most showed off the brutality of the trade and those times. Behind glass in cabinets were relics from the civil war—guns, uniform buttons, manacles, and even a cannonball. I shook my head at this barbaric display and moved on through the hall to the bedchambers.

The painting of her only confirmed that I'd come to the right place. I sat on the edge of the master bed and imagined Karada breeding with the man she'd fallen for. Never had loneliness bitten me more than at the moment. What was I? How could I have gotten here, to this point, through so many

years all by myself? I ran my hand over the stuffed blanket and marveled at its softness. At least my old lover had found a moment of happiness here. It was more than I could say. Even at my best with Galatea, I never admitted to her how much I cared for her, and I don't think I loved her.

I raised my head and stared at my reflection in the mirror atop the bureau. My image faded into the old skull face of prior years. "I am not Death," I said to the illusion. "I am Charon, and I carry those lost souls to the next plane. I bring peace and new beginnings. I am not Death." The skeletal face gaped back at me with its eyeless, black sockets, in reproach of my words.

I glared and willed my body to shift back to the shape I favored. Determined to find Karada's murderer, I stood and strode to the bureau to search through its contents. There were men's clothes within the drawers. Pushing them aside, I sought something, any clue as to the whereabouts of my target.

Losing hope, I rifled through the last drawer and found a small photograph of a child. She was chubby and ill kempt, her hair in crooked braids and her mouth in a sad frown. Turning the image over, I read the old-fashioned script writing on the back. "Angela Harris." Beneath her name, someone had scrawled an address. I doubted Fate was handing me things so easily, but it was a start.

For the remainder of the night, I slept in Karada's old bed. I dreamed of times long past, of the moment I had asked Fate to show me something secret. The smells of goats and sheep were strong in the air on that memory, as well as the

warmth of the sun at my back. I had renounced God and had gone into a place rumored to be a gateway to Hell. Thinking it nothing more than a tale to frighten children, I had walked into that dark cave and found truth in lies.

At dawn, I woke refreshed and ready to get through this revenge. Showered and dressed in the clothes left behind save a shirt, I combed through my long hair and admired myself and the many tattoos across my bare skin. The morning air was crisp. The day held promise. I leaped from the balcony overlooking the pristine gardens on the estate and made my way to the city of Morgan. I flew through the general smog and pollution until I was sure I had located the building listed on the back of the photograph. The service entry allowed me inside. I slipped on my shirt and buttoned it as I descended the stairs into the darkness. I heard the tones of life in the floors below me, heartbeats, murmurings, TVs left on to placate minds.

When I reached a painted white door with the number four on it, I knocked.

Someone called, "Coming." The door opened a crack soon after and a suspicious brown eye peered at me. "Can I help you?"

I couldn't tell if it was a woman or a man, such was the garbled tone of the person's voice. But it didn't matter. I only wanted information, not another failed attempt at sex or a meal to quench my vampiric thirst. "I'm looking for an old friend. She used to live here." I smiled, offering the basest of kindness as well as I could. "Her name is Angela Harris."

The eye narrowed. "Ain't no one here by that name, mister."

I nodded. "Well, thank you."

The door shut halfway before the voice spoke a final time. "You might try the landlord. The bastard moved into Room One down the hall last week."

"Thanks." I strode away, hopeful but not for much. The place was a dump. Being in the hall made me want to bathe once more. From the corner of my eye, I saw roaches skittering into the shadows.

I knocked on the door of apartment one.

Nobody answered after several tries, so I gave up and, hopeful for clues, went outside to wander the streets of the living. The farther I walked, the more ensconced in the city I became. I bypassed a diner, pausing there to glance in at the patrons. Nothing called to me, but the faintest niggles in the back of my mind told me that Karada had been here and that Angela, her murderer, had frequented this place at one time as well.

"How can you cling to life with such vigor?" I asked her soul.

She merely laughed at me. The current ferryman must have let her slip past him or worse—she must have tricked him into letting her go. I made a silent promise to collect her soul before I returned to my villa in Greece if she had not crossed over by then. As much as the thought of journeying to the river weighed on me, I could not leave her lingering between the two planes.



Through the day I walked and studied the world around me. It was in a park near the zoo that I smelled the spicy odor of a vampire, an old scent left by one who had traveled the same way many times. I sat upon a bench to wait for the night to come. All would be revealed in time, for Fate liked things to make a semblance of sense.

I hummed and watched the pigeons opposite me scratch for crumbs. They never came close, their innate instincts making them aware of what sort of danger I presented. Passersby thinned. An attendant closed the iron gates leading to the zoo and turned the lock.

The hairs on the back of my neck rose. I shivered with both bloodlust and the impending confrontation this night might bring. I watched the shadows play over each other and then, feeling the presence of another who shared a bit of my line, I raised my head.

She flew with all the grace of the angels, for I had seen them in my time. Her body was sleek, lithe, and her small breasts made my mouth water. Sure enough, as Karada's vision had shown me, my opponent's great black wings were feathered. A Blood Angel is a rare thing, an angel who is not quite what it needs to be in order to become an angel and yet, not all vampire. She dipped into the darkness, lost from me for now.

I sent out a thought, wondering if her mind had enough shielding to protect her from me. *"Meet with me, Angela. I must know you."*

*Impatient, I waited. I tapped my booted foot and chewed my lip in anticipation of an attack from behind me. All*

*vampires are territorial, and though my powers greatly outweighed theirs, they still tried to stand their ground. The thought of a fight had me on edge and prepared.*

The pigeons suddenly took wing. I flinched, startled by the flock as it filled the sky. In the confines of the zoo, a lion roared incessantly.

Thinking Angela had not heard me, I stood and undid the first button on my shirt so I could spread my wings without destroying it. I would go and hunt her down if I must.

"Who are you?"

The voice startled me further, so much so that I jumped. Fear was unbecoming for a creature of my nature. It unnerved me.

"Who are you?" she repeated again.

I turned to face her. Dark of skin and half nude, the Blood Angel stood before me. She was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen, completely at odds with what she was. Sadness glittered in her eyes. Her wings, shadows of dark softness I wanted to reach out and touch, were folded at her back.

"Tell me your name, and I'll tell you mine," I said, taunting her. I took my steps carefully, but approached her nonetheless. The closer I came, the more I could see what I was up against. Unlike Marianne, this woman had been touched by more than one angel. The marks of six hands blazed across her. Two meshed over one cheek, and four others had pressed across her torso at some time in her life. She had been chosen for something grand indeed. My mouth watered at the thought of befouling her. In my pants, my

cock thickened. Blood thrummed in my ears. Ravenous to taste something so forbidden, I licked my lips.

"Angela," she said and took a step toward me, unafraid. "But you knew that. I heard you calling to me."

"I'm Charon." Holding out my right hand, I waited for her to take it.

"You're a vampire." She took another step, the caution plain in her eyes now. "Why are you here?"

"Someone killed a vampire I cared for. I've come to take revenge."

Her eyes narrowed. Her hand never reached for mine. I pushed a thought at her mind with hope that she would take a few more steps and engage a fantasy now pressing on my imagination.

"Go back to where you came from." She flashed her white fangs at me and hissed a warning.

"Not until I've found the one who killed my Karada."

Angela lifted her chin, regarding me with widening eyes. "Ah, so you are *her* Charon. She told me about you."

I smiled, pleased at this. "What did she say?"

Angela circled, sizing me up, like so many vampires before her had done. Her eyes never left mine as I turned in unison to meet her gaze.

"She said you used to beat her."

I nodded. "She was willful and stubborn. It was a long time ago."

"Go back to where you came from," she repeated. Her wings spread, not as large and powerful as mine, but still a fantastic sight to behold.

"I think I'll stick around a while," I said and grinned wide, willing my teeth to show themselves so that she would know my challenge.

She said nothing. In a moment, she vanished, using a trick of speed well known to our kind. I let her go and went to sit back on my bench. Reaching out with my mind, I heard nothing of her thoughts. After a while, I began to wonder if I might have imagined her. I'd seen few who had been touched so many times by angels and none of them were vampires. It disturbed me.

Jealousy toyed with my mind while I waited for the dawn. This dark one had a purpose. Marianne had a purpose. They had been chosen by Him. No angel would touch me like that because my purpose had long since been fulfilled. I lay down on the bench like a transient and watched the sky lighten. I wondered where Angela fed and where she slept away the daylight hours. I wanted to walk in on her in that vulnerable state and test her mind then, when all walls would be easy to pass through. I wondered if she, too, was as alone as I was.

I had not taken a vampire lover since Karada. I admit that I missed hunting with another of my kind, sharing in the feast, and bonding in a way only a vampire can with its mate. I wanted the shared mind as much as I needed to share my body.

I closed my eyes and wondered if Fate had chosen this Blood Angel for me.

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## **Chapter Eight: Serena**

Envisioning Serena's face, I smiled at the phone. "Yes, your daddy misses you, honey. I miss you, too. He's trying his best to get better so you can come back home." The little girl's voice cheered me up and gave me something else to think about besides the vampire stalking me in the park across the street.

"Yes, you can talk to your daddy again. Hold on, Serena."

I handed Tommy the phone and watched his face light up with a smile. He should always be that happy.

I walked across the living room and parted the curtains to spy on the park. I couldn't see Charon, but I sensed his closeness. Karada's ghostly visits had become more random since the vampire's arrival. This did not make me feel any better. A ghost I could deal with, but a vampire who was older and more experienced than me was a serious threat. The ones I had met did not carry themselves with the same cocky attitude Charon did. He had tried to push his way into my mind. He wanted me. I saw the lust in his eyes, a sight I knew well from my time with Rory.

The sick thing about it was, I wanted what he wanted. I couldn't help myself. Tommy could never understand the side of me I kept hidden. Hunting alone could never measure up to hunting with another of my kind. Charon's presence further widened the rift between my human self and my vampire self. And I didn't know how much longer I could keep lying to the man I loved about what I was.

A shadow crossed the sidewalk. I narrowed my eyes to focus on the shape. A man. Tall with long, black curls that fell far past his shoulders. He stopped and scanned the apartment building. I pushed the curtains closed and stepped away.

"...I love you, too." Tommy set the phone back on the base. His smile began to fade.

"Go to the doctor tomorrow," I told him. "You have to get back in the groove, find your way into life and living."

"I know. You're right." He crossed the room and hugged me. "I'll go tomorrow. Everything will be all right."

I nodded, hopeful.

"Serena really likes you, Angela. She says you look just like her guardian angel."

A chill swept up my spine. "Yeah. She tells me that, too."

The next day, he came home from the doctor with a new prescription. I read the bottle over and over. He didn't need more drugs. He needed therapy, maybe. Anything but more drugs to knock him out. "I don't think you should take these," I said. "The main side effect is drowsiness. You sleep so much as it is."

He unbuttoned his shirt and tossed it over the barstool. "I'm afraid to stop taking the pills. They keep me from thinking about Genevieve."

I nodded. What did I know? I'm not a doctor. I had gone through some hard knocks in life but had never fallen as hard as he had. I couldn't understand the depression or the way his moods would change at the drop of a hat. Deep down, I wondered if I was part of the cause.

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## **Chapter Nine: Tom**

For two weeks I returned to the park and waited for Angela to appear. I took up residence in an apartment complex called Morenci across the street. My room offered me a view of the very bench where I had encountered her. At night, I sat in a comfortable chair and spied down on the place, my patience wearing ever thin. It should not be so difficult to find a vampire. They leave behind a unique scent, and most are careless when they feed, often offering a trail of bodies in their wake. But this one was not like that, at least not in any way I could see. The local news never reported anything about serial murderers or excessive amounts of missing persons. I could not judge how long ago she'd been made, but instinct told me she was young to the darkness. It would be impossible for her to have learned to feed without taking life.

Restless, I dressed and decided to go for a walk in the park. My stomach growled, wanting something else this night. No one greeted me in the hall since it was well past midnight. In the lift though, a lone man stood against the wall. There were dark circles beneath his blue eyes, and he looked through me as if I wasn't there at all. That was an unusual reaction to my presence unless I willed it to be so.

"Good evening," I offered, trying my best to be jovial.

He sighed and squinted in my direction. His clothes and hair were disheveled. A thick aura of melancholy rolled off his soul. I sniffed the air between us and past the usual scents of

soap and skin, I tasted Angela's natural perfume on this man. I stepped closer to him to examine his neck for evidence of her trespass on his body.

"Oh, good evening," the man blubbered, looking lost and confused. "Have you seen a lady with long, straight dark hair and a little girl?"

I shook my head.

"I lost my wife," he said, and turned his gaze to the lift doors. "And I can't find my daughter."

He puzzled me. I drew closer still and touched his shoulder. My mind slipped past his barriers with little resistance. I dug through the troubles on the surface of his thoughts, a dark woman, beautiful, at one time, but the memory of her wavered between a bedridden cancer victim to that of a vivacious bride, pregnant in a lace-covered wedding dress.

His heartbeat lured me closer still as we rode the elevator down the stories of the apartment. His pulse called to me, deep and rhythmic. I bent my head and pressed my lips to his neck. A sip. That's all I wanted, a taste to let me further in. I had to know if he had seen my Blood Angel.

His large hands settled on my waist. He gave in so easily as if he was used to being fed upon. I drank and tasted the flavor of her on his skin as well as medications I didn't recognize. He whispered over and over, "Angela."

Drawing back, I frowned. "Where is she?"

"My wife died." He wiped a tear from his eye and started to walk toward the doors just as they pulled open.



I followed. He was a peculiar man indeed. His build suggested strength, but his mind seemed touched with a sadness that had pushed him over the edge of sanity. It was then I noticed his bare feet. He wore sweatpants and a wrinkled white T-shirt. Maybe he'd risen from bed and left his room in a stupor.

He looked over his shoulder at me, his lips parting as if he wanted to say something. Drops of crimson showed on the white fabric of his shirt. I'd done it again, left my mark on a victim's neck, only this time I almost let him walk away. My carelessness troubled me.

"Let me help you." I started after him. His brows tensed with further confusion. I nibbled on my thumb and touched the bloodied pad to the man's neck, causing a question in his eyes.

"Where's Angela?" I asked, keeping pace with him as we approached the glass doors leading to the street outside.

He gripped the door handle and shook his head. "She says I can have Serena back if I get better." The door pushed open and the barefoot man stepped outside. "I'll never get better."

"Do you know where she is?" Stepping after him, I pushed my mind into his again. The memory of Angela was strange, an old one where she looked pubescent as she stared straight at him in a dim room while lights flickering over the curves of her face. This didn't help me at all. Two weeks and now this disturbed man. Three weeks and it might have been nothing. But I could not deny the scent of her on him. The memory revealed one thing. She cared for this man or had at one time.

"What's your name?" I asked when he stopped at the curb. He stared down at his feet and wiggled his toes. "Tom. I'm Tom."

I placed my hand on his shoulder and gave a squeeze. Still touching his mind with mine, I sent him a clear message. *"Tell Angela to meet me in the park tomorrow night. Midnight. Or I'll kill your daughter and you'll never see her dead body."*

Clutching his temples and shrieking in fear, he crumpled before me. Part of me, the old part, the thing living inside my soul ever since the blood of a vampire passed my lips, wanted to take his life at this bitter moment. I crossed the street and left my victim like that, smiling to myself. He would be my bait.

I spent the dawn in the park. I don't know when Tom ambled back into the building or to what room he might have returned to. I wanted to see if the message got to Angela.

Midnight the next night, I sat in my spot and sure enough, her soft, pleasing voice tickled my left ear. Her fingernails, more claws than anything else, dug into my shoulders. The exquisite pain turned me on.

"Ah, I see you got my message."

"I told you to leave," she growled.

"Not until our business is settled."

"I have no business with you unless you want to follow your precious Karada into the afterlife." Her nails sank deep into my flesh. Threatening her plaything had pissed her off.

"There's no afterlife for me, little angel."

I reached up, crossing my arms to place my hands over hers. She stiffened at my touch. Her icy skin matched my

own chilled state. She needed to feed as I did. With a firm grip, I pulled her hands free. My blood burned its way over my skin, but the wounds healed over as fast as they'd been inflicted.

"You are no match for me, Angela."

Her answer came in a sharp, burning pain to my neck. The little outcast bit me! I wanted to slap her away, to crush her to the ground and show her my wrath. I jerked away before she could drink, but I realized that I wanted this. I needed this barbaric connection more than ever. I squeezed her wrists, sucked in a deep breath, and relaxed. My complacency surprised her as well as made her uneasy.

"Come away with me. I can teach you so many things." I wanted to take wing with her, to race across the sky and hunt down our victims. Heaven help me, I wanted to kill, to drain my next victim and revel in that power. Most of all, I wanted to do it with her at my side.

Her mind closed off from my prying, not that she had let much pass between us. "What are you?" She hissed in my ear. "You're more than what you seem."

Standing, I released her wrists. We faced off, each of us on edge. The marks of the angels blazed on her skin. Again she appeared to me topless, her small breasts ripe, begging me to touch them, to lower my mouth and trace them with my tongue.

"Even I am not sure what I am anymore. Part of me is vampire, but there are so many other pieces  
...none whole."

Angela sucked in her bottom lip. "Leave Tommy alone."

I snickered at her. "Why should I? Is he special to you as Karada was to me? Is he your one true love? Your soul mate?" Sarcasm danced off my words.

The answer showed in her eyes. The human did mean something to her. Mad as he was, she coveted him, a dangerous thing between predator and prey. "If you've come here to kill me, do it now and be done with it. If you want me as your ward, I'll not give in as easily as you might think. I've been under the control of two vampires since my making. There will not be a third."

This intrigued me. "Who was the first?"

"Rory Archibald."

I shook my head. "So, Karada's beloved betrayed her in the end. I knew he would. No one could ever love that deranged woman."

The tension between us thickened. I felt it as one feels humidity in the air. Angela stepped toward me, reached up with one small hand, and palmed my face. Her tender touch baffled me, and I am not a creature easily taken aback. Heat settled beneath her palm, passing into me, warming the cold emptiness inside and making me want her more.

My body reached for her, my mind let down ancient walls of protection. I took her small waist in my hands and drew her delicate but muscular body to me. Her hardened nipples grazed my chest. I think the cold made them that way, not any sort of desire she might have had for me. I sensed no lust in her eyes, no willingness to understand me, only anger.

"You loved her." Her words hung in the small space between us. Taller than her, I had to bow my head. She flinched when I ran my lips along her cheek.

"I cannot love."

Her breathing slowed.

My heart lurched at this closeness. She didn't trust me, and yet here we stood, together, my mouth searching her skin. The tip of my tongue darted out to taste. I kissed her neck. She sucked in a dry breath.

"You lie. You loved her. If you didn't, you wouldn't have come here to kill me."

"I was bored and needed a reason to get out of bed." The place on my cheek where her hand fell away blazed with fiery heat. I couldn't understand this magic she set upon me. I wanted to be with her, to know her, to hunt and mate with this young vampire. "I want you," I confessed and nipped her with my sharp teeth.

She moaned, a deep sound in the back of her throat that might be arousal or a warning to back off. I couldn't be sure and at that moment, I didn't care. I bit into her. Blood flowed across my tongue, hot, wet, ethereal, and delicious. She tasted like no living thing I could fathom. I didn't know the names of the angels who had marked her, but I tasted the stereotypical flavor of what they had given her when they had placed their hands on her flesh. It was better than Marianne, sweeter than I thought possible. Behind her life's essence, I tasted sorrow and pain, years of it. I longed to drink it down, to take that part of her memory into myself.

*"Why have you never been happy?"*

She pulled away from me, flicked her finger across her teeth, and sealed the bite marks I'd placed on her. With a cold glare, she raced away into the trees, her wings fanning. This time, I gave chase.

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## **Chapter Ten: River**

The cool night wind felt good as I threw away my shirt and spread my demon wings. Angela soared high above me, her shape gliding in and out of the thin clouds. Stars glittered above us, and the little city below became a plane of lights and miniatures. I caught up to her with ease. She only glared back at me and dove away in a futile attempt to escape.

For a time, I let her think that she lost me. I traced her unique scent and, following high above, shadowed my body to appear invisible to her. She flew far past the city and soared over the wilds. I noticed what she followed, the St. Johns River south. The massive body of water glittered in the moonlight.

When Angela dipped into the thick trees, vanishing from my sight, I followed, anxious to see why a hungry vampire would come here rather than feast on the people so plentiful and easy to access in the city we'd left.

Alighting on the riverbank, I strode along, my wings folding at my back. I did not wish to retract them in case my prey took to flight once more. I sent out my mind to seek hers and met the thick wall she kept around her thoughts.

"Let us talk this night, little vampire," I called into the darkness. "I sense your hunger and your loneliness. I promise not to hurt you or try to control you ... this time."

"Lies!" she shouted. "What purpose do you have in talking with me?"

"I'm lonely. You are as well. We can be company for one another. Forever is a long time to exist, and I do not wish all of my unending years to be spent alone. Do you?"

Silence followed, spanning out so long I wondered if she had left me. I sat down on the bank among the high water grasses and watched the waves. The dappled silver light across the water's surface reminded me of the Great River I used to be forced to traverse. I closed my eyes and remembered those times. Emotions were stripped from me before my assignment to that task. When I was gifted them back an eternity later, I had no way of knowing how to handle them. Even now, they troubled me, and I cast them aside on instinct, burying them deep so they would not burden me.

Her footsteps crunched in the plants until she stood directly behind me. "I should kill you," she said. "Take your life so you won't haunt me again."

The tips of black wing feathers curved around my body. I opened my eyes, leaned back, and looked up at her. Sullen and cold, she appeared detached from the beauty around us. I wanted to pull her down into my lap, to explore her plump lips with my fingers, to trace her face and memorize the taste of her mouth against mine. Her wings draped like a cape, enclosing me. "Come. Sit."

She shook her head.

I reached up, using my magic to grasp her wrist before she could see my fingers approaching, and took hold of her. Angela resisted, but failed and tumbled down beside me, our wings knotting together. "There is no use fighting. I always get my way. It will be no different with you."



She snarled at me and tugged her wing until it pulled free of mine. "You're the same as the others."

"Ah, yes, I am." My grip lessened until my fingers slid down and twined with hers. Giving a soft squeeze, I said, "Just stay with me this night. I see the marks of angels on you. Did you know they touched you?"

Her eyes narrowed, revealing her ignorance. "You're mad. As mad as Rory."

"No. I have no excuse for what I know. My sanity remains intact no matter the atrocities I witness."

She glared at me before turning her gaze out onto the river. In silence, I held her hand and waited. She could not escape me without a fight. That she sat there so complacently spurred my hope that she would stay longer at my side.

"I don't fit in this life, Charon," she said in a whisper, breaking the silence. "No matter how I try, no matter how much I fight to make a place for myself, to scratch out a small piece of happiness, it's always stolen from me. You've come to take it."

I nodded. "Yes. I suppose I have. That doesn't change the fact that angels have put their mark upon you. More than one. Six at least. Maybe more."

A tear rolled down her cheek and pattered onto her breast. I studied the line it left behind and wished my finger could take its place. Normally, I would do so without asking, without regard for the body I touched or the soul within that might be disgusted with my efforts, but not now. The place where she had palmed my face still itched.

"No angel touched me. No God has shown me favor. I live in Hell every night, unable to find my way back to the light, unable to really live, to be who and what I once was."

"Hell. You have no concept of what Hell truly is." I chuckled. "You pity yourself. Silly, little vampire. So young and naïve. Did you ever stop to consider that who and what you are right now is exactly what you are meant to be? Fate doesn't take chances. She has a plan when she meddles in the lives of mortals."

Angela let out a long sigh before she nodded. "What now? We sit and talk this night like old lovers, and next time we meet, you kill me?"

"Maybe." I scooted across the crushed grass until our shoulders touched. "I haven't decided yet."

She studied me with more interest now than before, her eyes taking in all the tattoos over my skin. "Did they hurt?"

"Yes, but I got them a long time ago. Pain fades in time as do emotions ... if you let them."

I pulled at her and urged her onto the cradle of my lap. Forced to placate me, she crawled on and settled there with discomfort. I curled my arms about her waist and breathed in the sweet perfume of her soft hair. My erection cut into her backside. I knew that she knew what I wanted, but neither of us said anything about my lust.

"You're cold and hungry."

"Yes." She touched my forearm where an artist had engraved ancient runes. For a brief moment, the wall she kept around her mind fell away. I lifted my arm to her lips.

"Drink. Fulfill your hunger on me this night. Next time, we can hunt side by side."

"I don't hunt anymore. Not like you think of it."

It was a strange confession for one so young. The drive to kill must be eating up her mind. I pushed my skin against her lips. She resisted for a brief moment, then gave in, and bit into my arm with her sharp teeth. My cock tingled and thickened in need. If only we were naked. I wanted that, needed to have her feeding from me while I took her. Maybe with her, I could finish.

As she fed, I rocked us from side to side, while wishing to be buried in her. She must have starved herself before this night. Her body took in so much of my blood that I became lightheaded. My mind floated between waking and dreams all the while trying to push into hers. She relented a small amount.

I saw her childhood. Memories of a filthy apartment and the same building I'd searched for her in upon arriving at the city. I saw her mother floating in a pool of bloodied water. Then the image of Tom, younger, innocent, and less haunted as he stared at a flickering television screen.

I laughed softly behind her. "You love him. How sweet." The notion both sickened and intrigued me. I must admit to my jealousy.

She pulled her mouth away, leaving the wounds to bleed until they healed over. Her mind closed from me. She rolled off, escaping my hold. I let her, weary as I now was from her feeding. "No matter what happens between us, you must promise never to harm him."

I shrugged. "I have no quarrel with your broken excuse of a man. I want you." I crawled toward her and took her hand again. "Why not turn him? Make him like us."

"I can't do that to him."

"Does he know what you are?"

She shook her head no.

"Yet, you feed from him."

The guilt on her face tore at me. How difficult it must be for her to drink only a pittance and leave him. "You should turn him. Otherwise, you'll go mad with the wanting of him. I know."

"I'd leave him before I change him into what I am. He's not strong enough for it. Tommy has lost too much already, his wife ... custody of his daughter."

I lunged, pinning her to the ground. I settled over her and slipped my legs between her thighs so I could grind my clothed crotch into her center. "Good. It's settled then. You come away with me to Greece and leave him. Your presence is most likely the cause of his mental illness. The living know us, even if we do not tell them what we are, instinct still gnaws at their consciousness. It's you, Angela. You've made him what he is now. You're destroying the man."

Her eyes widened. "No. You're lying!"

I found her hands, took them in mine, and crushed them at either side of her face. She bore an expression of terror. I had the advantage all along but showed my dominance at that moment. "Do you feel an attraction to me?" I pressed, hoping that she did. "Do you want me to take you, to possess you, and to make you mine here by the river? I can remove

the sorrow I see in your eyes. I can make you forget. I can fill your emptiness."

"No!" Bucking against me, she smashed my cock, which stole my breath in an instant of sharp pain. I slammed hard into her and covered her lips with my own. I had to have her. As I forced my tongue into her mouth and battered at the wall around her mind, I longed to be one with her. I needed what she needed—to belong, to be known for my true self and accepted. I would make her see we were meant to be together, angel's marks or not.

She thrashed and, turning her head to the side, managed to escape my forced kiss.

"I want you, and I will have you. Just like Karada, like all the others before her. You will belong to me."

A growl sputtered in her throat. When she stared me down, her eyes went a golden shade. Here was a side I had seen in Karada ages ago. A demon side not of the blood I had gifted her with, but of something else. My lost one was a whore by nature, possibly spawned by an incubus. I had often wondered about that, but there was no way to be sure.

Angela's brow crinkled. Her fangs lengthened, and her nails curved into claws as she flexed her fingers in an attempt to scratch at me. This same fury could grow and change her innocence to something cruel and feral if left untended.

"A demon touched by angels. You are pure contradiction." I bent and left a gentle kiss on her chin. My face ached now as if fire had eaten into my flesh. This young vampire had a magic all her own which I doubted she knew she possessed.

"Kiss me," I ordered her. "Kiss me and thank me for what I've given you."

"And what is that? Your blood?"

I smirked. What games we could play in the chase. I decided to let her go, to let her run and think herself free. I would watch. I would taunt her. "No, little one, not just my blood. When the sun rises and you walk about in the light, you will understand."

I waited, hopeful that she would reach for me in gratitude, but she only hissed her defiance. Discouraged, I willed myself to vanish, my shape melding with the air until I became dark mist. I spied on her, my future ward—perhaps the companion I had sought throughout my lonely existence—as she struggled to see where I'd gone.

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## **Chapter Eleven: Home Again**

When I arrived back at the apartment, I felt different. Charon's blood pumped through my veins and gave me a strength I had never known. I found Tommy on the couch, the remote atop his chest, and his soft snores lulling. "Wake up." I gave his shoulder a shake. "Come to bed with me."

He moaned and stirred. His blue eyes opened, and I smiled down at him.

"Hey." He pulled me against him and smothered me with a warm kiss, a gentle touch far different from Charon's. I hated myself for having been alone with the vampire, for tasting him. Even as Tommy's lips parted to taste me, I longed to drink from Charon again. Ever since I had been turned, I had been leading a double life, one in which I fed on what I had been and on in which I struggled to be what I had been.

His fingers dug beneath my shirt and caressed my lower back. Heat swirled in my middle. I pushed away all thoughts and let myself be in the moment with my lover. Our tongues tested and teased. The stubble across his chin poked at my skin in a delicious, needling pain. He smelled musky and hot. My fangs tingled, and I held back to control the urge to drink from him.

"I was dreaming about you." He ran his right hand over my ass and squeezed. "It was a good dream." His hardness thickened in his sweatpants. It felt good to be with him. Safe, familiar. I wanted to believe that I wasn't bad for him, that

my presence wasn't hurting him. But deep down, I knew what Charon had said was true.

We kissed again, slower, without urgency. I had him and knew this could not last forever, that as much as I loved him, what I wanted could never be. He sat up with me pressed to him. His fingers moved between us to unfasten my pants. After standing, he undressed me, pausing to kiss my shoulder, my breast, my abdomen. His mouth worked down my skin until he reached my inner thighs. There he breathed in and let out a soothing sigh.

"Come to bed with me." I reached down to comb my fingers through his hair. "Hold me until dawn."

"I want to hold you all day." He raised his face, staring at me with that lost look.

To be with him in the day, to hold him on our bed and feel the rays of sunlight warm my skin—I imagined that sheer pleasure, and I wondered if the vampire had truly given me a gift. Most likely, Charon's words were false, a lure to get me to walk out into the sunlight and burn myself to ash, but maybe it was time for me to die, and what better place to do so than in my lover's arms?

"Okay, I'll stay home today."

His smile lit up his face. Tommy stood and nuzzled my cheek with his grizzled one. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

Hand in hand, we went to the bedroom. Tommy stripped off his T-shirt while I sat on the edge of the bed and watched him. Dawn shined through the large side window and filtered through the curtain. I stared at his chest while he untied his



pants and pushed them down. He wasn't wearing underwear. His cock stood erect and pointed at me from a nest of hairs. Wetness settled between my legs at the sight of him.

He crossed the floor in three easy steps and embraced me. Pulling away from him to part my legs, I leaned back onto the bed. Settling at my entry, he took hold of my legs and lifted me. He pushed his length inside, filling me. I turned my head, a smile curving my lips as I watched the world outside our haven. Light crept past the curtains, banishing shadows, which sent a shiver of warning through me.

I didn't heed it.

I wanted to believe.

I wanted to be human again, to be given a chance to recoup what had been stolen from me when I had been made into a vampire. I wanted a normal life with the man I loved.

The brightness hurt my eyes.

I closed them and concentrated on Tommy's body pulling back and pushing into me. His breathing became rapid. Skin slapped against skin. The darkness inside me abated, leaving a sweet tickle that made me hold as still as possible. He tensed and seized above me in the throes of an orgasm. I curled my legs tight and, reaching for the same release, pulled him deep into me.

The sunlight touched my face, and I screamed.

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## **Chapter Twelve: Angel's Mark**

At dawn, I watched the park from my balcony to see if she would discover her new talent. A vampire capable of walking about in the light of day is a dangerous creature indeed. I hoped it would fill her with awe, that she would be impressed by what I was and what I had given her. Something about her called to me. But no dark-skinned beauty lingered across the street from my apartment window. I waited for a time and gave up, tired from the long night. I lumbered back inside my apartment.

In the bathroom, staring at myself in the mirror, I groaned. Fate's game took a twisted turn. Where Angela's palm had graced my cheek in the night, a bloodred mark glowed with the pulse of an angel's touch. "Very funny," I grumbled. "She's a vampire. This is impossible."

A ripple of fear tore through me. Could a vampire be so touched by angels that she could become one? Was He playing some sort of game with me? It had happened in the past. Small tests to be sure I was worthy, but this didn't feel like a test. I could imagine no task He would want to bestow upon me.

Willing the mark to vanish, I touched my skin.

It remained, defying me.

I pulled off my clothes and started the water in the shower, in need of a hot spray to take my mind off things. Steam clouded the mirror and hid her mark. I stepped into the stall and stood there, thinking of Angela and Karada. I

weighed their differences and likenesses. It was obvious this Rory fellow had chosen Angela as a replacement for my Karada. They could have been twins such was the likeness. But where Karada was selfish and cruel, this new vampire defied that natural predatory instinct. Angela had the capacity to care for, maybe even love, the human male she'd been stalking. I don't know why she didn't see that her closeness to him was killing him.

Mortals cannot fathom the undead. They think us beautiful and dangerous and, in many ways, human. But we are not human anymore. The change brings about a new being. A predator. In many ways it brings about the true demon within.

I turned. The water pounded on my back, soothing my muscles and shoulders from bearing the weight of my wings in the night. Reaching down, I touched my sleeping cock and thought of Angela's lips. What would it be like to taste her body, to control her mind, and mate with her in the clouds? I supposed it would be like all the other unwilling ones. She would fight me, and I would revel in the battle until the day she gave in or left me as my Karada had done. But my hold would remain if she did so.

I needed to gain her trust.

Stroking my waking length, I imagined the only way to get close enough to her was through the man she coveted. I could gain *his* trust, lure him close enough to control him, turn him if I thought it might help.

The slickness of my skin sliding beneath my fingers soon stole away my musings. I concentrated on pleasuring my

body. I wished for another to share this moment with—a woman's voice crying out my name might have helped. In a desperate rhythm, I pulled at myself and felt the edge of an orgasm just out of reach. I wanted to breach that plateau and ride the euphoria there. I needed an escape.

No matter how long I tried, relief would not come.

Frustrated, I washed my body with soap and my long hair with shampoo and the fruity conditioner I'd purchased two days before. Something was wrong with me, something I didn't understand. After I rinsed and stood before the misted mirror, toweling myself dry, I saw a vision. The specter wavered before my eyes, dead but not passed on as she should be.

"What do you ask of me now, Karada?"

She smiled, her full lips teasing me with memories of coupling and nights of watching her feed. She loved the kill, the hunt, all of it. Her smile faded. "Come to me, Charon. I have missed you. Come to me here at the edge of all things and have your way with me one last time."

Puzzled, I reached for her soul, longing to have another with mine. Behind her, I saw the ripples of my river, mesmerizing and beautiful. I also saw the current ferryman, his face a shadowed skull, his dark robes tattered from years of use. He could not smile, but I sensed his mirth.

"Vile creature," I whispered. "Karada, you will not entice me back. Never again will I ride the tide of the Styx and help the souls cross over. My time there has since passed."

Her soul glittered in hues of red, showing her anger. Wordless, the image and her essence vanished. Left alone

and unsatisfied, I clambered to the bed to sleep for a few hours and contemplate my next move.

I woke at the crest of the evening, angry for oversleeping. Dressing in haste, I readied for my next meeting with the object of Karada's vengeance. The man Angela doted on needed to be coerced to my side. In his fragile state, I didn't see it as much of a problem.

I stepped out of the apartment and rode the lift, seeking out his feeble mind. Like a magnet reaching for metal, our thoughts melded. Sitting on a couch before a TV, he watched some inane show about lovers.

*"What room are you in, Tom?"*

*"Seven."*

His weakness to resist answering me proved how far gone the man was. A few more months with her appearing to him, and he'd be mad, fit for an asylum. I passed through the lift doorway onto floor nine and walked along humming. I knocked on the door to number seven.

"Who is it?" a woman called.

I frowned, not expecting anyone else but the man.

"Old friend of Tom's," I answered, lying.

The white door opened, and there stood my Marianne, the blaze of the angel mark still bright on her face—a match to my own I realized.

"Charon?" She swallowed hard and blushed bright pink. "I didn't—um, gee, I didn't know you and Tom knew each other. This is weird."

I should have erased her memory of me, turned, and left that place. I should perhaps, have followed Karada's spirit

back to the Underworld and returned to my old haunt. But I can never resist the lure of a pretty face.

I went inside and hugged her, uncomfortable and taken aback as she was by my arrival.

"Fate brings us together again. How are you?" I asked, hovering my lips by her ear before I withdrew. Her scent awoke my body, readying it to perform if the chance presented itself. I wondered if she could allay my impotence of late.

Marianne escaped my arms. "I'm all right. Just stopped in to see my brother-in-law." She waved a hand at Tom, who remained on the couch wearing only gray sweatpants and a confused expression. He hadn't even noticed I was there. "So, how do you two know each other?"

The glassy look the man bore wove deeper than I had imagined. I pushed into his mind to find a plausible story to tell Marianne. Once there, his memories blurred and became so mixed up there was nothing I could cling to. So I made up a vague lie and hoped it would fool her. "We met a few years ago at a conference. I figured since I was in town, I'd stop by. I haven't heard from him for a while."

She nodded before edging closer to tell me in a conspiratorial whisper, "He hasn't been the same since my sister passed." She motioned for me to have a seat near Tom. "I'll get you something to drink."

"Thanks. Water is fine, bottled if you have it."

She blushed again, and I imagined her thoughts must be lingering on our shared moment in the airplane lavatory.

I grinned at her and winked.

Easing in beside Tom, I patted his knee. "Where's your girlfriend, old buddy?" I muttered.

"She'll be back tonight. She works during the day." He faced forward, still fixated on the TV. "Maybe if you stay long enough, you and Marianne can meet her."

"That'd be great," she chimed in. "Your brother told me a little about her when I visited your daughter. It's nice of Angela to look after you while you get better."

So, she visited more often than I imagined. *"You'll never get better."* I sent the thought out of sheer cruelty. I needed him to be hopeless, to be lost and in need of my control.

His head whipped around, and he narrowed his eyes on Marianne. "I'm *not* sick."

Marianne came to sit in a chair near us and set two bottles of water on the coffee table. Her face had paled as a result of Tom's harsh tone. "When's the last time you saw your psychiatrist?"

"None of your business."

She leaned forward in her seat. "Don't you want Serena back? She misses you. She can't come home until you get yourself together."

Tom sighed and threw up his arms. "Look, you should have called before you came over. I don't want to see you and your high-and-mighty attitude. Angela will work everything out. She'll take care of things. Why don't you just get the hell out of my house? Your sister never liked you anyway."

His outburst continued as he stood and raged his way down the hall, slamming a door in his wake. I reached for my

water, nonplussed, and, frankly, content to be alone with this woman again. "What's his deal?"

She hesitated, glancing over her shoulder at the hall. "Nervous breakdown after my sister died. It's just ... sometimes I think he doesn't *want* to face reality."

"Realty isn't always a fun place to be. I guess I can't blame him." I drank down half the water. She looked shook up, her eyes brimming with tears. "Maybe you and I should go for a walk. There's a park across the street."

"Yeah." She stood and brushed at her skirt. "All right. That's probably a good idea. Maybe he's right. I shouldn't have come here. I did call, though. I told Angela I was coming." She lowered her voice. "She sounds nice on the phone, but I really have to wonder what's going on between them. Tom's parents said they haven't seen her since the two were in high school, and if not for her answering the phone when I called, I would have thought she was a figment of his imagination."

"Well, at least he has her to look after him. I'm sure it's not easy for her to deal with."

Marianne nodded and wiped at her eyes.

We left the apartment building and strolled together along the winding path in the park. Stars twinkled in the sky above us and the moon appeared, orange and bright on the horizon behind the buildings clogging the city. With each step, I became more aware of her easy nature and something else—her drive to do the right thing. She was everything I was not. The darkness in me longed to diminish her light. She explained that Tom had married her sister, Genevieve, even



though she was already seven months pregnant from another man when they met.

"My sister was a wild thing, never one to settle down, but somehow, he tamed that side of her. He loved her. I guess he saw the good in her."

I reached for her hand and found it. "And you?"

She stuttered her answer and avoided my eyes. "I'm not nearly as uninhibited as she was. Gen and I had our disagreements..."

"But the plane."

"I, um, don't know what came over me." She stopped and faced me, a beautiful woman I wanted as another toy. "Don't take this the wrong way. I think you're handsome, gorgeous really, but what we did..." She bit at her bottom lip while contemplating her next words.

Before she could speak, a familiar figure strode up the path behind her.

"Marianne?" Angela called. She stopped three paces away, sizing me up.

Marianne stared at Angela for a long while. I sensed a familiarity, a wave of déjà vu as the two women regarded each other. Angela closed the distance between us and held out a slender, delicate hand. "You *must* be Marianne. I recognize you from Genevieve's photo albums, and Serena has told me so much about her auntie."

Befuddled, Marianne nodded. "Yes. And you are?"

"Angela Harris, Tommy's girlfriend."

"Oh!" She let go of my hand and embraced Angela. "Oh, thank God we have you to take care of him."

I glared at the little vampire.

"I was going to stay over until you came home, but well ... I'm afraid I made Tom mad. He said I should leave, and I figured it best I go. I didn't mean to upset him."

"It's all right," Angela said, shooting me a strange look. "Thanks for coming to see him. It helps for him to have family around even if he doesn't admit it. He has mood swings. It's nothing personal, I'm sure. A side effect of the meds the doctor has him on. They've tried three so far, and it takes time to see if they'll work."

"This is my ... friend, Charon," Marianne offered.

"Hello." Angela eyed me.

"Pleasure to meet you."

She nodded.

"Maybe we should get back to the apartment," I suggested.

Angela's eyes narrowed. "No, I think Tommy will need time to cool down."

The hold I had over Marianne's mind fled, pushed away by a strong wall. I chuckled at Angela's attempt to protect the other woman. She could not block me out and hold up Marianne's safety net as well, so I forced my thoughts into her head.

*"Come away with me, or you'll be missing your lover soon."*

Ignoring me, Angela took Marianne's hand and started walking toward the zoo entrance. I followed, enjoying this new game. She could not keep it up for long. The three of us

stopped outside the closed admittance gates. Marianne continued to ramble on about her sister, becoming emotional.

I had long since stopped paying attention to her words in order to toy with Angela's mind. Irritated, she faced me, her eyes glittering gold for an instant in warning. "And how did you two meet?" she asked me.

I held out a hand to Marianne. Our fingers laced together, hers warm and mine growing cold with a playful hunger. Each of us had a hold on this woman, and she would become a new trick in my plan to bend Angela to my will.

"I bumped into her in the airport in Minneapolis. Total coincidence." I leaned in and planted a soft kiss on Marianne's cheek. She eased closer to me. I seized my chance, lowered my lips to her neck, and bit into her skin. Blood flowed over my tongue. Marianne let out a soft cry of pain.

Angela shrieked. Her nails scraped into my back, dug into my shoulder, and shredded my shirt in an attempt to make me stop. But I had no intention of letting go. The taste of the angel who had touched Marianne burned going down my throat. I drank in her soul. I pulled at her essence and did it out of cruelty—I wanted to kill her simply because I could, because I wanted Angela to understand how strong I was. When her heart slowed its steady rhythm, I let go. Her body fell at my feet.

Angela wailed and lunged for me.

Stepping out of reach, I cackled. My wings itched to spread from my body. Skin broke, bones grew, and I let them burst out behind me. I taunted her before I took to the sky. "Catch me, little one."

In pursuit, she howled, her voice a cry of agony and hatred. Maybe I could bring forth the thing in her blood, the taint Karada's line suffered. I longed to see it bare its claws and cold cruelty. I wanted it to be mine, to be a thing only I could call forth and control.

I looked over my shoulder to see her shape, the dark angel on my heels, her face distorted with rage. "Why!" she shouted. "Why!"

Her question did not bother me. I wanted the thrill of the chase, of being set upon by her anger. My cheek burned at that moment, which caused me to falter. Small hands clawed at my belly, latched onto my waist, and tugged me down from the clouds and the stars high above. The pain of her touch sizzled on my bare skin.

"What are you?" I found myself asking, for she should not be able to do such damage to me. Our wings entangled. Our arms and legs knotted. We fell in a spiral. The ground raced to catch us, and Angela and I hit hard. Bones shattered. My wings snagged and tore. I lay there, her body atop mine, both of us drawing in pained breaths.

She whimpered.

Inside my body, the vampiric gift worked over my ruined parts to mend and reform all that had been damaged. I knew Angela's body worked in the same manner. The question was, which one of us would recover first? Trying to crawl higher atop me, she slumped and heaved until her face was an inch above mine.

"I'll kill you for what you've done." Her full lips were so close—yet, I did not have the strength to claim them. Gold lit

her pupils before she dipped to my neck, bit past my skin, and drank.

The pain of the mark she'd given me on my cheek hurt worse than the broken parts of my body. The hot draw of her mouth on my neck did the opposite, soothing me. I held still, offering no resistance. She couldn't kill me. Death did not want my kind. I wanted her to control me—I realized my desire at that moment. I wanted the peace of relenting to another being, of letting someone else carry the burden of my purposeless life. I wanted a connection, a soul who wanted me for more than the physical, wretched and damaged as I was. I didn't like that epiphany.

*"There's still time to turn her. The soul lingers by the body."* I sent the thought to calm her anger, to test her, not for any feeling of regret I ought to have suffered. Raising my hand, I ran my fingers down the curve of her back. *"Save her. Do it for Tommy. You waste time here drinking from me. I cannot die."*

She swallowed and, sitting up, regarded me with hatred in her eyes. "You do it."

I chuckled. Bones knitted. Blood rushed to heal over my horrendous wounds.

She rolled off of me and limped away.

After catching my breath, I pulled myself up, pain dancing across my body and limbs. Desperate to believe that I had some purpose, I clung to the idea that my killing Marianne meant something. I followed after Angela and walked through the silent park back to the place where I had committed my treasonous act. Stooped over Marianne's still body, Angela

wept. She stared up at me and wiped away her bloodstained tears with her forearm.

I looked past her, thinking something had moved in the bushes, a shadow maybe, or a play of lamplight over branches.

"Do it," she said, her voice wavering. "Bring her back."

I sat down opposite Angela and lifted Marianne so that her head rested in my lap. Closing my eyes, I reached out into the other plane for her soul, found it, and twined mine with hers. Confusion. Sorrow. Regret. And an emotion of desire entered my mind. Marianne desired me still, even in death. With one hand, I guided her soul back into its place within the body.

"There is no bringing her back the way she was. You understand that. Turn her, little angel. Save her from death. Steal her away from the end. Make her become what we are."

Visions of a vampiric family all my own twisted in my imagination. I could have these two women, more if I so wished. We could live together, hunt as one pack, maybe even love.

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## **Chapter Thirteen: From the Shadows**

How could I do what he suggested? Marianne didn't deserve to become like me. No one did. I shook my head no and stood. Backing away, I shot Charon a cold glare. "Never. I could never do this to any person. I'm not like you. Not like Karada or Rory was. I never wanted to be this. I hate what I am!"

He nodded, an awkward smile playing on his lips. "So, this was all a test." Charon flipped his hair from his shoulder. "A test to see which of us has fallen furthest from the light, and which of us will win." He nipped his lower lip, cutting past skin to draw blood. "It's me," he said more to himself. "I have fallen for so long that I have forgotten what the light looks like. You will fall with me, little angel, all in time. There is no light left for us even though we may be able to walk beneath the sun."

He snarled before he lowered his face to Marianne's. His mouth covered hers in a bloodied kiss. I watched, helpless to turn away. Her fingers twitched before she reached for him to tangle her hand in his hair. She suckled on the flow of blood at his mouth as if it were the sweetest drink. I salivated and hated myself for it.

Was this what it was like when Rory turned me? Could I have resisted him? Could anyone at the edge of death resist the taste of a vampire's blood and the offer at a second life, however dark and cold?

"No," I said in a pleading whisper. "God no, Charon. Don't do this to her."

He raised her up and his eyes were barely visible, piercing into me with coldness. His voice spoke in my mind. *"I need you, Angela. I will do whatever I must to have you in my life. I do this for you. I do this for us. For a new future ... together."*

*Marianne broke their deathly kiss. She held to him as if he were her long lost lover. Dazed, her face turned toward me. "Angela? What happened? Your shirt ... Did I pass out?" Charon's blood lingered on her chin, shining in the gold lamplight. "Sometimes I faint ... but I don't remember feeling dizzy."*

How could I explain? I took a step toward her, feeling the need to rescue her from the clutches of the demon she clung to. "Maybe you need to lie down for a little while."

She nodded, her face still reflecting her confusion.

Charon licked blood from his lips and picked up Marianne. He carried her toward me, his strength having obviously returned. "It only takes a moment to change the course of a life," he said to me. "A moment, Angela. A taste. All that you desire is within your reach. Yet, you deny yourself."

He set Marianne down on shaking legs. Curling an arm around her waist, he held her steady. "You did faint," he explained, in a lame attempt to soothe her. I knew what he had done, twisted his way into her mind. He would change her memories, steal them away if necessary to keep her close to him.



"I can't change the course of someone else's life. I can't do what you suggest."

His wicked grin reached his eyes. Like the lost souls in the insane asylum my maker used to feed on, Charon's eyes bore a certain unmistakable madness. With one arm, he guided Marianne to his chest in a tight embrace. She melded to him.

His free hand rose high. Fingers curled. For an instant, I saw his fist come for my face, but it was too late to move out of the way. Stricken on my left temple, I stumbled backward, blinded by pain and a white flash of light. My feet fell out from under me. My body slapped against the sidewalk, which set nerves firing off at the injustice of being injured so soon after the fall from the sky.

"You can't do it, little angel, but *I* can. And I will have you, no matter what it takes."

Their footsteps carried away from me. I tried to roll onto my stomach, needing to get up and chase after them. After two tries, I managed to push up on all fours. As I crawled across the cement, my vision blurred. I could hear nothing of Charon or Marianne.

My head tingled. Blood pounded in my veins to the places in need of healing. Cars droned along the street. I blinked, trying to see ahead. Headlights whizzed past. Voices. Pounding in my skull. A flash of white light again.

A car zipped by. Warm air whooshed by my face. I stopped.

"Miss?"

I turned toward the voice.

"Are you all right?"

The cold, wet snuffle of a dog's nose touched my forearm.

"Help me," I forced out the words. The tingle of my body trying to heal itself sizzled in my temple.

Rough hands clutched my forearms. "You're freezing," the stranger said. He pulled me up. His jacket covered my naked upper body, still warm from being close to his body. I breathed in. Oil. Car exhaust. Soap. My eyesight cleared. Silver shimmered in my rescuer's black beard. His brown eyes flickered from my bare chest, where those same rough hands pulled the jacket closed. "Did someone hurt you?"

His aura reflected kindness, the intent to offer aid, and concern for my well-being. At my feet, his dog licked at my shoes. "I have to get to my apartment."

"You're bleeding."

I reached up and touched my forehead to find it wet. Beneath my skin, my shattered skull had already begun to pull back together. "It's nothing. I'll be all right. I slipped and fell in the park."

"But your shirt..."

I couldn't explain that part. I thirsted for the taste of fresh blood to replenish what I had lost. His heartbeat called to the dark being inside me. My fangs elongated, readying for the plunge. At my feet, his dog started to growl.

"Rocky! Enough." He stepped back from me and tugged the dog away. "He's never done that before. I'm sorry."

I waved a hand and started to cross the street. Behind me, the man called out, but I ignored him and forced one foot before the other. *Run. Tommy and I can leave this city. We'll go somewhere Charon can't find us. Start over.*

*Marianne would hunger soon. She would kill. The sky would bleed red and drive her mad until she obeyed her thirst. And what would Charon teach her?*

*"You question what you are too much."* Charon's voice danced in my thoughts. He was close. Panic seized me. His last words after he struck me echoed in my mind. *"You can't do it, little angel, but I can. And I will have you, no matter what it takes."*

*All I could think about was Tommy. Would Charon kill him? Or worse? Turn him into a vampire just to get close to me?*

Into the apartment's lobby I ran and feared he knew where Tommy was. Maybe he had known all along. An elderly couple got into the elevator and gaped at me. The doors slid shut. Tones beeped at each floor we passed. At level five, the couple got out and gave me a curious stare before they scuttled away.

Tones beeped. The numbers kept changing. Finally, the elevator opened and I left it. After rushing down the long hallway, I came to our apartment. The door was ajar. Bloodied fingerprints marred its surface.

"Tommy!" Dread tore through me. Charon's scent lingered in the living room. In the hall to the bedroom, a perfect, red handprint marked where the vampire had been. "Tommy, where are you!"

I searched each room, checked under the beds, the closets. Nothing. No trace. The open bedroom window terrified me. I edged close to it and peered down. No body lay across the sidewalk below, and eerily, I wished one did. At

least then I would know it was over, that Tommy was in a better place.

The moon was a silver sliver smiling at me sarcastically. My life, my love had been taken from me, and this time I knew I must fight to get it back or die trying. Red edged the night sky, bled across its surface to remind me that I needed to feed. I stepped up onto the window sill, spread my dark wings, and jumped.

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## **Chapter Fourteen: To the Light**

Marianne followed me so easily that it felt like less than a challenge. Her leathery wings matched my own, evil and mottled in shades of red and olive. Side by side we flew over the city lights, Angela's lover hanging limp in my arms. His blood stained her lips, for she had fed on him until he passed out, having attacked him with a ferocity that warmed me. The mark on her face where the angel had touched her was already beginning to fade. That fact made me feel powerful. Those touched by His minions could be defiled, and I had done so. No wrath fell upon me, and the farther away from the city I flew, the more I believed that no one could hurt me.

We reached the riverbank an hour before dawn, the same spot I had met with Angela before. I lighted upon the ground, my new ward at my side. She reached for Tom's body, but I slapped her hand away. "No, Marianne. You must not kill this one. I need him."

Jealousy and confusion widened her eyes, and the rush of mixed emotions from her thickened the air around us. "Why? I'm thirsty. I need more."

"You will have it ... in time."

She growled at me and sat down on the moist earth. Crossing her arms over her bare chest, Marianne glared at the trees before her.

I marveled at how simple it was to wipe away her memories, to force her to focus on me, to make her believe I was the only important thing in her life. For all intents and

purposes, she had no idea who Tom was anymore. He appeared to her as prey, nothing more.

"Emotions are such trivial things," I muttered to myself. Contrarily, I wished I could feel them. I wanted love now more than ever, and hoped when Angela and I met again, she would understand why I did what I was about to do. Marianne was not strong like Angela. She bended to my will when what I really wanted was an equal who could fight me.

"He tastes good to me."

"Of course he does," I told her. "They all taste good. But I want to keep this one. He'll be our plaything, our pet."

She watched me out of the corner of her eye, a slow grin spreading across her lips. New vampires are often unsure of themselves and their status. Tom's being a plaything appealed to Marianne's need to be important to me, her maker. She nodded.

I delved into Tom's mind, pushed away his memories, hid his past from him, and locked away all recollections of Angela. This task did not come as easily as with Marianne's mind. The man's emotions burned my efforts. Frustrated, I set him on the ground and paced.

My newly made vampire shuffled closer to the man's body.

"You'll kill him if you take more," I warned her.

She groaned. "You have me. You don't need him."

I chuckled at her. *So new and already so selfish.*

I thought back to the night I had been turned to the darkness. The vampire had found his way to the middle lands. How or why he had come, I could not know. His body gaunt from lack of feeding, and his eyes bright and curious, he

followed the souls onto my boat and offered me a copper piece in payment.

"A follower of myths?" I asked him.

He had smiled, revealing his fangs. "You could say that, Charon." He took three steps to the end of my ferry. Nothing but a mirage of skeleton and death, I knew my appearance ought to frighten even the darkest of living creatures, but this vampire did not fear me. He clamped his pale fingers over my shoulders and sank his teeth into my body to draw away my blood. I remember the rush of being fed upon, the high of another being daring to touch me. Not since before my calling by Him had another living creature laid its skin against mine.

The vampire intrigued me. I wanted to be like him, to feed on blood, to have that fleeting moment of connection to life that I had lost an eternity ago. Perhaps because he dared to find a way to reach me, I was forever changed by his needs. My own had been cast aside for so long that I did not remember them.

No matter how long the vampire drank, I could not die. My masquerade fell away, and I allowed him to see me for what I was, a man trapped in youth, a slave to Him and His will whose future had been stolen away by a god. He seemed surprised by my revelation and in that stunted moment of his hesitation, I turned the challenge on him and fed from the pulsing vein in his neck until I drank him dry. I tasted thousands of deaths in his blood, the remnants of memories and lives he had stolen. I felt nothing for them, and nothing for the vampire's empty shell of a body when I pushed it away from me and into the murky depths of the Styx.

I carried on that night as I had before then. I gathered the souls and ferried them across. The vampire's essence drifted with me to the other side.

Only this time, after the souls glided away into the shimmering glasslike surface of the next plane, I was cast out of Hades. He had forsaken me for my sin of drinking the blood of a vampire. I found myself in Greece again, at the place I had been stolen from, only the world had moved on and I had not changed with it.

Marianne latched onto Tom's arm and dragged his body into her lap. Her malicious action drew my attention and shattered my musings. "I said no more!" I ordered her.

She lowered her face to his neck, her eyes narrowed on me.

My cheek burned where Angela had touched me. I wondered if she was close to us, if she had given chase. I started for Marianne with the intent of snatching back the body before she could do more harm to him. But the ravenous little whelp bit into his neck and pulled heavy draws of his life into herself.

"Kill him, and I'll kill you."

She swallowed before releasing him. Licking her lips, Marianne studied me. I slipped into her mind and found the memory of us together in the plane lavatory occupying her. She grinned and pushed Tom from her lap.

I took a step backward.

She was up and before me in a matter of seconds. "Why me?" she asked, her eyes wide and curious. "Why did you pick me that day?"



"Because I should not have." Her fingers traced my cheek, my temple, and then swept into my hair. Her small frame pressed against my chest, pert nipples dragging over my skin. Marianne felt warm from feeding, and I felt cold. She ground her crotch against mine, which awakened my dick. The closeness I needed so badly overwhelmed me.

She nibbled at my lips. I kissed her back, hungry for more and tasting Tom's blood in her mouth. She moaned and pushed at me until the two of us tumbled to the ground, cushioned by moss and composting leaves. I read her thoughts, carnal, animalistic. I had this with many lovers before me, and although the rush of heat and the drive for sex tempted me, I wanted more.

"What's wrong?" She hissed and worked her mouth along my neck. Nips and bites sent my body into a shiver. "Am I not enough? Is that it?" Her nails had grown into sharp talons which tore at my pants. Sitting back between my legs, she cocked her head to one side to stare down at me.

The hold I had on her mind broke. I can't explain how or why, but she was fighting it. When that connection failed, reason flooded her face as well as understanding. "You vile thing," she said with a growl. "Using me." Marianne glanced at Tom, still and near death on the bank by the water's edge. "I am no pet. I am not what you plan to make of him."

The handprint on her face disappeared then. I began to wonder if His wrath would still reach me now, if He would work through this newly turned vampire.

She pulled away my pants. Skilled fingers stroked at my cock, thickening its length. I lay frozen, at her mercy, and hopeful that she could bring me to orgasm. I closed my eyes.

The pads of fingers caressed. One hand slipped between my legs to my sac. Fondling me there as well as across the crown of my dick, she wakened my lust. I wanted her. I wanted to fuck her and make her scream, but I knew it was not enough for me.

*"I'll find you,"* came the distant mental message from my adversary.

Marianne pleased me and I tried to focus on where the little Blood Angel might be. The hot, wet sheathe of Marianne's body swallowed my length. She sat atop me, circling her hips in a rhythm. Drawing me in and out and deeper in.

Although I wanted to find Angela if only to be aware when she reached us, I found my attention turning to the minx riding my body. I reached up and grasped her round breasts which molded to my hands. My hips danced upward to meet her thrusts. She pinched at my tiny nipples, her nails dug in and released.

Harder. Faster. With angry lunges, she rode me. Then it happened. The tingle settled in my balls and wavered. I thought it would vanish. I hoped it would continue. A gush of energy surged in me. Spilling my seed inside Marianne's tightness, I came in a burst of heat. As waves of heat spread through my cold body, I knew utter sorrow, for this was not love, not loyalty, not empathy or caring. This was mating on instinct, and although it felt good, it did not satisfy me.

Marianne kept pounding away at my body until she reached her own plateau of bliss. I felt every pulse of her pussy milking me and the slickness of her excitement. I had taken someone beautiful and turned her into a monster—a creature the same as me. And I would do it again. Many times more, with the hope I would find the one who could stop me. I wanted to be stopped. I wanted to be what Angela wanted, and at that moment, I realized why I wanted her so badly. After all she had been through, she retained that part of herself that a vampire loses when it is turned. I had lost that part of me when I became Charon, the Ferryman to the Underworld. The vampire's blood had only plunged me further away from myself into the abyss of a purposeless existence.

Tom made a soft crying sound from his place across the ground. I had taken what Angela wanted most of all, the thing most precious in her life. I had stolen her lover because I wanted her love for my own. I wanted to be hopeless and lost in another being, bound by the unexplainable soul mate-kind of connection that would make me whole again.

But what being could want me? My time in the underworld made me stand apart from the living, a cold, ruthless, inhuman thing. Could love change me or even reach me?

Marianne, heaving for air, collapsed across me. I pushed her off me and stood, naked and colder than I ever remember being. I didn't want to be the lusty youth of a man I had been when He called me from life to walk among the wisps of the dead. I wanted to be what I once was—feared. My body shifted, skin vanishing, flesh melting, all replaced by bone. I summoned my old robe, a tattered cloak black as night, and

the elements, obeying my will, seeped into the garment across my back.

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## **Chapter Fifteen: Embrace**

The sky started to pale into twilight. Golden clouds rimmed the horizon. I rode the winds over trees thick with vines and followed the shimmering shape of the St. Johns River below me. Charon's blood flowed in my veins, our connection strong. I sensed him and where he might be. Heating me, sunlight warmed my bare back. I no longer feared the day, thanks to my enemy. But I feared what he had done to Tommy. I hoped I could find him before Charon could carry out his plans, but all my life, hope had been fleeting and happiness lost to pain. The dread I felt thickened into grim foreboding.

Amidst the swamp's plant life. I caught sight of him. Charon stood, as I had seen him in my nightmares, wearing a black cloak that barely obscured the skeleton beneath the cloth. He held no scythe like Death would, because he was not Death, only a guide to it. I wondered if I would meet my end this day.

My wings directing the airflow down, I glided to land beside him amidst the smells of rich earth and crushed leaves. Lingering as well was the coppery scent of fresh blood and the subtler musk of sex. I searched for Tommy, and I sucked in a worried breath when I found his prone form near the bank. His faint aura alerted me that he would soon die without a transfusion. The weak beat of his heart barely made itself known to me despite my heightened senses.

"Why have you done this?" I asked, trying to hide the layers of pain and distress in my voice.

Charon approached me. Behind him, Marianne sat up and pushed her mussed hair away from her face. Her nakedness revealed what had happened between the two of them.

"Because I need you, Angela. I need you to bring me to the light, to save me from what I've become." The cool morning breeze caught up his robe, fluttering it. "And you need him."

I looked from my enemy to my beloved. "You have Marianne. You don't need me. You took her, made her your possession...."

"Yes."

"Why me?"

He glanced at Marianne but soon returned his attention to me. "Because *you* challenge me. *You* fight me."

"There is more to life than battles."

"Prove it to me. Turn him, Angela. Make him like us. Take what it is you desire. I will protect you and him as long as you stay with me. I will provide you all that you want and need. He cannot go on living in this manner—stalked by the very being who claims to love him. The only way for the two of you to truly be together is to pull him into our darkness. There, he will understand you."

I clenched my fingers into fists, unwilling to give in to what he proposed, but tempted nonetheless. "I can't."

Marianne stood, fixing me with a stare. I knew she didn't know me anymore. He had probably wiped her memory clean of her previous life and turned her into a slave.

"You can, Angela. You saw me do it. It is a simple rite. Share your blood with him, and he becomes what you are—what we are." He took another step toward me. One bony white hand rose and opened. It beckoned me to reach.

A cold mist passed between us. The touch of a ghost abraded my skin as Karada's laughter entered my thoughts. She had come to witness my end, to watch her vengeance carried out.

Charon paused, his skull lifting to follow the soul's path. "Ah, Karada, you've come to be with me again." He reached for the mist and grasped it in his bony fingers, where it gathered form but seemed unable to escape. Lifting it to his mouth, he sucked the mist into his body. A crackle of lightning flashed through the otherwise clear sky. In those few seconds, I saw an outline of Charon's wings, and the hint of demon horns protruding from his head.

He swallowed the soul and took another step toward me.

"Were you ever human?" I asked.

"Once." He lifted his other arm and waited patiently for me to come to him. "A long time before now. Ages before I knew the taste of blood on my tongue. I was a man once, young, prideful, and full of lust for the unknown."

"You have Marianne." I wanted to slip my arms around Charon despite the frightening way he appeared and what he had done to the ghost. I wanted to hold him against me and feel his body close to mine as we had done the last time we met at this river. I wanted the kind of understanding only a vampire could offer. God forgive me, I wanted to help him. It was obvious that he wanted to change, to be something other

than darkness and death or the demon thing that resided within him. "Take her from here and let me go. Just give me Tommy."

The illusion of his skeletal body wavered for the slightest moment to reveal the shape of his human face—but how many faces he had, I shudder to imagine. Charon's eyebrows were high with concern, his eyes watery with unshed tears. He bridged the distance between us and wrapped the arms of death about my body. I breathed out and held still, trapped in his embrace, fearful of what he could do to me. We stood there a long while in silence. I began to question myself. Was he truly my enemy? Or had he been sent to show me a new possibility? My eyes closed. I found purchase with my hands on the slim illusion of his shrouded waist.

His form thickened. The coldness in the air dissipated. Charon's body regained its human form, molding to me as we held each other. "I wish I could love as you can." His damp cheek pressed to mine.

"You *can* love," I said in a whisper. "It's only a matter of trying, of giving in. But you like the control."

"Control is all I have left, little angel."

I hoped to show him he could trust me, and maybe if I let down my guard, he would show me the same offering. I breathed in his scent, an aroma mingled with incense and old leather. For the first time in my life as a vampire, calm edged over my consciousness. Taking a risk, I let down the walls that kept him from my mind, and Charon's thoughts twined with mine. I saw his memories in flashes moving backward, lives he had stolen, women he had controlled, souls he had



ferried to a shining place so bright that I could scarce see its end.

His cheek ran alongside my face while he shared his secrets with me. He kissed my neck with gentle touches. This was not the vampire I had come to face. This was a being far different. His sorrow swirled through me, thick and impenetrable as a moonless night sky is dark. But there were lights in his sadness, hopes, however minimal. At one time, he had dreams, long before he had been chosen for a higher purpose and cast into darkness.

He showed me the life he remembered, a time when he was barely come of age exploring the hills beyond his father's house. There were goats he should have been tending, chores that needed his attention, but he wanted to find a great secret. In the depths of the hills, he uncovered it—a silvery portal—a crack between worlds. Instead of fearing the unknown, he stepped into it and became forever changed.

"You've forgotten who you are."

His lips parted against my skin as if he might bite me, but instead, he said, "Tell me who I am now, little angel. Not who I was. The past cannot repeat itself no matter how much we want it to do so."

I pulled back to stare at his face. Fully human in appearance once more, his thick hair framed his chiseled features. He stared at me with awe and lust. But I had searched his mind. He did not lust after me in the exact way Rory had. He wanted something more, something I wasn't sure I could give, something he had yet to find in another—love. "Only you can truly know who you are."

He nodded, a frown turning down his mouth. I felt his disappointment. This was not the answer he had hoped for.

"You must turn him ... if you love him."

I shook my head. "If I love him and it is his time to die—"

He pressed two fingers over my lips to silence me.

A shadow in the darkness, Marianne slunk toward Tommy, which drew my attention. Her steps came faster until she reached him and dropped down beside him. She snatched up his shoulders and pulled his upper body toward her. In a swift motion, she lowered her face to his neck to swallow what little blood remained in his veins.

I started for him, but even as I did, I heard the beat of his heart cease. Horror enfolded me. "No!"

When I reached her, I tore Marianne away from Tommy's body and shoved her into the bushes where she fell on her back hissing. "No," I said again and collapsed beside him. "I can't live without him. No, no, no."

Soft footsteps crunched behind me. I looked up. Charon stood watching me, his face without expression. Did he feel regret for this moment? Happiness? I could not know. The pain of losing the only man I had ever loved ripped through me. Memories of our first kiss pushed into my thoughts. The feel of his hand in mine, forever lost. My future now would be cold and empty. What comfort could anyone offer me? The light in my life had winked out.

As I wept, Marianne crawled to her master to huddle by his legs, embracing his ankle.

"Turn him. There is still time," Charon said.

"No, he has suffered enough because of me." As much as I wanted him back, I knew it would be wrong to do it, to pull him into the eternal quest for blood, to have him become a hunter of his own race.

Charon shooed Marianne away and knelt beside me. "Turn him." This time, his voice was thick with sadness.

I shook my head in denial, no longer able to speak. What would I do now? What sort of purpose did I have without Tommy in my life? I would become a wraith, a cold, empty shell walking the Earth until eternity came to an end. There was nothing left for me.

Charon's fingers gripped my arm. He pulled Tommy away from my death grip. "Let go, Angela." His voice soothed me somewhat. "You have to let go now."

He meant more than letting go of his body. I knew he wanted me to let go of him and all that I held dear. Maybe Charon wanted me to be like him, empty and unable to love. "I'll never let go of him."

Then I saw a handprint on Charon's cheek, burned into his skin. His aura glowed a bright red tinged with purple. The befuddled emotions of regret and loneliness entered my mind. The emotions were Charon's, not mine. He wanted to give me back what he had taken, something no vampire before him had ever done. He wanted to give me happiness, and I realized then that when he had shared his blood with me so I could walk in the light of day, it had been a kind gesture laced with purpose. Certainly he wanted me for himself, but he didn't want me to be his plaything, his fantasy, although I sensed he had wanted that from me at first.

"Trust me," he said.

I let go at that moment, and raised my palm to place it against the mark. "I did this to you when I first touched you in the park."

"Yes." He pulled Tommy into his lap. "The mark of an angel given as protection. You are that, if not fully. And if you don't make the wrong choices in this half-life we now lead." Flashing his fangs, he offered me a demon's smile before he dragged them across his forearm.

"His soul lingers near you, Angela. He does not want to pass on. Not yet. It is not his time just as it was not your time when you were made, just as it was not Marianne's time."

I shook my head. "Don't do it."

"He doesn't want to cross over. He tells me he wants ... to stay with you." Pressing his broken skin against my lover's lips, he forced the taint of what we are into Tommy's mouth.

Unable to witness the act, I looked away, and cried in heaving sobs. Selfishly, I prayed it would work. Repenting, I prayed it would be too late to change him. If Tommy became like me, everything in our lives would change. He would know all the lies I told him. He would see what madness I had made our life together into.

Marianne began to cry in soft whimpers. When I caught sight of her face, half hidden behind Charon, I realized her eyes had become clear. Charon's hold over her mind no longer kept her memory at bay.

"I did this," she said over and over.

I felt nothing for her even though I knew it truly was not her fault.

I hugged myself and rocked back and forth. The sun broke fully over the tops of the trees to shine down on our macabre scene. Charon slumped and finally fell to one side. His arm left Tommy's mouth. Blood, shiny and wet, covered Tommy's lips and chin. Despite my disgust, I wanted to go to him and kiss it away. My eyes fixated on his chest while I waited to see if he would draw a breath, if his heart might beat again, or if his ice blue eyes would open and recognize me.

"I'm sorry, Angela" Marianne choked out between sobs. Her face was stained with blood red tears. She pushed her fingers into her hair and fisted them, tugging in a mad way. "What am I?" she whispered. "What have I done?" She began to rock as a disturbed person does, as Tommy did when his sadness overwhelmed him. Without hope, completely lost in the realization that she was a creature who preyed on the living, I saw myself in her.

I felt a cold caress graze the back of my hand. It was so faint that it could have been the wind. Then his voice broke through the nightmare. "Angela. What's happened? Where are we?"

Tommy lay on the ground his blue eyes squinting at the sky above. "I had the worst nightmare, not like the others with Gen. Someone tried to kill me." He turned his head to the side and frowned.

I wiped the tears from my cheeks, too late to hide their color. "I'll take care of you. I'll teach you not to kill. I'll never leave you."

He lifted his fingers to touch my face as I leaned over him. "Your shirt." He shook his head, his eyebrows knitting

together with confusion. "My God, am I still dreaming?" His eyes danced from side to side, taking in my haggard appearance and the dark wings at my back. "Am I dead?"

"You died, my love." My confession pained me, but at least I wasn't the one to bring him to the darkness. "You died and Charon brought you back to me. Tell me if you want to die again, and I swear I will let you go. If you can't bear this second life, I'll understand."

Tommy shook his head slowly. "I remember floating above myself and knew I wanted to be here with you."

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## Chapter Sixteen: Together

I lay on my side, wishing for my pain to end, for my loneliness to be cast aside and hoping I had not waited too long to revive Tom's soul and force the change over him. Crickets chirped a haunting melody in the undergrowth nearby. Each intake of breath brought the perfume of the water nearby and made me somehow feel at ease. *How fitting that I should be given this new opportunity near a river. How ironic.*

*I felt trembling fingers trace my arm. Marianne's voice spoke in a low murmur at my ear, asking if I could hear her, if I was all right.*

I reached out with my thoughts to discover if Tom survived or passed on. I cannot explain the warmth that spread through me when my mind touched his. He lived, inasmuch as what we vampires can do so. His mind struggled to understand why, only moments before, his soul floated above his body, and why now he was back inside it and overwhelmed by his heightened senses. In that transitive state, I slipped my hold over him, and made him mine.

Delving into who he was, I was overwhelmed by Tom's loyalty, by the heavy pull of emotion when I saw Angela in his memories. I felt her touch through him when she closed her hand over his. My selfishness had guided me as it had since I became the guardian of souls, as it had since I became a vampire. I wanted what this man had, and I would have it,

one way or another—even if I could not have her wholly to myself.

Weary and drained, I forced my eyes open in time to see Angela and Tommy kiss. His awareness began to strengthen. His mind questioned where they were, what had happened, but before the full memory of Marianne's attack on him at his apartment could come to light, I stole his knowledge of the past, hiding everything he might fear, anything that could jeopardize his love for Angela. I wanted to erase it all, steal it and make it my own. I could have ... but I did not.

He stared at her with curiosity, dumbfounded, when their lips parted. She watched him, hopeful. Tentatively, she wiped my blood from his face. I longed for her touch on my skin like that. I longed to be wanted and cared for, to have a true companion who would not let my mind fall into the boredom I so hated.

I forced my weary body to sit up.

Marianne's mind had slipped from my grip in the moments I struggled for consciousness, but I reached for her soul and took control, once more pushing away her fear, her terror over what she had done. I soothed her with the knowledge that Tom was all right now. He lived. He was one of us. Part of our new family.

My body ached. I thirsted for sustenance, but felt so very tired. I wanted to go home, to return to Greece and my bed in the house I kept. There I could sleep with this new coven to watch over me. Beholden to their master, they would not stray far. I wanted sleep because I was tired, not bored any longer, but exhausted.



I reached for Angela's hand. Her dark fingers linked with my olive-colored ones. Free of her worries, Marianne took up my other hand. The newest of my brood, Tom, clasped Angela's other hand. Together we stood; four vampires capable of walking through the daylight, four souls bound for all eternity by this night, by blood. Death could part them from me, but only that. I didn't want to think of such a future moment when I would outlive my wards and be alone again. Alone sounded painful. Alone sounded hopeless and sad.

"He has forgotten you," I whispered to Angela to explain. "He does not know what has happened before this day, only that you are here with him as I am with you, as Marianne is with me. If you try to leave me, I'll make him remember."

She sighed, facing me. "Thank you for this gift ... Master."

Pain shot through me at the utterance of the word. "No, little angel. Never call me that." I wanted an equal, though I doubted my ways would allow such a sharing. But I would try. I would strive to have what she shared with Tom, even though I had little faith that such a blessing could come to pass. I had wasted away years of time with my selfishness and greed. I had hurt so many, killed even more, and for what? I cannot say I truly regretted all I had done for that would entail a deeper emotion to which I could not let myself succumb to. Suffice to say, I felt remiss in my use of the gift I had been given. Life eternal was not a light gift that He had offered. I should not have taken the blood of the vampire and left His good grace. But I did so as I had done when I entered the Underworld, at the guidance of Fate and my selfish ways.

\* \* \* \*

We returned to the apartments and gathered up trifle belongings to take with us. Dressed in casual clothes, my companions and I started out into the world. This new beginning excited me. Tommy was much removed from reality, a lost schoolboy look in his eyes whenever he stared at Angela, and Marianne, too, bore an expression of disorientation. *Ignorance is bliss*, I reminded myself when we reached the airport. I knew the time would come to let them have back their memories, and I did not look forward to that moment.

Angela, on the other hand, was grimly aware of her predicament. I had given her lover back to her, but in return, she had opened her mind to me. I held her with a loose mental lead, unwilling to push her mind into the darkness as I had done to so many others before her. She sat in the window seat and stared out across the blue sky, her thoughts contemplative, her hand in Tom's as always.

When the airplane hit a bout of bad turbulence, she turned to me and said, "I had forgotten how beautiful the sky could be." She didn't smile or say anything else, but held my gaze for a long while. Tom had fallen asleep with his cheek on her shoulder.

"I have forgotten it, too, Angela. I have forgotten so many things. I want you to make me remember." I wasn't sure how soon I could come to grips with what I had told her. I wanted more than emotions. I wanted her love, and with Tom holding her to me, I doubted I could have it.

She blinked back tears. "Your control over me only proves you can't give in and become what it is you claim you want to be. Love does not bind someone against their will." She looked back out the window, her profile serious and set.

"I want my freedom back." I faced the seat ahead of me. "I want my life back. I think you and I are more similar than you realize. I want a thousand yesterdays to do over. I want my father and my mother and the time I lost with them. I want to take back the dark days of escorting souls to the next plane. I want what I've given you and Tom ... a second chance."

She smiled but didn't respond, too lost in the perfection of the blue sky.

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## **Chapter Seventeen: Ennui**

Shadows drifted across the ceiling. I lay awake in the soft comfort of cotton sheets and a hand-sewn quilt, with pleasant aches in my body from making love to Tommy earlier. The room smelled of the lemon incense that burned by the open window. A high shelf showed off Charon's excessive display of pottery, urns, and flasks. Some looked antique, others as if he'd found them in a bargain store. The majority were shaped in the traditional Greek style, curvy with two handles near the lip. Why he had so many, I couldn't understand.

Movement drew my eyes to the doorway. Charon stood there, watching me. "Can't sleep?"

"Not really."

He crossed the Persian rug barefoot, wearing only baggy, drawstring pants. Moonlight caught on his shape, highlighted his muscular frame, and gave me glimpses of the tattoos across his skin. At the bedside, he paused to draw back my covers.

"Do you want to hunt with me?"

The sky framed by the window bled only the slightest hint of pink. Although the idea appealed to me, I knew I shouldn't. "No."

He sat beside me. Tracing my arm with two fingers, he stopped when his touch reached my waist where Tommy's hands were linked about me. My lover was snoring, oblivious to this nightly visit as he was oblivious to so many things now.

Charon lay down and scooted in against me. Tommy was curled at my backside. Facing me, Charon stared into my eyes and stroked my hair. The connection we all shared with him was tremulous, held together by his will and his drive not to be alone, but I knew his hold did not tighten on me with good reason. He saw more in me than the others. He ran his thumb across my lips. I sighed and frowned. He wanted stolen kisses, shared moments of passion, and understanding. Gifts I would not give him. I knew he needed such things because I felt his desperation whenever we ended up alone together. At those times, he would pull me against him and hold me.

"Where is Marianne?" I asked.

"She's asleep in my chamber."

"Please go."

"No." He shook his head ever so slightly. "I need to stay here for a little while more before I go back to the river."

"The river?" I didn't understand. We had been in Greece for two weeks now, and there was no river near the estate, just a small stream and the village beyond.

"I have to go into the darkness again, Angela. I have to guide Karada's soul to the other side."

"Will you come back?" The thought of him leaving filled me with dread, as much as it shouldn't have. Guilt raged inside me. I should be happy he was going, hopeful he would never come back. Then, Tommy and I could be alone, but if that came to pass, the rush of memories would return to my lover. What if he didn't want me then?

"I have nowhere else to go, little angel." His brow crinkled as he contemplated his words. "Nowhere to go, nothing else to do but start over, here, where it all began for me." He moved his face closer to mine. The tips of our noses touched. His fingers curled at the back of my head. "Tell me what you desire. Share your wishes with me, and I will grant them. Be my purpose."

I closed my eyes and tried to relax. He was too close. With Tommy beside me, this moment felt incredibly wrong in as much as it felt incredibly right. Power emanated from Charon, a sizzle of magic and mystery that made my skin prickle with goose bumps. His breath tickled my lips, slow and steady. He spoke against my mouth, his voice low. "Tell me, Angela."

Before that moment, I thought I wanted my freedom. The other side of me wanted him to take control, to dominate my will, to use me up. With a master, there was no need to worry, no room for despair because he would handle all matters of importance. I could give in to him, let him have my mind and body to do with as he pleased.

His soft lips dragged across mine. My breathing hitched. His mouth ran along my cheek to my forehead. "Tell me, Angela, because when we stop wanting, when we stop craving, we go mad with the boredom of life. I don't want that for you." He kissed my forehead, breathed in the scent of my hair, and then ever so slowly, his mouth returned to hover over mine, tempting me to taste him.

"What do you want from this life?" he pressed.

I couldn't open my eyes, couldn't look into his. He knew me, what I was, and what turned in my mind. He knew me

better than Tommy did. My lips parted. I leaned forward to meet his kiss.

*"I need you," I thought. "God forgive me, but I do need you."*

*The tether on my mind slipped free and vanished. With his hold gone, a rush of panic overtook me. The master did not want to control me. Charon pulled back. "Say it. I want to hear it from your lips. I need to hear the words."*

I swallowed and forced them out. "I need you."

He sucked in a long breath. His eyes slipped shut and the most wondrous smile appeared on his face, fangs giving his grin a sinister look in its happiness.

"When will you leave?"

"Mmm." He backed away, rolling off the bed to stand.

"Tonight." He stretched his arms high. "She will continue to harass me if I don't end this."

I pulled out of my lover's arms and got up to follow.

"Now?"

Charon nodded. He held his hand out to me. "Would you like to come with me?"

Cold swept over my skin. Did I want to see that other side of life? Did I want to follow this vampire into the darkness that had stolen his humanity and made him into what he was? I reached, fingers splayed, mind curious, body willing to follow him anywhere at that moment and all without his mental hold over me—a hold I craved.

"You want me to go with you?"

He nodded. "I will protect you there. No one can hurt you. They're all dead."

Our fingers met and knotted together. Dressed only in a white nightgown, I left the room with him. Our bodies moved in time. I glanced over my shoulder at the bed and the lover I was leaving behind.

"Mahsa will look after Tom and Marianne."

The young gypsy girl he spoke of visited us often, bringing flowers and strange offerings of sweets from the village. She had Charon's eyes. "Is she your daughter?"

"Yes." He smiled as we passed through the hall.

At the alcove beside his bedchamber, he tugged me behind a column. There, shrouded in the dim light away from our companions, Charon placed his arms around my waist. We stared at each other in tense silence. I pushed my hands around him and laid my head on his chest. His heart beat in a tedious rhythm. He rested his chin atop my head. "What is this I feel for you?"

"I don't know." He hissed. "You're asking the wrong soul. Feelings evade me."

Time fled. We clung to each other and the warmth of our bodies' closeness made me believe this moment was meant to be. Maybe Charon was right all along that Fate wanted me to play this part. Could it be that I was exactly who and what I was supposed to be?

We stepped away from each other, our hands meeting and clasping in a now familiar hold. "I trust you now."

He nodded. "Trust is a start to many paths." His thumb drew small circles on the side of my hand. "I trust you, Angela."



We left the alcove for the bedchamber. Marianne slept sprawled across his bed, her blonde hair spread around her face. Bypassing her, Charon took me to a side room lined with bookshelves and a single door. He let go of my hand and turned the handle.

Silver light painted the room, draining all color from the books. "This is the gateway," he explained. "The one you saw in my memories that I found as a youth." Hand in hand, we walked through. The cold was exquisite, the ethereal rush of motion and change crackling in electric pulses across my skin. Voices told me secrets. Souls touched me in icy brushings over my exposed skin.

We emerged on the other side of the portal to a dark expanse of stones and water. Dripping, rushing, splashing water. My shoulders felt heavy because somehow in that passage, my wings had appeared. Beside me, Charon had become the skeleton again, a black robe billowing about his fleshless shape. But beneath his façade, I felt the true shape of his fingers against mine.

In time, we walked to the water's edge. A boat appeared from the very air, another illusion. To the right, I saw another boat with another boatman. Mist followed him on his journey. "Those are souls."

"Yes," Charon answered. "As you can see, there are others who lead them across, many others."

We stepped into the ferry. Across the water it floated toward a shimmering light in the distance. I had seen this part in our shared visions, the impossible silver light. I peered over the side of the boat to see reflections across the surface.

Each slice of mist that drifted in the air above us was an echo of the human it had been in life. Nude, they glided, arms outstretched, faces serene, eyes fixed on the light. More and more gathered above Charon's ferry until the air was thick with them, and each intake of breath I drew gave me a taste of the spirits surrounding us. Some swirled about me. Others passed through my body offering cold sharings of their past.

We reached the water's edge where the light met the river and spanned as high as I could see. Souls that had followed us dove into the vibrant beacon, becoming a part of its brilliance. I, too, felt the pull to enter the light. Here, I had come to the end of all the things, and to the beginning. Energy permeated the air. I wanted to understand this light. I needed to touch it. I reached out.

His fingers closed over my hand and stopped me. "Stay here," Charon said. His wings appeared, bony and skinless frames of what they were in the flesh. Curving horns grew from his temples. He let go of me to unfasten his robe, which fell at his feet.

Within the ribcage of his chest, Karada's soul circled frantically.

"She doesn't want to pass on," he said. "So I must carry her through."

He leaped off the boat into the light.

Rainbow colors swallowed up his shape and sucked him into the brilliance. I squinted, trying to witness what happened next. A scream pierced the in-between place. My connection to Charon allowed me to experience the pain he suffered. But the scream was not his. It was feminine, and

the familiar tone resonated in my memory. Karada, shrieking her fury for all to hear, had gone through the light to the other side.

I sank to my knees to reach for Charon's robe. Bringing it to my face, I wondered if I was now trapped in this place alone. The fabric smelled like him, like leather and incense and the alluring musk of his manly scent. I breathed in his memory. I breathed out my fear.

The boat drifted back the way it had come. It hurt to look into the light, but I tried to see him beyond its veil. "Charon?"

Water sloshed at the boat's sides and drew me farther away. Souls skittered in curious arcs around me before flitting off to find another ferry. The boat skidded onto the bank. I climbed out, holding Charon's clothing against my chest in fisted hands. The way back was clear, the portal we had passed through glimmering not far from where I was.

I sat down on the moist sand to wait, unable to go back without him.

"He will return." It was Marianne's voice behind me. She settled in at my side with a look of expectancy. "He told me about the other side. It's not what everyone thinks. Not a Heaven and Hell. Even this place, it's not what I imagined, not the Purgatory of Catholicism I was raised to believe in."

She edged closer to me until our shoulders touched. "I'm sorry for what I did to Tom."

I turned from the light to see her face. Drawn with sadness, she waited for me to forgive her.

"It wasn't your fault." She didn't look like her sister at all. Marianne was rounder with fair features, not the dark haired

beauty Genevieve had been. The paleness of her skin only added to the vampiric allure.

"What's going to happen to us, Angela?"

"I don't know. I've never known." If he didn't come back I supposed we could all return to the states as much as I was growing to like the wilds of Greece. Secluded in his home by fences and the ancient folklore and fears in the village, we were sweetly closed off from civilization.

The light pulsed. We both turned to watch Charon emerge. Hideous, he flew through the gathering of souls, a demon incarnate with blue-black skin stretched taught over his lanky frame. Olive green wings flapped to hold him above the water's surface. He circled the river, his tail thrashing, his horns glistening, and then he caught sight of us on the shore and changed his course.

"I am like him now," Marianne whispered. "But you're not. You and Tom are different than us. It's why Charon favors you over me." The misery in her voice saddened me.

"Do you care for him?"

She hissed out a drawn breath. "I don't know him. Not really. I'm not sure anyone can. At times, I think he doesn't even know himself." Marianne stood up and held out her arms to receive him when he landed on the bank. Charon approached, his grotesque shape shifting into the handsome body he favored. He clutched Marianne against him in an embrace unlike the ones we shared.

I wondered how long it would take for him to recognize that the love he so needed waited in his arms to be known.

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## **About the Author**

Anastasia Rabiya writes erotic romance, paranormal erotic romance, and fantasy. She often crosses genres in order to follow her muses into the darkness where they seek out destiny in all its forms. She believes in fairies, demons, angels, magic, passion, chocolate, supportive friends, e-books, and writing critique groups. Her deepest desire is to pursue her creative dreams and realize them. Every spare moment she devotes to writing for her haunting muses.

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