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THE EMBRACE OF
Life AND **Death**

A DARK KISS TALE

LIZ STRANGE

The Embrace of Life and Death
by Liz Strange

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Kieran is a hundred-and-twenty-year-old immortal, originally hailing from the harsh, famine-stricken life of 1880s Ireland. He has surpassed death and thrived, gaining wealth, power and knowledge. Azrael is the angel of death, but his mission is far from ominous. He is the protector of the grief-stricken, and the champion of lost souls. The two are polar opposites in mission and nature, yet are inexplicably drawn to one another.

The Supreme One sees all, and when he discovers the truth about the relationship he is enraged. Their commitment to be together must be stronger than his determination to keep them apart.

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Author's Note

The characters used in this novel were first introduced in my paranormal romance series, *The Dark Kiss Trilogy*, though it was always my intention for this to be a stand-alone novel.

This is Kieran's story.

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Chapter One

I'd been aware of my surveillance for about a month before finally coming face-to-face with my shadowy voyeur. The first hints had been nothing more than a fleeting tingle, a whisper of awareness of another supernatural being in the near vicinity to where I hunted. The presence was foreign to me, not a human being, but not vampire either. It was a warm energy, yet subtle, only noticeable because of my keen senses. This was a unique experience for me—something I'd never tasted before.

Yet I did not fear it, nor worry when in proximity, for whomever or whatever it was, they never intruded upon my unseemly activities or nocturnal ramblings. Distance was kept, and judgment not passed, at least not to me directly. If I were forced to make an assumption about its intention, I'd have to say my watcher was simply curious. As the nights passed I came to expect their presence, and even began to take a strange comfort from its silent observation. It became a gentle reminder that I was not alone in my supernatural existence, that there were wonders even I had not yet been made privy to.

At last the time arrived for my *shadow* to make itself known. That night, my heightened sensibilities immediately picked up on the difference in their presence. Where their touch had previously been a hazy breath of warmth, now heat and urgency existed, a phenomenon demanding my undivided attention. I peered into the darkness, over the shoulder of my

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victim as I fed, and for the first time I could discern an actual form. It stood not ten feet from me, a dark mass only a few shades lighter than the night itself. The specific features could not be identified, but the height and breadth of the form spoke to something large and masculine.

The blood from my female victim became sluggish, then stopped altogether. It'd been her misfortune to fall for my boyish good looks in a bar not three blocks away, and it had taken but a small touch of my supernatural influence to convince her to leave with me, alone. Persuading my victims to come with me willingly had become easier with each year of my undead existence, to the point I barely gave the occurrence a passing thought.

I let her body fall to the ground, and waited. Warm tendrils of energy probed my mind, spreading a flush through my body and making the stolen blood sing. For the first time in more than a hundred years I tasted a pure stream of life, bold and sweet. A teasing, spidery tingle started in my gut, spiralling its way out the tips of my fingers and toes. My body felt nimble and rubbery. The air grew heavy with an odd, but not unpleasant scent, accentuated with bright snaps of anticipation, like dancing fireflies.

"Kieran," a rumbling baritone called out. The voice commanded my attention, the urgency it imparted squeezing along my body like groping hands. The breath accompanying the words came as a humid gust of wind, closing the space between us, then encircling me, exploring me with its otherworldly influence. I'd never experienced anything like it; the intensity of the moment stunned me into silence.

"I have been watching you for some time now, Kieran," the same voice said. "And I am most intrigued and puzzled by what I have witnessed."

I trembled in response to the strange stimuli, becoming so rattled I had to call on my inner resolve, developed over the years of my sinister existence. Pulling my wits together, I took a deliberate pause before speaking so as not to seem rattled.

"You have me at the disadvantage, I must confess. Though I have been aware of your surveillance, I do not have a name to address you in return."

The shadowy figure advanced, instilling a sense of dread foreign to creatures such as I. "You may call me Azrael."

The name gave me a prickly tug of familiarity, though in the moment I couldn't identify the context or significance. I concentrated on the figure emerging from the camouflage of darkness, explicitly aware of how the face that appeared made my bowels hot and loose. The creature before me exuded gritty, masculine power, striding towards me on limbs like solid, muscled tree trunks. The circumference of one leg easily surpassed the size of an average man's waist, and a sprinkling of fine dark hair could be seen covering the limbs left bare by the short, tunic-like garment he wore. A set of massive, dove grey wings lay flat against his back from shoulder to knee.

A wave of energy, like fire, burst forth from him, licking along my skin and pulling a soft moan from my lips. Tiny pinpricks of heat and ice danced a strange tango up my arms to the base of my neck. As I strained my eyes, I could just

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make out a misty cyclone of power swirling around us, drawing in closer as Azrael closed the distance between us. When he was within arm's reach I could see a fine sheen of perspiration covering his ruddy skin, and I longed to run my tongue along the salty fluid. The heavy scent, I now realized, belonged to him, and the nearer he drew to me the more intense and alluring it became.

He stopped just short of being able to touch me. The eyes that fixed on me had appeared black at first glance, but as Azrael drew nearer I realized they were blue, not dark. I'd always been partial to blue eyes on either sex, influenced by memories of my human family and also the one who'd given me the Dark Kiss. All had been blue-eyed, but the eyes that stared at me now were not a shade I had seen before. They were a deep indigo, reminding me of the colour of the frigid, winter sea, the water of my boyhood land. Flecks of gold danced in the blueness, shining in the soft moonlight. The effect captured me.

My mind continued to roll along nonsensical trails of thought as the creature stood close, continuing his blatant appraisal. I let my eyes trace the lines of his face, down from his eyes to the straight, patrician nose, back to the strong cheekbones, full lips and square jaw line. A mop of dark, shaggy curls framed his face. One wayward strand dangled into his eyes, and I experienced the most maddening urge to brush it aside. I felt my hand lifting from my side, and with a flush of embarrassment I dropped it again. *What was wrong with me?*

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"Azrael," I repeated. My voice sounded laboured and distant.

"Do you know who I am?" he asked, the sound quivering along my exposed skin.

I did my best to hold my reaction in check, but each word brought with it a tactile sensation that proved difficult to ignore. "Should I?"

He did not respond, and I couldn't ascertain whether he was simply surprised by my ignorance, or annoyed. Then he closed that final distance between us, wrapping a heavy arm about my shoulder and drawing me close to his warm, firm body. His touch was a lightning strike, leaving me weak in the knees. He prevented my trembling form from slipping to the ground by tightening his grip, a beautiful, alluring suffocation against a granite-like chest. Whether he meant to or not, the history of his long existence was transferred through his touch into me as a series of violent, twisted images. The path he showed me highlighted the never-ending battle between light and dark, and the part he'd played to minions of both sides.

"I am the Angel of Death," he whispered against my ear. His breath was fire, heavier than the air still humid from the earlier rain. I found his touch both pleasurable and draining, his words startled me with their fierceness.

My face now pressed to his chest as I responded. "What do you want with me?"

He walked some distance away from the dead girl at our feet, leading me by the hand before lowering us to the ground. For the first time I noticed the complete silence of the

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world around us, as though time had literally stood still. The air had taken on the texture of molasses, and had I needed it to survive, I would have choked on its density. Azrael's heart thrummed in his chest, steady and strong, a sound not to be found in my own immortal body.

"I need to understand why you are this way," he answered, and the words made no sense to my racing brain.

"This way?"

He adjusted his hold on me, now cradling me in his powerful arms, and looking down onto my upturned face. A warm finger moved along the side of my face, and for one brief moment I thought he smiled. It seemed strange that I did not struggle, but I felt no need to.

"We have been watching vampires for a very long time. For some reason, I find you different from the others of your kind." His voice shook the boundaries of a reality only the two of us existed in. "Though I have tasted your dark desires, witnessed your transgressions, I still wish to know you."

"I don't understand."

"Nor do I Kieran, for I have never experienced a feeling like this before. I am greatly troubled, and must think before I act further."

Then the face came close to mine, pressing down until our lips met. His mouth was warm silk, and his kiss firm. He stayed against my lips for a long time. A light sprinkle of stubble rubbed against my cheek, startling me out of my reverie. My brain cleared enough to realize what was taking place. I had been returning the kiss with passion, despite the

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absurdity of the situation and the obvious dominance the creature had over me.

A throbbing, pulsing energy enveloped us, and a deafening, otherworldly wail broke the silence. The arms holding my body withdrew and I crumpled to the damp ground. Curling into a ball, I waited for the painful sound to end and reality to return.

When my eyes could focus again, I found that Azrael had disappeared. I was alone, with cooling tears on my cheeks, and his kiss still warm on my lips.

* * * *

The encounter was still bright in my mind many days later, worming its way into every thought and action to come after its conclusion. The strange being's words whispered at my ear, his warmth lingered on my skin. Though I desperately tried to make sense of his intentions, each idea I brought forth simply came with a whole new series of unanswerable questions. For the many months spent in Australia, I had been satisfied to do nothing but simply exist, and feed. I didn't want to be bogged down by complications, and any actions that required too much forethought. Now, even that had become moot.

Daniel, my housemate and newly minted best friend, picked up on the change right away. When I returned home that night after the confusing encounter, I walked past him as though he didn't exist, heading to my silent room to collapse onto the familiar comfort of my bed. At that moment I wanted nothing more than to bury my head in the proverbial sand.

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Daniel let my actions pass without comment or question; he had never been one to intrude. Better than most, he understood the need to work through one's issues privately. My friend had many skeletons rattling about in his own closet.

One particular evening, after a rushed and not-entirely satisfying feeding, we decided to head to a local pub for some pool and people-watching. Or eavesdropping might be the more accurate description. Most immortals possessed some level of psychic awareness, allowing us to peruse human thoughts and emotion. Not all could do it, and few could do it without some limitation, though I have known some who seemed to be able to know everything that passed through a specific human mind. I had more ability than Daniel, whether from personal predisposition or the extra decades of existence I had on him, I couldn't say with any certainty. What Daniel lacked in telepathic abilities, he more than made up for with an empathic absorption of human emotion and a keen eye for reading body language.

As we sat, blending in with the crowd milling about us and waiting for a table to become free, Daniel finally inquired about my recent attitude.

"Is everything alright Kieran? You've been very...quiet lately." He chose his words with care, taking a non-confrontational stance, as was his habit.

"Yes, fine. Just thinking about things, the past. You know how it is." I swirled the contents of the glass of wine before me, hoping to impart that there was nothing to worry about, even though I wasn't too sure that was the truth.

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Daniel continued. "Is this about Peru? Are you still mourning Donovan?"

His words surprised me, as those events had been far from my thoughts in recent days. The name of my dear friend Donovan, brutally murdered by the vicious Mistress Harshika, brought about a memory so vibrant I shuddered. Once again I felt the shower of blood and gore, the remains of my closest companion on my skin, the taste of grief burning on my tongue.

It had not been too far in the past when Daniel and I, along with the immortal race as a whole, had met in a secluded and forgotten settlement deep in the heart of the Peruvian jungle. We had been summoned before Harshika, the first of our kind, ordered to submit to her complete dominance over our existence, or die. The depraved circumstances of her own change had left her heartless and arrogant, unable to understand the idea of friendship, let alone a complicated emotion like love. She was so certain of her power she never gave a thought to the tables being turned on her. She would never have guessed that her downfall would come at the behest of her long-standing and most loyal servant, Achyut.

Donovan, who for the previous year had been my travelling companion, fell a casualty to that regrettable episode of our past. Another friend, a human, also became one of Harshika's victims, having had the Dark Kiss forced upon her to save her from certain death. We vampires had all been deeply affected by those terrible events. Yet in an odd way it had brought many of our kind closer, building

friendship and alliances where previously there had only been suspicion and animosity. My friendship with Daniel was a case-in-point.

"Donovan will always be missed. He was a true brother to me." I meant the words I spoke, though we had spent little more than a year together, much less time than I had passed with other immortals, even humans.

"I know that I can't take his place, but I hope our friendship has brought you some happiness." Daniel smiled.

"Of course. You are very dear to me Daniel. I hope we continue this way for many years to come. I enjoy living with you, we hunt well together."

"Good," he answered, leaning back in his chair. He let his gaze wander over the pub's interior, filled with a predominantly twenty-something crowd.

I followed suit. Bringing the wine to my lips, I allowed myself the smallest taste. With the flavour still on my tongue, I felt the tension I had been carrying since my encounter with Azrael begin to drain. I watched the crowd as Daniel and I sat in a comfortable silence, greedily drinking in the rush of emotions about me. Sex, or the possibility of sex, was foremost in the collective minds of the patrons there that night.

Sometimes Daniel's control over that part of him he wished not to acknowledge, the part that in his human life had liked to force and humiliate others sexually, simmered near the surface in such settings. He always kept his demon in check, stealing only blood when he came across someone who struck his fancy. Sex came from him exuding a

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supernatural *persuasion* over his victims, and even then only on rare occasions. If only every night could pass so easily, with thoughts of sex and blood my only concern.

Then Azrael took centre stage in my thoughts again. Little did I know then what his appearance in my life would mean for the future.

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Chapter Two

The next evening I awoke from an intense dream about my encounter with Azrael, one that lingered long after the effects should have dimmed. Lips so full and warm made a teasing replay, pulling at ancient fears and letting loose a strange longing from deep within my being. Every shadow mocked me, hinting at the possibility of his appearance, yet never delivering on what had passed from concern into the realm of hope.

In my dream, I had been walking a long stretch of road, an eerie compilation of many places I had actually been, and destinations that existed only in my subconscious musings. For some unknown reason I was dressed in the fashion of my human days, the long-sleeved shirt unbuttoned and flapping in the soft breeze. The trees lining the path I walked were bare, hinting at the approach of the winter season. The naked limbs quivered, singing a strange staccato as they struck against one another.

Suddenly, Azrael was there. He stood several feet from me, the moon's silvery light a personal halo about his massive form. I stopped, terrified and stunned by the carnal beauty his appearance offered. Without seeming to move we were then standing together, the warmth of his flesh so close it shimmied up my body, a greedy teasing. The moonlight caught his eye, the deep blue made so vibrant every muscle tensed in response. A sound that I did not hear caught his

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attention, and he peered over his shoulder. When his gaze returned, worry had captured his features.

"This cannot be," he said. The deep vibrations of his voice flowed into me, awakening a longing I did not understand. And couldn't control.

"What cannot be?" I asked, clearly missing something that he was trying to communicate to me. There was no answer.

A cloud of throbbing, churning light appeared, pushing aside the darkness that hid our clandestine meeting. The air about me became heavy, filled with a chaotic, unidentifiable sound. As it closed in on us, trapping us in a spotlight that neither of us wished to occupy, Azrael's worry turned to fear. The mass swallowed him, taking him away as though it had ripped my heart from my chest, leaving me alone in the empty night.

"Kieran!" I heard him call, but I was alone. With a start I erupted from my slumber. The experience left me confused, but certain that the dream heralded important events to come.

When several weeks passed after this unsettling dream without even a hint of his presence, I began to wonder if that single encounter would be the only one between us. His conflict seemed to indicate otherwise, but who was I to guess what a being so far removed from my own supernatural existence may or may not do? Still, I searched each night, leaving my psychic shield wide open, so to be alerted to his company at the earliest opportunity. At best I discovered many sordid and often criminal secrets from the humans around me. Secrets that my predatory nature would make

profitable use from. My supernatural stalker did not come to me again.

With no other choice open to me I returned to my usual nocturnal habits. I soon pushed aside the hope for another meeting, and in time the memory slipped to the wayside. I concentrated on the things within my control; my life in Australia, my financial ventures, and my procurement of blood. Ever faithful, Daniel carried on with this existence as well. Though it was never my intention to dominate the relationship, he had taken on the subservient role with ease, as though meant to follow in my footsteps. It was an arrangement that suited both of us, and did not demand anything of which we were not able or willing to give. When I wanted his attention he was there, and when I didn't, he went about his own business.

One particular evening found me in the company of a pretty young woman I'd encountered at a local nightclub. She'd been out for a night of fun with a group of ladies from the real estate office where she worked, never imagining what a twisted plan Fate had for her. I was alone, looking for exactly the type of situation that presented itself.

Wonderful hunting grounds those types of establishments tended to be for creatures like myself. People had lowered inhibitions from alcohol consumption, and as such were more open to encounters with strangers. Sabrina had a lovely petite frame, and bright blue eyes in a heart-shaped face. An immediate attraction to her seized me.

I approached her group, singling her out after about thirty minutes of superficial, flirtatious conversation with the chorus

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of women. Several drinks made her bold enough to suggest we take a walk, an occurrence that had happened to me so many times before I didn't know if I could recall all the names of the previous parties, even under threat of destruction. This was my bread and butter, an act perfected over many years and countless blood-drained bodies.

Bidding goodbye to the girlfriends she'd come with, I played the role of a normal hot-blooded young man, but felt my sinister anticipation growing. Her blood called to me, begging me to taste its sweetness. The natural scent her body produced was gentle and light under her perfume, and I felt sure her blood would follow suit. I licked my lips as I followed her outside, fangs pressing against the inside of my upper lip.

We wandered to the beach, which we found deserted. Gentle waves lapped at the shores, urging me to have my way with her. After a few minutes of requisite verbal foreplay we lowered ourselves onto the damp sand, and with a gentle touch of my hand I swept aside the long strands of hair from her swan-like neck. Her eyes were bright with eagerness, her nerves giving the experience an extra jolt of exhilaration. Several times it had passed through her mind that she did not do things like this—pick up strange men from bars. I had to bite my tongue to keep from chuckling; this was the most inopportune time to participate in such behaviours. My eyes picked out the vein with ease, throbbing in tempo with her racing heart. The sight of it filled me with dark and malicious glee.

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My mouth brushed the skin of her throat, so soft and supple. I licked along the engorged vein, eliciting a shiver of excitement from her. I took a perverse pleasure from the fact she remained oblivious to my true nature. She relaxed even more, pulling me down with her to the damp sand, until her small body lay underneath mine. Her hand slipped under my shirt, and finding the skin so cool and firm she gave a small gasp. The vampire physique is always a thing of beauty, as though in death the best of your human attributes transform to perfection.

My fangs sank into the flesh, bringing hot, gorgeous blood to the surface. I sucked at the flow with greedy, selfish need, indifferent to her reactive struggles and protests. Her pain and fear inebriated me. A soft cloud of bloodlust settled on my brain.

A large, solid object collided with me, seeming to have appeared out of thin air. There had been no sound, no blip on my psychic radar. I was ripped from my feeding and knocked several hundred yards down the deserted beach. The suddenness and power of the attack shocked me. That I'd heard and felt nothing threatening in the environment about me was terrifying, as I'd long since passed the stage where my feedings consumed me, blocking out all other stimuli. I could admit to some complacency, but total abandon to thoughts of my safety was not my style. I struggled to sit up after the blow, disoriented and, quite frankly, furious.

A blur of shadow raced along the beach towards me. Jumping to my feet, I braced myself for another physical altercation, but the movement suddenly stopped. A full

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minute of tense silence passed. The shadow then started to solidify, taking on an obvious human form until finally a familiar figure emerged. I should have guessed.

The indigo eyes regarded me with a mixture of anger and frustration. Hands easily twice the size of an ordinary man's balled up into fists at his sides. Scorching air filled the space between us, assaulting me like an electric shock. I held my ground, but not without difficulty. In truth I would have loved nothing more than to run off into the night, screaming like a child.

"You were going to kill that girl," Azrael said. His voice rumbled, shaking the night about me. My stomach clenched in response.

Weakness ate at me, a direct result of his much more powerful influence. I tried to sound firm. "Yes."

"Why would you do this?" he asked, misery staining his words.

"I'm a vampire. It's in my nature to kill."

"But you don't have to kill. Not to survive. You can take the blood you need, and leave your victim with their life intact."

"Yes," I agreed. "But I enjoy taking lives." Easiness and agreeability had always been my way, both as human and vampire, but I could not deny the darker side of my nature.

With a sharp tug at my arm he moved us closer to the still form of the girl lying on the cold sand. I could clearly see, as no doubt Azrael could, that the girl lived. Her chest rose and fell with shallow, shaky breaths, and her heartbeat assured me she had not been lost. Azrael relaxed his clenched fists,

and in a startling movement grabbed me about the face. The night itself seemed to let go of a tightly held breath, easing the strange pressure against my body.

"This is why your kind needs to be kept in check," he said, bitterness giving his words a hard edge. "If you would just keep to feeding on the sick and depraved, instead of the innocent. Why do you confuse me so?"

He forced me to look up at him. Much as before, his complexion appeared flushed, but this time the exquisite masculine features were tightened by anguish. Conflicting emotions churned through me, so severe that at first I did not realize they were not entirely my own. Azrael bathed me with his inner conflict. The rage and indecision my existence invoked in him came to me like a burst of the arid Santa Anna winds.

"I don't understand Azrael. What are you asking of me?" I truly did not understand the intention of his words, nor the reason for his obvious confliction.

He seemed to suddenly realize that his hand lay along my cold cheek, and he withdrew it. The same hand brushed along his lips before he spoke. "I cannot ask of you what I wish. This is wrong."

"Wrong?" As much as his words were pained, they also held an odd tenderness.

"Why do I not stay away?" he cried.

I was about to answer when it struck me that the question had not been asked to me, but of himself. My resolve softened. With hesitation I reached out my hand.

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Raising his face to the sky, the angel let out a wail of pain and anguish. I could not imagine a sound such as that had ever been heard on the earth before, and it terrified me. A chorus of dogs began barking and howling in the distance, in reverence to the unnatural sound that touched their sensitive ears.

Azrael dropped to his knees, his massive form shaking. I crawled over to him, my brain still ringing from the impact of his cry, and placed my arms about his body as best I could. From his appearance alone I knew he was much larger than the average man, but when in such close contact the width of his torso astonished me. In reaction to my touch he sagged against me, and the unrestrained weight almost toppled me. I struggled to hold us both in place, which Azrael seemed to take notice of, shifting until he sat on the damp sand. Strong hands pulled me to him, and we rocked together in the darkness and silence for a very long time. When a warm liquid touched my face I realized he was crying.

Then with a warm kiss to my cheek, he disappeared in a whirl of salty wind and dancing shadows.

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Chapter Three

I kept the bizarre encounters to myself for several weeks, unsure how to feel or even proceed. I simply rejoined Daniel at the home we'd been sharing in the outskirts of Sydney, and in doing so realized I took his loyalty and attachment to me for granted, and made a silent promise to be more appreciative. True friends, especially ones that shared the same undead existence as I, were few and far between.

In his human life Daniel had been a sexual sadist, preying on the weak and defenceless. Those repulsive actions were what brought him to the attention of his would-be maker, Johanne. She'd caught Daniel in the act of assaulting his young cousin, and for her own cruel amusement had given them both the Dark Kiss. Forever they'd been trapped in the form and age of their respective roles; perpetrator and victim. Daniel had spent the years following as his cousin's companion and protector, and had lived as clean a life as any vampire could. He took blood by force, but nothing more. Clellia had left him recently, having found a partner with whom she could share all aspects of her life amidst the turbulent experiences in Peru, an act that had unburdened and saddened him. We'd both had to move on from our losses, sometimes by leaning on each other, sometimes by turning our attention elsewhere.

One pleasant distraction had come in the form of two female vampires, Lucy and Sandra, who had appeared to us one evening, a few months after we'd come to live in

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Australia. They'd stayed on for several weeks, living as our makeshift partners, sharing beds and blood, but it wasn't a situation meant to last. No feelings of love had risen between the parties, lust perhaps and friendship definitely, but nothing profound enough to keep us tied with any permanence. The time with them simply passed with satisfying ease, then Daniel and I had found ourselves alone once again. In truth this had become my habit since leaving my mortal life, I wandered from people as much as places, never having found "the one." It didn't bother me really, I was never wanting for entertainment or sex, and being on the move made it easier to escape detection. When I needed company I found it, sometimes for long stretches of time, and when solace beckoned I simply slipped away.

These meandering thoughts brought me back to the strange moment when Azrael had kissed me. As the memory filled my mind, the sensation of his warmth teased my own cold flesh. I brought a hand to my cheek, as though experiencing the roughness of his face against mine. I drowned in the remembered colour of his eyes and his musky scent. Lust stirred boldly, proclaiming an interest I had never known to exist before. Pushing the feelings aside proved difficult, but I forced my mind back to the present.

Daniel had proven an amiable enough housemate. He possessed a quiet, unassuming demeanour, and he'd most certainly won my respect with his actions in Peru. A sordid past had brought him to his current state, making it a pleasure to now call him my friend. We were similar in our understated ways, and easy-going personalities. Neither of us

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possessed the cruel indifference of the elder vampires, and both of us enjoyed the company of other immortals and select humans. I'd never thought of myself as monstrous, though recalling Azrael's words on the beach, I realized a truth long ignored. My dark nature had become so ingrained as to be taken for granted.

Daniel came to me then, almost a month after my latest run-in with Azrael, as I sat reading on the patio. We'd not talked about my anxious moods since the night in the bar, and I could tell by the way he held his eyes downcast that he had something serious on his mind. He took a seat next to me, at the table in the backyard of our home, and I waited for him to speak. I couldn't remember a more sombre or tense moment between us, a feeling I did not wish to experience again.

"I know that something's been bothering you," he began in his gentle, non-confrontational way. "Despite your brush off the last time I asked you, I can tell that something's going on. I've let it go by for several weeks now, but I wanted to make sure that the problem wasn't anything I have done." Over the last couple of months his native Australian accent, which had been so subtle as to not be noticed, had picked up. It gave his words a pleasing twang.

"It has nothing to do with you, Daniel," I assured the younger vampire. "Please don't worry."

"And it's nothing you wish to share with me either?" Not an accusation, but an offer. His worry was plain, and I realized then how much our friendship meant to him.

"Not right now."

He took the words without comment or discernable reaction, and rose to leave me alone again. As he stood, the large book on my lap seemed to catch his attention, but not being one to overstep he didn't ask why I would be reading such a thing. At the moment it was beyond my faculties to explain my sudden interest in the hierarchy of the Angelic Realm. I couldn't reason it out to myself, let alone explain it to another.

The evening after my first meeting with Azrael, I'd hurried over to the university library and checked out a number of books on the subject of angels, specifically anything related to the angel Azrael. Of course, being a boy who'd grown up in the Catholic Church I'd heard many stories about angels, but what I could recall did not seem to be of much help to me. Those were the stuff of fairy tales, or contrived situations intended to impart a moral lesson to the reader.

Since becoming a vampire I'd distanced myself from any type of religious or spiritual belief. It seemed strange to realize that I'd turned my back on such things so easily, as though the physiological phenomenon that turned me into a vampire had erased my ability to believe in any type of higher power. For what did spirituality mean to someone who cannot die? That thought continued to itch at me as I dug deeper, searching for answers on a purely scholarly or historical level, not a religious one. And so I came to learn many interesting things.

Many writers of mystical and religious literature described Azrael as having a contradictory past and nature. While hailed as a saviour of lost souls and a comforter to those seized by

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grief, he is also divorced from the day-to-day protection and guidance of human lives, visiting only on the verge of, or after, death. His appearance then took on an ominous tone over the ages, and became one to not be necessarily sought out or wished for. Most certainly not by one of the undead, as the fact our kind existed at all seemed to be in complete defiance to everything he stood for. Again I had to puzzle over his attitude and actions toward me.

While researching, a particular passage leapt out at me, and I have found it difficult to not think about it since. *Azrael and his kind are responsible for the following: First, they seek to separate ghosts and lost spirits from their ties to the corporeal or ethereal plane, so these souls will move on to their final destinations. Secondly, they hunt the undead and destroy them wherever they are found. Third, angels of Death try to reduce humanity's fear of death. Lastly, Azrael continues his mission of ministering to the damned.*

I closed the book on my lap and thought about Azrael's words. *"For some reason, I find you different from the others of your kind."* He'd spared me, that I could clearly see, but the reasoning behind his leniency escaped me. I hadn't lived as long as many, nor did I possess the strength or abilities of some of the elders. I felt quite unremarkable as far as vampire-kind went. Yet something about me had given him pause, intrigued him on some level. Did I dare think that he felt some type of affection for me?

Kieran.

I whirled about in surprise at the sound of my name, realizing too late that the word had not been spoken out loud.

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The call had come from the angels' thoughts directly to mine, and that understanding brought with it a sharp bite of fear. Searching with my mind for any sign of Daniel, I found nothing but humans in the near vicinity. What he could have done to assist me I wasn't sure, but his company would have given me comfort at least. And I knew he'd come to my defence without question or prompting.

A shadow in my peripheral vision swayed, bursting forth in a sudden shower of dancing light, which reflected like rippling waves across the well-manicured lawn. From out of this gorgeous supernatural display walked Azrael, the light clinging to his frame, reluctant to release its touch from his earthly form. The heavy tome slipped from my lap as I rose to my feet. My movements seemed unnaturally stiff and awkward, as though nothing could compete with the grace and fluidity with which this monstrous beauty moved. I was mesmerized.

Powerful wings the colour of dusk fluttered as he strode towards me. The air flooded with his scent, and the touch of it to my senses brought about a manic excitement. I moaned when his arms wrapped about me, so totally consumed by my reaction to his touch that I didn't struggle as my feet left the ground. The heavy swooshing of his wings washed cool night air over my body, where I lay cradled underneath his defined torso. One powerful arm wrapped around my body to my hip, the other my shoulder, and Azrael's warm breath whispered on the back of my neck. A sensation like motion sickness washed through me, followed by a giddy, misplaced euphoria.

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The earth lay far below, nothing more than shimmery points of light and indistinct forms that disappeared before my eyes could make sense of their shape or function. Grit and moisture trapped in the level of elevation at which we travelled stung my skin and eyes, as it became disturbed by our artificial turbulence. I heard nothing but the wind from Azrael's wings and his strong heartbeat, pounding out its alluring song. I hadn't fed that night, and the meeting of our bodies was fire and ice. His heat seduced me, maddening and delicious, and I longed for it to lick along every inch of my body. We could have passed minutes or hours, and I wouldn't have been able to determine which. Again thoughts of spirituality danced about in my brain, offering provocations that could not be substantiated and eliciting fears of eternal damnation. Is this where he was taking me? To have my soul judged and weighed—supposing that I still possessed such a thing.

With a suddenness that brought a sour lurch to my stomach we began to plummet, hurtling toward the ground at an alarming speed. I had convinced myself we were about to crash in a shower of fiery retribution, when our bodies tipped back and my feet touched the ground with unprecedented gentleness. Giant wings closed as I turned to face my captor. He looked as stricken as I felt.

Our eyes met, and his heat turned to wildfire. My greedy pores opened wide to absorb the foreign sensation, and my body flushed like it hadn't since I'd been a mortal man. I became overwhelmed with a maddening rush of emotions and feelings that would not mesh with one another. Tears blurred

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my vision, but I still stumbled forward into arms that opened wide to receive me. I poured myself into the embrace, so unnatural and forbidden, yet so unabashedly wanton.

Azrael stood more than a head taller than me, and his stature would have put a world-class body builder to shame. A long time passed as we remained in that embrace, before I pulled away far enough to look up into his face. Shock surged through my body when I discovered fresh tears staining his cheeks. A swath of clean skin appeared under the path of his tears, emerging from the fine layer of grime that covered all exposed areas of his body. The dirtiness did nothing to detract from his undeniable beauty, in fact seemed to heighten his rugged magnetism. Without thinking about the consequence, I rose to tiptoe and traced my tongue along the trail of his tears. Azrael's body tensed, but he did not pull away.

He pulled me close again, strong arms crushing my smaller frame. "I have no explanation for my actions," he whispered. With my ear pressed to his chest I could hear his heart, steady and strong.

I didn't know what a proper response to that would be, so I remained silent.

"This goes against everything I have dedicated my existence to," he continued. "I fear that for the first time, I may not be able to fulfil my duty."

"I don't understand," I answered, voice shaky.

His arms released me, and his hand slid down my arm to grasp mine. He pulled it up between us and regarded it as though it were the most miraculous thing he'd ever seen,

before pressing warm lips to my curled fingers. "I cannot destroy you Kieran. I want to keep you just as you stand before me. Protect you."

"Yes."

The words that came next stunned me to the core. I shook my head, not quite able to believe what I'd heard.

"I have fallen in love with you."

My knees buckled. I fell forward against his granite chest, grabbing the front of his tunic to steady myself, finding the texture surprisingly rough. My brain made a desperate attempt to process his statement, but could not quite accept the implication it brought. Time chugged past, mocking the power of the moment, while I struggled to come to terms with the situation I had found myself a part of.

"Say something," he commanded. His voiced boomed, terrifying and disorienting me.

"You...love me?" I finally managed.

"Yes," he said, pulling my hands free of his garment. "I do."

"How?" I asked, staring into those dark blue eyes.

"I have no answer for that. I simply know it to be true."

"What do you want from me?"

"Time," he answered, letting escape a sigh heavy with burden and conflict. "I would like to spend some time with you, to see what might come of this. Can you give this to me?"

In that moment I knew that not only would it be unwise to refuse his request, I found that I didn't want to. "Yes."

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Then he took my hand, leading me away from the base of the mountain that for the first time I could see with clarity, towards a path that zigzagged across the incline of the sheer rock face. Where this path might take us I couldn't say, and no obvious destination appeared within my supernatural range of sight. With a hesitant smile he looked back at me. A hot wave of lust shot through me in response, like a bright surge of adrenaline.

Where we ended up was of no consequence. What mattered was that we would be alone.

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Chapter Four

Warm, sweet water enveloped my naked body. The space about me glowed with candlelight, which Azrael had proven fond of over the past several weeks. I watched with unconcealed longing as he made his way to join me in the hot spring, a precious wonder that nature had chosen to hide away in the remote cavern. The opening in the ground appeared perhaps twenty feet long, running from a gentle depth to a sharp drop-off towards the middle of the formation.

Azrael pulled the tunic off over his head, revealing a hard, defined male form that elicited an urgent tightening in my nether region. He stood at the side, lingering to allow my unashamed stare. I drunk in his visual perfection, hyperaware of the effect he had on all of my senses. A small ledge protruded from one side of the opening, and here I perched, the water hitting me just below the throat.

So it had been each night since whisking me away to this remote mountain range, where no one had dared to try and exist since biblical times. Our roles of captor and prisoner seemed well defined, but his demeanour led me to believe there was more to the events than he let on. It was more a situation of desperate need on his part; as though by keeping me hidden away I was being protected, not controlled. I'd been allowed to feed, with Azrael supervising from the shadows, but not to take a life. My needs had become his utmost concern.

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The blood I most longed to taste had not yet been offered to me.

The evenings passed brilliant with conversation, Azrael never seeming to run out of questions or to tire of my answers. Of his own existence I'd learned little, but each small kernel of insight that appeared I stored away for future reference. His words dripped with authority, yet he seemed more kind than cruel, and always genuinely concerned for my comfort. His fondness for me couldn't be more apparent, every look, each touch offered the truth of his feelings for me. The intensity of his attachment to me grew with each passing night. Warmth and affection touched me through him, giving me a sense of rightness I'd never known before.

"Join me," I said, trying not to sound as though begging, but the sight of his naked body taunted me.

He waded into the water, making slow, deliberate movements. A sultry half-smile hovered on his face. Each step that closed the distance between us brought with it new levels of exhilaration, burning desire like fire through my veins. I let my gaze travel over the wonder that was his body, unable to pull away. My skin suddenly felt too tight. Stopping before me, he placed a hand on either side on my shoulders, hanging on to the ledge. His breath whispered against my face, so warm and sweet. A tremble rode my body, but I waited patiently for the kiss that would inevitably come.

For kisses were all that Azrael had doled out by way of physical affection, though I made my eagerness for more obvious to him. Lingering embraces and a handful of sensual caresses had occurred, but every attempt to instigate more

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received a gentle rebuff. A few times I'd caught his hungry and appreciative stares, felt his hardness against my body as we lay in bed, but the relationship went no further. The lack of progress was both exhilarating and maddening.

My eyes slipped close, and I leaned my head back against the rock. Water lapped against my chest as Azrael came towards me. My hand moved forward, meeting firm, muscular flesh. At last his mouth found mine, lips slightly parted. For the first time I dared to slip my tongue into his mouth, probing, and to my great surprise he responded in kind. I pulled him in closer against my body, until our chests pressed together, and his arms snaked about my shoulders.

For the first time we kissed with ardent passion, writhing and grinding against each other's naked bodies. His breathing became ragged, the sound sharp and arousing against my sensitive ear. His tongue tasted my mouth, face and throat, hovering at the place where the neck and shoulder meet. I could feel how hard he'd become, his impressive length jabbing into my inner thighs. I brought my hands down to his erection, stroking him, and the moan that escaped his lips was the permission I'd been waiting for.

His weight crumpled against my body, cheek pressed against mine. Large hands gripped my shoulders, their strength biting into my unnaturally firm skin. While I continued to pleasure him, I repositioned myself so that I could reach his throat, where I then pressed my eager mouth. The sharpness of my fangs scraped the inside of my lip. The sounds emerging from Azrael's lips excited me, taunted me. My dark desires merged with my sexual ones, both of which

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demanded immediate satiation. My lips pulled back, and my teeth sank into his warm flesh. The tiny spill of blood that touched my tongue before he pulled away tasted sweeter than any other I'd had before, a literal drop of heaven.

My eyes snapped open at the suddenness with which he ripped himself away. His face hovered a few feet from me, eyes wide, arousal setting his mouth in a tight line. A strange occurrence began then, something I could not have been prepared for. The solidness of the form I had come to know as Azrael began to dissipate, losing its distinctive shape. A powerful, blinding halo of light now encircled his form, eating away at the earthly flesh. Warmth and power surged from this bizarre phenomenon, numbing my brain with its intensity and making my limbs heavy and impossible to manipulate. The otherworldly beauty overwhelmed my senses. My throat clenched as though hands were about it, and I drifted in a sensation of weightlessness and profound joy.

A sharp choking sound filled the large cavern, shaking loose a shower of stone and dust. Azrael had become a pillar of light, having lost all of his earthy form. The radiance throbbed and swirled, churning the water like a tiny tsunami. An artificial wind howled through the space, making the loosened stone and dust dance. The raging pressure emanating from the glowing force before me lashed out. I slammed against the rough edge of the hot spring, shards of stone tearing at my flesh. But despite the overwhelming assault to my senses I did not cry out. I braced myself, letting my eyes slip closed. Silent anticipation consumed me.

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When I opened my eyes again, the cavern was dark, all the candles having been extinguished by the former rage of wind. I peered into the solid blanket of darkness, straining to find Azrael. Then his warm hand touched my face, and strong arms pulled me from the water. A trail of water droplets hit the stone like gunshots in the stunned quiet, as he carried me to the far end of the space that held our makeshift bed.

Azrael lay us down on the soft mound of blankets, and cradled me against his damp body. He murmured against my ear.

"What just happened?" I asked.

He made a sound like sob before speaking. "I'm not used to such sensations in this form. I lost control, and slipped into my natural state."

I let that sink in for a moment. "From what I remember of my church teachings, man and Angels are supposed to have been made in God's likeness. Are you saying this isn't true?"

"There are many ideas that have lost their truth, and have become muddled over the long years humans have existed. This is but one tiny world in a vast expanse of space."

"Then what are you? Where do you come from?"

"It's been so long that none can clearly recall. We simply are, and carry on with what we have always done." His words were gentle, but the message clear: This was not the time to discuss such issues.

"Does this mean that we can never truly...be together?"

"I do not know Kieran. This is not what I am meant for. These feelings I have for you are so confusing, and the

sensations are not something I am used to. All of this is foreign to me..."

A terrifying thought came to me. "Will you be punished? If we're discovered?"

"Yes," he answered without hesitation. "I am defying my maker's wish and my principal duty. Angels are to be selfless, we are not meant for pleasures of either the heart or body. And with you I have experienced both."

"And what about the fact that I am a man?"

The question clearly caught him off guard. "We do not think in such strict terms as you do. As I said this is not my natural form, but one we have adopted to make our association with humans less traumatic. We do not define ourselves by gender, having evolved to a higher state that does not need to satisfy baser instincts like sex."

"Yet many take to quoting scripture when trying to prove that same sex relationships are immoral."

"A human invention. You should be very aware that humans are quick to condemn anything that they do not understand, or goes against what they have come to know as tradition. Such silly, primitive creatures in many regards."

"So the conflict lies with the fact that I am a vampire?"

"Completely. Our very natures define us as enemies. The existence of your kind has troubled the Supreme One since your first appearance several thousand years ago."

"The Supreme One?" I asked, never having heard Azrael mention such a creature before. The name pulled an anxious reaction from my body.

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His body stiffened. "That is not for you to worry about." He then fell into a thoughtful silence.

My eyes had adjusted to the darkness by then. Azrael's face was very close to mine, and his blue eyes pierced the gloom. I brushed aside a lock of damp hair, and pressed my lips to his. He sighed and returned the kiss with eagerness. The downy softness of his wing brushed along one arm, and I shivered from the sensation. I brushed my hand down the shaft of one feather, longer then the extended length of my arm. Azrael's mouth had moved to my ear, and I was suddenly very aware of how tightly pressed together our naked bodies were. Hazy waves of eagerness fluttered over my skin.

A warm sensation filtered through my body, and if I didn't know any better I'd have thought I was blushing, but vampire bodies don't work that way. This feeling came as a direct result of Azrael's response, his rush of uncontrolled lust and love filtering into my physical realm through the touch of our bodies. It tasted of a young boy's sexual awakening, compounded with the intensity of adult desire and supernatural power. A pleasurable hum circulated through my blood, and my skin vibrated with urgent and unrequited need.

Azrael rolled away from me to light several candles near the bed. He then turned onto his back, staring at the shadows dancing across the cavern ceiling. I curled along his side, frustrated and anxious. His inner conflict snapped at me, bright and insistent. The churning stream of tumultuous thoughts admonished me in a way a verbal lashing never could have, leaving no place for rebuttal or misinterpretation.

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His attachment to me reeked of danger, could lead to his ultimate destruction, and his inexperience with the overwhelming layers of emotion connected to interactions such as ours was tearing him up. Truth be told, I had my own discord.

Despite my undeniable attraction to Azrael, I also struggled with conflict and fear. I'd never been with another man—supernatural or otherwise. Whether this heightened my excitement of our transgressions, I couldn't say for sure, but it did add a level to the relationship that I'd never had to deal with before. It was intriguing, and in some ways unnerving. I didn't know whether I'd be able to deliver on the pleasure he seemed to want from me, or whether he would be able to return that pleasure. Arousal was one thing, but a deep satisfaction and connection—sexual or emotional—didn't come from curiosity alone. Settling into that thought left a tender ache in my heart.

The idea of losing the relationship before it went any further brought a startling revelation to me—I wanted it to continue. More than just the novelty of the situation called to me; it was all of Azrael's being that I craved. I enjoyed the way he never tired of trying to understand my nature, how he puzzled over my feelings and history, the joy my presence brought him. His power and mystery excited and intrigued me, and his kindness shook alive a part of me long dormant. I wanted to be a part of his life that didn't have a clearly defined role, a connection that confused as much as it excited me.

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The rest of that night passed in restless silence. I finally fell into sleep with his warmth at my side and his love burning in my brain.

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Chapter Five

I awoke the next night in a cold bed, alone. As I rose, the single candle still burning offered a dim source of light, but I didn't need to see to know that Azrael was gone. A ghost of regret had been left in his place, and his loss struck like a cannonball to the gut. A spasm of panic erupted within me. The cold aftershocks, when reality had taken a firm grip, moved with a glacial ache through every fibre of my being. I'd never known loss as profoundly as I did that night. His departure shattered me.

I waited three desperately long nights for him to come back, hope slowly dying with each passing hour. He did not return. At last my need for blood overshadowed my heartache, and I left the cavern unaccompanied for the first time in months. It took many hours until I reached a small city, discovering only then where I had been kept. I'd been squired away to a remote area of Northern Iraq, and my appearance caused quite a stir amongst the local population. After many fruitless attempts I found a man with whom I could communicate, and he provided a telephone with which I could contact my long-suffering roommate.

Daniel had remained in the same house, and my preternatural memory kept his cell phone number safe. He answered after several rings, the voice hesitant. "Yes, hello."

"Daniel, it's Kieran. I need your help." My words all but leapt from my throat.

"Jesus Christ, Kieran! Where have you been? You just disappeared..."

"I can't explain right now...I need money, and a way to get back to Australia."

I quickly explained my whereabouts, and through my new Iraqi friend, passed along the nearest place to wire some money. I didn't have anything but the clothes on my back, so the arrangements for my transportation would be provided by people outside of the normal, legal channels. It took three days on a stinking cargo ship full of pilfered goods, and a questionable population looking to pass into new areas unnoticed by authorities. I fed on a young man before boarding, and spent the remaining time locked inside my windowless room.

Azrael's loss haunted me every minute of those days, as though a phantom of his presence followed me. His scent lingered on my clothing, and every time my eyes closed I felt his warm, strong hands on my body. I longed to taste his mouth on mine. I didn't see how I could return to my life and carry on as though I hadn't just experienced the most amazing event.

Daniel met me at the pier. I stumbled from the ship, a wreck in every sense. Disorientation and anger had damaged me during the voyage at sea, and my thirst raged. My dear friend met me with pained eyes, slinging an arm about my waist to help me down the dock. Once inside the relative privacy of Daniel's car, he opened the vein at his wrist and pressed it to my dry lips. A primal grunt escaped as I drank, and I completely lost myself to the euphoria of bloodlust. I

seized his arms with such savagery that Daniel cried out, but his pain did not dull my need for blood.

As I continued to drink, Daniels' psychic defences weakened, and he unwittingly bathed me in memories of his violent and perverted human past. His unnatural lust became my own, made even more repulsive in light of the relationship I'd shared with Azrael. When I pulled my lips away from the seeping wound, Daniel appeared shaken, but not angry. Shame shone back at me through his pale eyes, and with a tender hug I assured him that my feelings toward him had not changed. If anyone should have been viewed in a different light, it would have been me.

Daniel's blood had taken the edge off my hunger, but I needed more. He understood, and without prompting drove us to the seedier side of the sprawling metropolis that is Sydney. He conducted the interaction that brought two young prostitutes to my access. I drained them both before I felt sated, but the flush of blood did nothing to assuage the loss throbbing through my brain. At that moment, in the lowest depths of my despair, I couldn't see how I'd ever escape that feeling. Then he took me back to the home we'd shared before my encounter with Azrael.

The house gleamed. Not a spot of dust or an item out of place caught my eye, and I knew that Daniel had made every effort for my homecoming to be perfect. I would have expected nothing less of him. His human transgressions had ingrained a desperate need to please in him, ironic considering the world he had become an eternal member of. Yet despite the state of perfection of the house and his

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obvious happiness at my return, the hole left in my heart still existed. Raw pain and loss overwhelmed me.

A terrible ache clawed inside my chest, bringing an unrelenting emptiness that I'd never known before. It could not be escaped by distance or replaced with other types of affection, even one as sincere as the friendship Daniel felt for me. With the relationship between Azrael and I, the light and dark had collided, merging heart and soul, and the effects on my being were irreversible. Right and wrong had blurred with our union, crumbling ideals and convictions long held to be indestructible. I believed this conflict had caused Azrael to flee from me. Like him, I would never be the same.

I stumbled to my former bedroom. As with the rest of the house, I found the room immaculate. I fell onto the bed, the sheets crisp and lightly lemon-scented. A few hours until sunrise still existed, but I felt a lethargy so absolute I couldn't think clearly. I lay on the cool sheets, listening to the stillness of the house, and the distant sounds of the city, then I inexplicably burst into tears. They sprang forth in a mad, unstoppable shower, expelling a pain I wouldn't have wished on the most loathsome of creatures. A vice of despair clenched my chest.

Daniel appeared in the doorway, silent and non-judgmental, then came to lie beside me on the bed, taking me into his arms to offer what comfort he could. I sobbed for more than an hour, verging on hysteria so epic in scope I scared myself. Still I remained unable to explain to Daniel what had me so upset. He waited the episode out, alternating between hugs, smoothing my hair and rocking me like a child.

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His quiet, accepting way calmed me like nothing else would have. When my tears slowed, and the wails drowned into shudders, I attempted to explain myself.

I rested my head on his shoulder as I spoke, tasting the whisper of blood from my tears. "I'm sorry Daniel. I've been through a lot these last few weeks."

"So I gathered," he answered in his usual warm and uncritical tone.

"I met—someone. More than a someone, and I'm sorry I kept all of this from you. I should have told you when it all began, but I just wasn't sure what, if anything, was going to happen." Azrael's face flashed before my eyes, and a strangled sob escaped my throat.

"Shhhh," Daniel soothed, before pressing cool lips to my forehead. His lips were firm, but gentle. "We don't need to speak of this right now."

The innocent action, a chaste kiss, brought a jolt of reaction from me. The sensation surged through my body, tingling and pulling a delicious ache from my memory. Without thinking my actions through, I pulled him down to me and met his mouth with my own. Unlike Azrael, his flesh was cool to the touch. I forced the recognition of the difference from my mind as I slid my hands up his arms, over his shoulders and into the soft fall of dark hair. The texture was silky and fine, and the sensation of my fingers running through it excited me beyond reason.

Daniel tensed, and at first he did not return the kiss. I'd never been in such an intimate situation with a man before Azrael, and it thrilled me to discover that men's bodies came

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in many different shapes, just like the countless women I'd been with over the years. Azrael's form had been large and heavy, almost burdensome to manipulate, whereas I found the body in my embrace leaner and closer to my own stature. I let my hands explore him, feeling well-defined arms, a narrow waist and flat stomach. Daniel reacted with an almost imperceptible shiver when my hands cupped his tight behind.

In turn, his cool hand slipped beneath my un-tucked shirt, nimble fingers making a hesitant voyage up my back. His tongue shot forward into my mouth, probing urgently. His lips were thinner than Azrael's, but the kiss held the taint of more experience. His desire filtered into my own consciousness, fuelling the inappropriate and misplaced attraction I felt. We were about the same height, putting us eye-to-eye, and for some reason this made me feel that the level of control in whatever might happen, was balanced.

Our kiss deepened, and with his other hand he began to lower the zipper on my pants. His mind swam with a myriad of emotions; lust, uncertainty, excitement, and fear for the potential loss of our friendship. Each layer of feeling teased me like foreplay, calling forth my own building arousal. The flame of my need for Azrael burned bright, and I made a conscious decision to use Daniel's body to satiate it. I knew that my reckless actions had crossed lines, and the fallout would have long-lasting implications on our friendship, but in that moment I didn't care. I didn't want to feel the grief, the rage and despair from Azrael's absence any longer. I wanted to intoxicate my mind with sexual gratification, pushing aside all other matters and distractions.

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Our clothes were shed as though they never existed, leaving our naked and stimulated bodies pressed against one another. I hesitated for a few seconds, looking into Daniel's anxious eyes, now lit with a psychotic brightness. The intensity of the situation flared, feeding us both, urging us toward the point of no return. I traced my lips over his cheek, his throat and chest, using the tip of my tongue to flick at a hardened nipple. Daniel shuddered.

Then, like the flick of a switch, the other side of his personality emerged. His quiet, unassuming persona disappeared completely, replaced by a hungry, forceful presence, a part of himself long dormant, hidden in the shames of his past. This presence erupted like an angered lion, capturing shades of madness in his wide eyes. I glimpsed a series of rapid, yet painfully explicit memories of his human past, highlights of some of his most wicked transgressions against his victims. How he'd loved to hurt and degrade those weaker than himself. Hesitant touches were now confident, bordering on aggressive, but instead of alarming me, my passion was spurred even further. I reacted in kind.

We thrashed about in a mad frenzy, shaking the bed with such force that the headboard cracked and separated from the base. We spilled to the floor, the carpet rough under my naked back. His greedy mouth covered every inch of my body; kissing, licking, sucking. He brought me to climax with both his hands and mouth, before the steel rod of his manhood penetrated me, bringing forth a cry of satisfaction so thunderous I feared my eardrums would burst. My vision

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swayed as waves of pleasure rocked my body. I bit my lip, tasting blood.

I returned the pleasure to Daniel with unabashed enthusiasm. In the end we collapsed onto the mattress, which lay askew the broken bed, our bodies bloody, sticky, and exhausted. I propped myself up on a hastily stacked pile of pillows, with Daniel resting on my chest. He clung to me, his inner animal firmly back in its cage. I could feel the nervousness and hint of embarrassment tiptoeing through his mind, replacing the burst of lustful bravado. I was also troubled, but so physically and emotionally drained that I had no explanation or comfort to offer him.

We fell asleep in a tangle of bedclothes, the consequences of our actions made to wait for the following night.

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Chapter Six

After an initial awkward period that lasted several days, we settled back into the comfortable familiarity of our friendship. I apologized profusely, which Daniel accepted with graciousness, though I suspected that neither of us were particularly upset by the incident. In fact, it seemed to make us even closer, as though there was now nothing we couldn't share with each other. Hungry lust lurked under the surface of the new state of our relationship, on both sides, but we remained firmly on the side of friends. I won't say that knowing we were sexually compatible didn't appeal to me, because it did, but it wasn't the blinding lust and emotional unification I felt with Azrael. It simply made me feel less alone.

Azrael.

Each night I searched the sky for him, a few times certain his otherworldly energy had touched me, but if it had, he did not come forward. I refused to wash the clothes I had come home in, so as not to lose the scent of him trapped within the fabric. Each night when I woke I pressed them to my face. It was a small part of him to keep alive.

The thrill of the hunt dimmed in the wake of his departure from my life. The blood I took kept me strong, but the dark rush did not appeal to me as it once had. And blood was all I stole—the lives I left intact. Azrael's influence had made a profound change to my life; I couldn't be the same Kieran I

had once been. I no longer looked at the world with the same mindset.

And so the weeks passed.

One day, while slumbering in my light-protected room, a peculiar sensation invaded my dreams, luring me back to a state of consciousness. Though I could function during daylight hours if properly protected, I always found the experience disorienting and uncomfortable. It felt too much like death breathing down my neck. The darkness was where I belonged, where I felt safe. I opened my eyes to the biggest shock I could imagine.

Azrael sat on the edge of my bed, serious eyes locked on me. He appeared tired, and more uncertain than I'd ever known him to be. The difference I detected was more than the apparent worry, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. The shock of seeing him froze me in place, my mind exploded with a thousand questions. Tingles of need raced over my skin, warming my blood and building a tension in my chest so great I felt certain I'd burst. I convinced myself that his presence had to be an illusion, and any movement on my part would shatter it.

Azrael raised a large, tanned hand in my direction, motioning for me to come to him. I hesitated, but the hand found my arm and pulled me forward. The warmth from his touch flared up my arm, and the tension in my chest clenched even tighter. My mind swirled, cold shock inhibiting my ability to think coherently. Strong, familiar arms wrapped about me, pulling me in against the body I'd been craving long past any real hope of being with him again.

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As my own arms returned the embrace I realized what had changed. For the first time I was able to slide my hands about his broad back, the giant wings that normally prevented this were gone. Azrael must have understood my sudden awareness, as he pulled back and gave me a weak smile. I knew in an instant the turn of events would have serious ramifications. I couldn't reason through what those might be in that moment—it only mattered that he'd returned.

I rushed forward, planting my mouth against his with an almost violent urgency. Tears streamed down my face as I kissed him, and the touch of my hands to his hair brought a hard choke of emotion to my throat. Warm fingers brushed the tears from my cheeks.

"I have missed you so, Kieran," he murmured, emotion burdening his words.

"I've missed you, Azrael. I thought I'd never see you again..." The tears flooded again, and it was several minutes before I could speak. Azrael waited patiently, his own eyes brimming with moisture. "I love you so much. Tell me what I need to do so we can be together."

"I have already done it," he answered. Then he stood, and began to unbutton the long-sleeved shirt he wore. The shirt opened to expose his hard, muscled torso and the fine dark hair across his chest. As the clothing slipped to the floor he turned, revealing his back and a pair of long, white bands of scar tissue running across the shoulder blades. I touched the site where his wings had been removed and found the skin raised and rough. Azrael quivered as my fingers trailed along the scars. He turned, and the conflict pulled his handsome

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face into a series of sharp lines. I kissed along the band of scarring, before moving to the front of his body. My lips pressed against his firm chest, up his shoulder to his warm throat. His vein throbbed under my lips, and my whole body tightened and ached from the exertion of restraining myself.

I forced myself away from his body, meeting his tortured eyes. "What happened?"

"I was given a choice."

"I don't understand."

"I do not wish to delve into this right now. Please, let us just enjoy the fact that I have returned." Then he kissed me with force and raging passion. "And for the first time we can fully be together."

The shock of his return was so severe that it took me a full minute to understand the hidden message in his words. When the realization took hold he smiled in response to the dumbfounded look that must have crossed my face, and the sight of his happiness thrilled through every fibre of my being. We were now both standing, facing one another with lust burning like fire between us. Everything I had been pining over was mine for the taking.

Moving forward, I unzipped his pants with one clean, quick jerk. As they hit the floor I realized he wasn't wearing anything underneath, and that his feet were bare. I dropped to my knees before him, pleased to see that he was already aroused. My face pressed against his thigh, and I took a firm hold of the backs of his legs. My mouth slipped over the tip of his member, already swelling, the girth of it almost more than I could manage. I slid my mouth along the shaft and back

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again, slowly at first, making the experience last for the both of us. When his erection became full and hard as rock, I led him to the bed.

I was already naked, as has always been my habit for sleeping. Arousal and need threatened to madden me. There was a catch however; I needed blood first. I'd not been feeding well as of late, which took its toll on my stamina and abilities. Azrael raised himself up on his elbows, obviously wondering at my delay, and I knew that there could be no way around the truth.

"I haven't fed in a couple of days. I need blood to be able to...perform," I said, inwardly cringing. I had never pictured our first sexual encounter happening that way, but truth is often times far from perfect.

Azrael nodded his understanding and brushed aside the hair from the side of his neck. His bare throat invited me, and I didn't turn the offer down. I fell atop him, and latched my mouth onto his warm skin, feeling that pleasant tightening in my belly the moment before my teeth pierced his flesh. He flinched, but did not pull away, and after a few seconds he relaxed. His blood was so sweet and thick the effects were instantaneous, surging to all the right places.

With a growl I sprang back into action, only to find Azrael lost to the pseudo-sexual haze that affects most vampire victims. A dreamy half-smile lingered on his lips, and his eyes had closed. I slammed my mouth down onto his, the blood still warm on my lips. His eyes snapped open. With a quick thrust of his powerful arms he had me beneath him, and he returned the kiss with savage, brutal passion. I cried out and

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balled the sheet into my tightly clenched fists. He rubbed himself between my thighs until I couldn't stand it any longer.

"Now," I begged. Sweat dripped down his face, falling to my cooler skin below. His expression was an odd mix of raging lust and uncertainty.

"I am not sure what to do," he finally admitted.

I smiled, not to mock his inexperience, but at the pure joy of being the first (and hopefully the only one) to share the connection we were about to. With a swift but gentle adjustment to our position, I had us both on our sides, pressed almost nose-to-nose. Desire danced in his eyes, the shadow of indecision attempting to damper the fire. I put my mouth to one ear, and whispered exactly what I wanted him to do. Then I leaned back on the bed, and let him take the lead.

He kissed his way down my throat and smooth chest, lingering at a few places along the way. I shivered from the endless waves of pleasure his warm lips evoked. When his hand joined his mouth, running along the length of my engorged member, I bit my lower lip, but even the taste of blood could not sway my attention away from Azrael's touch. An ocean of warm, sweet blood couldn't have tempted me at that moment. I had lost myself in a way never experienced before, in either my human or vampire existence.

When he took me, the pain and pleasure mingled in such a way that no distinction between where one ended and the other started existed. A violent shock of excitement rolled through my body, lighting up my brain almost to the point of overload. Nothing coherent passed through my mind; there

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was only gratification and greedy desire for more. When Azrael collapsed on top of me, shaking and panting in the after-effects of his orgasm, a smug satisfaction settled in. He was mine. There was no turning back.

Soon his breathing settled, and warm tears trailed down my back. I took him in my arms, cradling his large form, and whispered how perfect and wonderful our union had been. In a dim recess of my mind the ramifications of what had just occurred called out, and I quickly pushed those thoughts aside, but as my hand brushed the scar tissue on his back I knew that the truth would not be avoided indefinitely.

"Oh Kieran," he said. His voice was thick and quiet, his breath humid. "I cannot even put into words... That was the most amazing thing I have ever experienced. I was able to lose myself completely to the sensations, my feelings... Thank you."

"Please don't thank me. It was just as amazing for me." The words were the absolute truth, but unease now had me in a firm grip.

He snuggled closer as he spoke. "This was everything I hoped it to be."

"But your being here has come at a great sacrifice, hasn't it?"

"I do not want that to take away from the happiness of this moment. The truth of what has happened will still be there whether we deal with it now, tomorrow, or a year from now." Then he turned to me, indigo eyes gleaming. "Just let me love you right now."

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His words carved a swath through my heart, and I could not refuse his request. If there were some way to hide from the truth, and stay cocooned in that room forever, I would have taken it. Then a small sound outside my door alerted me to another, more immediate issue.

Daniel.

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Chapter Seven

He waited patiently in the hallway, as he did most nights, while I pulled on some clothing. I emerged less than a minute later, dishevelled and clearly in the grips of post-coital bliss. There was no mistaking the heavy scent of sex clinging to my person. Daniel gave me a quick onceover without comment. A hint of jealousy lurked behind his outwardly impartial manner, but for the tightness at the corner of his eyes he had no discernable reaction. His internal musing betrayed him however.

"Ah, I won't be going out with you tonight," I said, stumbling over my words as I tried to come up with a reasonable explanation for Azrael's presence. I bypassed the issue of his jealousy completely. It seemed a prudent move, considering.

"I didn't realize you brought anyone home with you. I thought that was a major no-no, considering our security needs." His pale grey eyes regarded me intently.

"Of course, you're right. But this isn't just anyone." That was the understatement of the century.

"Can you elaborate?" There was a decided note of frustration to his tone.

I couldn't without telling the truth. Yet Daniel was a trusted friend and ally, and the only one who knew the depth of my feelings. In fact, he was the only one who knew about us at all. No matter how much it might hurt him, he deserved my honesty. "It's Azrael."

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Unmistakable surprise screwed up his features before he recovered and settled back into guarded neutrality. I regarded him intently, waiting for the direction his reaction to the news would take. As I did it struck me how attractive he was. Being one to naturally fade into the background, something he had perfected as a human I suspected, I sometimes forgot the fact. He had an endearing, boy-next-door appeal, a beauty saved from being too feminine by strong shoulders and the line of his jaw. I was pondering this when I felt the pull at my own mind as he reached out, trying to taste Azrael's supernatural aura. Then his psychic probe stopped short.

The abruptness of his withdrawal caught me off guard, calling out my panic that perhaps Azrael has slipped away again. I threw open the bedroom door, relieved to find him still lying in bed. My actions must have startled him, as he jerked upright, letting the sheet slip a little too far. He quickly snatched it back in place, pink blotches appearing on both cheeks. It was a charming response for such a solid, powerful man.

I realized then, as Daniel and I both stood in the doorway peering in on Azrael, that I didn't feel the pressing, urgent force that had always accompanied his presence before. Strange that I hadn't picked up on the absence sooner, but I had been overwhelmed with the rush of feelings at his return. In the past I'd often felt as though the pressure of the air around us was too high, nipping and tugging at me, and making me all too aware of his authority over me. Now,

though the heat between us remained, the bothersome aspects of the phenomena had vanished.

"Are you sure he's an angel," Daniel whispered at my ear. "He feels human to me."

I shook my head, uncertain, and now itching with growing concern. I stepped further into the room. Daniel trailed at my heels, his presence for the first time an irritation to me. I stopped at the edge of the bed. "Azrael, this is Daniel. My friend and roommate."

He gathered the sheet about his waist, allowing himself to be covered as he stood. Daniel met his outstretched hand. "Nice to meet you Daniel." The deep rumbling of his voice shimmied up my spine.

"Likewise," Daniel answered.

We stood in a hesitant silence, which quickly became awkward.

"Well, you were just on your way out, right Dan? Don't let us hold you up." I gave him a hard look, which he didn't acknowledge, but I knew he would understand.

"Yes, I'll catch up with you later." His lip was curled in distaste as he turned, then disappeared from sight.

Azrael looked to me, smiling. "He is not quite what I pictured. I thought he would be...rougher, considering his past."

"I think that's how he got away with what he did for so long. He looks sweet and gentle, you'd never suspect what lurked underneath. He's made his amends though," I added hastily, not sure why I felt such an urgency to defend him. Daniel himself fully admitted and accepted the truth of his

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human past. I continued to stumble over my words, too keyed up to put the required thought into what I was trying to express.

"I did not mean to insult your friend." Now Azrael looked worried.

"I'm sorry, everything is coming out the wrong way. I'm just a bit rattled." I'd started to pace, which caused Azrael to watch me with concern. I took his hand and led him to the bed, where we both sat. "Daniel brought something to my attention that I didn't notice earlier."

"Yes," he prompted.

"Your power, your aura, or whatever you call it, seems different. I mean, it doesn't feel like the other times we were together." I searched his face as I spoke, fighting the urge to brush the matter aside and give in to the lust dancing on the periphery of my jumbled thoughts.

He broke off his gaze, suddenly interested in his hands in his lap. "Yes, part of the conditions of giving up my wings."

"What have you done Azrael? What's happened, you have to tell me!" My voice was too sharp, and tears threatened to spill.

"I did this for us. There was no other way," he said, voice so quiet it was barely a sound.

I grabbed him about the shoulders, shaking him with vehemence. To my great surprise I saw pain in his eyes from my actions. "Tell me. Now. Everything."

Tears started to pour down his face. Regret reared its ugly head, as I saw his reaction to my outburst. I pulled him into a

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tight embrace and whispered as I stroked his hair, "Tell me Azrael. Please. I need to know."

He looked at me with eyes like sorrow personified, and took both of my hands in his. A strange sensation came over me, a dulled version of the shocking transfer of power Azrael once possessed. I realized he was using what remained of his quickly fading power. He used everything in him to transfer the episode in its entirety to me, allowing me to see, hear and feel what he had gone through.

I witnessed his returned to his own realm, where he had thrown himself back into his duties. He worked day and night, scouring the earth for souls that needed help and loved ones who needed comforting. He even assisted the other angels and another strange creature with anything he could, seeming desperate to be constantly busy.

"The Supreme One?" I said out loud, the name having come into my brain with the sight of the odd, yet wondrous being to whom Azrael appeared to be subservient.

He looked startled, then nodded. I came to understand that the Supreme One was whom the people of earth called God, Jehovah, and a multitude of other names. He was the all-powerful one who guided Azrael's kind, and monitored the actions of the world's inhabitants. I understood that he could see everything, know everything.

"I can tell you his real name, though I do not think it will make much sense to you," Azrael said. Then he emitted a sound such as I had never heard before, a sound unlike speech or dialect as I know it to be. It turned my insides to jelly, and a cold spasm of adrenaline rocked my senses.

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The memory transfer continued, though with each passing second it became harder to understand and our connection more draining. I could see that his behaviour had become erratic; many of the other angels turned away from him, unable to excuse his actions any longer. Only one attempted to help him.

The other angel was similar in form and stature to Azrael, but with his own distinct features. This creature was more delicate, less threatening than my love could seem. The hair was still shaggy and long, but lighter in colour. Much warmth and affection came with this image, cuing me to the intensity of their relationship. I realized in that moment how little I knew of Azrael's past.

Raphael. I could tell they were close friends, and that they had great respect for one another, though they had clashed many times over ideals and interpretations of The Supreme One's word.

Azrael went with him to the other man's private chambers, far from prying eyes and ears, where he poured his heart out. He confessed his attraction to me, told him he thought he loved me. He explained about what I was, the things we'd shared, about our time in the mountains. Raphael listened intently, only speaking when he needed clarification. I could tell that a tremendous weight had been lifted from Azrael as he talked. He'd unburdened his soul by sharing our story with him. When finished he sat in contemplative silence, as was his way. I somehow understood that Raphael never judged quickly. He was a being capable of more grace and compassion than any other Azrael had ever known.

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At last Raphael spoke, but his words were not what I expected. "You have come to your senses then?" he asked. "You understand that this relationship is wrong. Wrong for so many reasons, and that you must never see Kieran again?"

Azrael was stunned by his reaction, and no longer certain of how to proceed. The secret had been revealed, and he could not take it back or pretend the truth had not been exposed. "Yes," he lied. "I will not see him again." Raphael seemed to take Azrael at his word.

Of course the very first thing he did once on his own was come to my home. Many days he loitered outside, a few times he even ventured inside to watch me while I slept. He still had his full powers then, so slipping in and out without detection was never an issue. But every time it became harder for him to leave. Once he stayed too long, and I almost caught him. A wistful smile crossed his lips as he thought back to the moment he spoke of.

When he returned the following day, Raphael was waiting for him in the yard. He sat in the same chair I had the night Azrael came to take me away with him. The look on Raphael's face had been pure disappointment, which had cut Azrael to the quick. There was no explanation or justification for his actions. He had been caught acting against everything his kind stood for. He knew the consequences would be harsh.

"Take a seat, old friend," Raphael said, the sadness dripping from his words. "You know why I am here."

"I do." He looked to the house and was so overcome with panic at the thought of never seeing me he could barely walk. He took the seat next to Raphael, but could not face him.

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"Azrael, brother, you know how much this pains me, but I cannot keep your relationship from the Supreme One. I must tell him."

"I understand. I accept the consequences of my actions."

"You know that he would have found out on his own, if he is not already aware that is."

"Yes," he answered. Deep down he had known that, had been fooling himself with thoughts of keeping our relationship hidden.

Raphael took his hand, and without another word pulled him along. They moved through the vortex of time and space, to the place that was their natural residence. I understood them to be in the outer sanctum of the Supreme One's court. Trembling, Azrael advanced on the golden doors, never having had to enter under such dire circumstances before. Usually he was bringing some poor creature to the Supreme One's attention. Now he would be the one judged. His only thought had been that he might never see me again.

The doors swung inward when they approached. As they passed the threshold, Azrael's panic let loose like a bursting dam. The fear rushed through his blood, seeping from every pore until his tunic clung to him, a sensation mirrored in my own body. He stopped just short of the Supreme One's sitting area, and knelt with bowed head. Raphael placed a hand on his shoulder, but he didn't acknowledge the touch. With a stream of communication projected directly into both their minds Raphael was dismissed from the Supreme One's presence. Each retreating footstep left Azrael closer to his punishment. Never had I felt such anxiety or sadness before,

not in any situation in either my human or vampire life. Azrael thought it was ironic to then realize that the humans he gave peace to must have felt exactly the same way upon losing their loved ones as he did facing the possibility of an existence without me.

"Azrael," the Supreme One began. "You understand what has brought you before me under such circumstances?"

"Yes, I do." He looked up to the Supreme One as he spoke, seeing nothing but a shimmering mass of light, with no definable shape that could be focused on. Whether there was an actual form I could not say; it was like nothing I had ever seen before. It was not something that many would ever see. Just being so close to that pure stream of energy was disorienting and somewhat unpleasant, the effects a warning to how much worse it could and would be. Again, Azrael found it a new way of thinking about his master. He'd never felt anything but reverence and awe for the Supreme One before. At that moment there had been only bitterness and fear.

"You disappoint me Azrael. I would never have suspected such a betrayal from you." A wave of heat licked along his bare skin, emphasizing the depth to which his betrayal ran.

"I am sorry. Your disappointment shames me."

"You should feel shame, harbouring the belief that you could actually feel love for such a creature!" The words emerged from the mass of light, sharp and bright.

"I must ask with the utmost respect then, how these feeling could ever come to be, as their nature is so offensive

and unacceptable? Everything about this creature calls to me, and I am powerless to refuse."

"He has bewitched you, led you astray from the true path." His answer offered no possibility of argument, yet Azrael continued.

"How can one such as he have power over me? I could tear him limb from limb, strike him dead with ease. How could he manipulate an offspring of the Supreme One?" He rose to his feet, then feeling as angry as frightened, and demanded, "I must know the truth of this!"

The Supreme One's response rattled about the space they'd occupied, building momentum, until it exploded forth as a tidal wave of supremacy. The force struck Azrael head-on, knocking the breath from his angelic body and tossing him several feet in the air. He landed in a tangled heap, ego as bruised as the form he held. A warm gush of blood came from his nose, pouring down over his lips and into his mouth. As he tasted it on his tongue he thought of me.

"That is the only truth Azrael. You were weak, and gave in to the temptation he offered. You turned your back on your solemn duty for pleasures of the flesh. You know full well that this form you now possess is not your true nature."

"But it is not only of the flesh that I feel pleasure! It is also with my heart. I feel—love for Kieran, friendship, a connection I have not known anywhere else." His conviction made his words strong, and I knew with every fibre of my being that what he felt for me was real. He was certain his feelings had not come of influence or trickery.

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"It is a sad day when one of my flock professes love for an undead, monstrous creature like a vampire. And concedes a connection to such a creature is greater than that he shares with me! How could you be so deceived?"

"How is love deceitful?" He pushed on, knowing full well that by doing so he would be digging his own grave. "How can what I feel for Kieran and what he feels for me be wrong? If this is such an abomination, why would you let it be? Tell me!"

The Supreme One did not answer, instead choosing to propose a question of his own. "Would you choose this disgusting creature over your mission? Over my protection and guidance?"

"Yes," he answered, the truth too powerful to deny any longer. "More than anything I wish to be with him."

"You would give up your power, trap yourself in this form just to know a human's touch?" The very concept of true love eluded him, and he continued to categorize our relationship as something consisting only of individual physical encounters. Under such circumstances how could he be persuaded to look at things from a different point of view?

The ball of light became a stream of golden liquid, moving towards Azrael with hypnotic serpentine movements. He could not pull his gaze away as the marvel advanced, ever changing until the form of a dark-haired young man emerged. The figure before him could not rival his form in musculature or stature, but the power behind the outward appearance could not be denied. The eyes did not merely look at him, they penetrated deep inside, perusing his troubled soul. He

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cowered under the silent accusation, even though he had begun to doubt the assumed omnipotence of his master's abilities.

"Don't turn away from me," the Supreme One instructed. Azrael did as he was told. "Since you have chosen your new earthly partner over your spiritual duties you will have to conform to a different way of life."

Before he could utter one word to question his statement, the Supreme One reached behind Azrael and tore one of his wings from his body. A scream of agony caught in his throat as the flesh ripped open. Blood exploded from the wound, trailing warm liquid down his back. The Supreme One did not even meet Azrael's gaze as he came about the other side and repeated the action with his other wing. That time he did scream, and fell to his knees. Hot tears filled his eyes, blinding him. He tried to revert to his natural state to avoid the agony, but as his master had threatened he was trapped in his human body.

"You won't need these anymore." The words sounded cold, callous.

There was little he could do but curl into a ball and wait for the pain to subside. The air licked at the wounds with an acid tongue, sending wave after wave of anguish through his damaged body. The dazzling light faded, and the joy he'd always known in his presence soured. For the first time in his existence he felt real hatred. His insides turned black with the emotion.

The feeling surged through him like bile. If he'd been able to he would have charged, attempted to inflict bodily harm

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against his master. He'd wanted to hurt him so badly I could taste it. Instead, he lay trembling and bleeding in the most holy of sanctuaries, waiting until he could return to me. Blackness came, and the next thing he knew he was in Raphael's chamber and his wounds had been dressed. The candlelight flickered, making his distressed expression that much more pronounced.

Raphael explained everything he needed to know. The consequences were laid bare.

"You need to leave here brother," he said. "After this I cannot help you anymore."

Azrael nodded his understanding. He was taken in Raphael's arms, and in a whirl of sound and sensation they returned to the yard. He hugged him goodbye. Turning to leave, a small sob escaped his lips, which made Azrael's heart miss a beat. Then he vanished. As he sat, debating what to do and letting the truth of the situation settle in, he realized the pain was gone. Looking down, he found himself dressed in the clothes from the previous night, though he had no recollection of changing. He seemed to be physically as he had always been in human form, only without wings. He had been able to enter my house without need of a proper entrance, as though he could pass through the construction like air, but for the first time in all the millennia he'd existed the process seemed to weaken him. Before that he had never known pain, or sickness or exhaustion. There had been no limits to his energy or abilities.

He turned to me then, his handsome face blotchy from the vehemence of his outpouring emotion. His conflict and pain

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imprinted on me, amplifying my own conflicting emotions. I felt shame at what he had been put through, and all just for wanting me. A once majestic, awe-inspiring creature had been reduced to a fragile human form, so easily hurt. And now destined to die.

"Even now I feel my power draining. Soon I will be as a mortal man."

What would this mean for us? I wondered, as I pulled him into a desperate embrace, where as he made a small murmur of discomfort. I realized I needed to take care of the force with which I touched him from then on. His supernatural vigour and power was dissipating, while mine would grow with each mouthful of blood, and each new day I survived. One day disease, or an accident, or just plain old age would take him from me if he continued in this manner. *Could I survive his demise?* I honestly didn't know if I could.

"Azrael, you know how I feel about you. I love you more than I ever dreamed it was possible to love anyone. But how can I ask this of you, simply to be with me?" The last few words were lost as my throat tightened with emotion. My eyes filled with tears, and as one slipped he wiped it away with his warm finger. I placed my cold hand on top of his, pressing his warmth against my cheek, clinging to a sensation that I had no right to ever experience.

"You did not ask this of me, my love. And that is why I know your love is true. You make no demands on me at all. You share with me your love, your life, your bed. I am here because I want to be." His words were hot against my ear, thrilling me.

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His lips moved across my face, finding my mouth and pouring his feelings into my being through touch. His passion and need affected me so deeply, my reaction danced on the edge of fear. His affection began to thaw the cold stone my heart had become, peeling away the indifference that had surrounded it for so long. This union took me far past my friendship with Daniel, any lingering attachment to my human relatives both dead and alive, even surpassing my connection with my maker Giovanni. It broke through reason and safety.

"I don't want to be without you," I admitted. "Nothing can compare to how you affect me, what you make me feel."

"Then hang onto that, Kieran. When you have doubt and fear, cling to that feeling, and know this is meant to be."

I couldn't argue with him, not then. The rush of my love and lust overwhelmed me, blinding me to all the problems arising from our relationship. The questions invoked by his strange confession would have to wait.

I took his hand, kissing it gently. After dressing, we slipped out into the night and walked along the deserted beach. We passed no one, and I didn't let my mind wander further than the feel of his hand in mine, or the sound of his voice.

In that moment, all was perfect, and repercussions didn't exist.

* * * *

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Chapter Eight

Azrael settled into his new "human" existence with charming awkwardness and a childlike delight. For in many ways he was a child; inexperienced and naive in the day-to-day functions of normal human life. There no longer existed the possibility of thinking himself where he wanted to go, or the ability to manipulate the environment or other life forms without physical touch. He stumbled through activities as inconsequential as doing laundry and using the DVR, learning as he went along.

I met each of these moments with him, touched with either delight or poignancy. Our roles had been reversed, and now I had become the strong one, the leader. I took that position as an honour. I wanted to please him and keep him safe, something I had never felt for a human being before, at least not on such a consuming, urgent level. My feelings toward him were something that could not be duplicated or replaced, and I understood that also meant a great responsibility had been placed on my shoulders.

One evening I awoke, finding myself alone in our bed. The fact that he was gone didn't alarm me, as he did at times do things on his own in the daylight hours. His presence touched me as soon as I searched for it, and I knew that he was close. Movement in the bathroom down the hall from our room caught my attention, and after pulling on a pair of boxer shorts I followed the noise to its source. The door stood slightly ajar, and I knew long before my hand touched the

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handle that Azrael was the occupant. His breathing and brain pattern had become so familiar to me I'd have known it no matter the circumstances.

I entered, expecting to find him shaving or coming out of the shower. He sometimes prepared himself away from our room so as not to disturb me, a thoughtfulness I found incredibly sweet. Instead I encountered a flaming red version of the man I loved, with only his torso untouched by an obviously horrendous sunburn. The smirk was stopped before it crossed my face, knowing that my amusement would be upsetting to Azrael. His pain couldn't be more blatant, and the closer I got the more severe the burn appeared to be. Blue eyes, watery and screaming with pain, met my gaze.

"What happened to you?" I asked, taking a seat beside him on the cool edge of the tub.

"I took the bus to the beach, since it was such a nice day. I walked around and read for a few hours, and when I decided to leave I realized I wasn't near the same entrance I'd come in through. I wandered out, trying to find a bus stop, but I was lost. I ended up walking back home, not exactly sure where I was going, and it took me nearly four hours to get back here."

"Azrael," I said, scrutinizing the extent of his infliction. "This is serious. Your neck and arms are blistering. I think we need to get you to a doctor."

He looked stricken at my words. "How can I go to the doctor? I have no identification. How will you explain who I am?"

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As I watched his face, feeling his panic stream through me, his lower lip cracked open. Blood sprang to the surface, so red and delicious that I became completely distracted from the current situation. Without thinking I lapped at it, my guilt instantaneous as Azrael winced at the contact.

"Sorry," I said, rather sheepishly. "You're right though, we need to get you some identification."

So I tended to his burn as best I could, after consulting several medical references. It took several days before he was comfortable again, but in a strange way the experience brought us even closer. I'd never looked after anyone before, never cared for someone or tended to their needs. I suffered his pain as my own, literally, as our closeness had given me an empathic connection to both his emotional and physical experiences. The familiar shadow of guilt returned. The situation would never have happened if Azrael hadn't lost his wings, been punished because of our relationship. It would never have happened if he hadn't fallen in love with me.

I have to do more to guide him and protect him from the perils of human existence.

It wasn't that Azrael wasn't knowledgeable or logical. The matter was simple; his omnipotent existence had never come into question before, and had certainly never failed him. There had never been a reason to worry about sunburns or stubbed toes, broken bones or bee stings. He had never been tired or hungry or stressed before. Roller coasters and hot tubs were magical experiences for him, as were bubble baths and live music. I couldn't even begin to comment on his enjoyment from food.

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It had been many weeks since he'd come to me stripped of his supernatural powers, and we had never once returned to the dialogue of that fateful night. The curiosity aroused by the hints he'd made of a past that didn't originate on Earth gnawed at me. I longed to know the truth about him, and his kind. His talk of returning to his "true nature," hinted that humans being had not been created in the image of a higher power, seeming more likely to be the other way around. It seemed that angels, or whatever type of being Azrael truly was, had taken on a man-like form to assimilate with the life already established on earth, to have a visual presence that humans could understand and relate to. All of these ideas squirmed about, desperate to be given voice, and yet I had remained mum. What was I waiting for?

While Azrael convalesced, I pushed aside these thoughts, focusing on the more urgent matter at hand. I started my plan to establish him an indisputable identity. First item: call Giovanni.

That fact that I called didn't surprise my maker in the least, but as the nature of my contact revealed itself his easy toned became guarded. "Have you found a human companion?" he questioned me.

"Yes," I answered, for lack of a better explanation.

"I see," he said, his tone imparting the need for more information.

"I don't know that this is a situation that can or should be explained over the phone." I returned, realizing only then that the situation was much bigger than a false identity. I needed guidance myself, and perhaps the voice of reason.

"Then perhaps it's time that Rachel and I came for a visit to the Land Down Under?"

We made arrangements for him and Rachel to come in about a week's time. Getting to Australia proved a difficult endeavour for those who could only travel at night. It meant extra travel time and the utmost in planning. Giovanni wanted to arrange for a private ship for as much of the travel as he could, and perhaps bring a human companion along to keep watch during daylight hours.

Giovanni had taken his own Dark Kiss some three hundred years ago, and had survived events that I could not even imagine going through. He was a unique immortal, not as cold and stoic as many of the elders were, and yet not completely in touch with his humanity either. He had long ago accepted his dark nature, becoming able to kill and steal without worry or guilt, but somehow still remained capable of love and friendship. I'd learned much in my years with him. I took great pride from being his progeny and comfort from his friendship. Rachel, another offspring and now his wife, had come into his life in the past quarter century, fulfilling a piece of him that had been lost since his change to immortal. His love for her was fierce and unbreakable, and the few times I'd been close to her I'd felt that she returned the sentiment with equal intensity. Until Azrael I'd never experience such a thing for myself.

Four nights later the ringing of my cell phone interrupted an intimate moment, but once I saw the number my focus changed like the flip of a light. Azrael regarded me quizzically when I abruptly disengaged from our encounter, but knew

from past experience that the serious expression on my face meant not to question my reason.

"Giovanni?" I said by way of salutation.

"We're at the docks. Come pick us up," the smooth voice at the other end of the line instructed. His voice resonated deep within me, so familiar and yet so apart from the place I now found myself.

"On my way," I answered and snapped the phone shut. I turned to Azrael, so beautiful and flushed with wantonness. "Get dressed. We have visitors."

Soon, the shadowy and nearly deserted docks appeared in the harsh slashes of light from the car's high beams. I made my way to the area where the private ships docked, not at all surprised to find two figures resting against the entrance, fully embraced in the darkness. Giovanni raised a hand in greeting as the car crept closer, then stopped. With a blur of movement he and Rachel were at the vehicle, depositing their luggage. In the next instant they were in the backseat of the car.

When I saw my maker, I couldn't help but smile, not just from the fact that we shared a warm relationship, but also from the fact that I was able to see him at all. Giovanni had experienced a grim brush with death, and the fact that he'd not succumbed to the unbelievable torture he'd been put through was a miracle. He pressed a cool kiss to my cheek. "It's good to see you Kieran."

"You too Giovanni. And Rachel," I answered, smiling at my maker's companion.

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"I've always wanted to get to Australia. I'm glad you gave a reason to come." Rachel flooded me with the warmth and sincerity of her words. She had an openness I enjoyed and did not often find with other immortals. Most tended to be guarded and cold, long removed from their human existences. She had the delicate features of a life-sized China doll, and long hair in a shade of red not known anywhere in nature. Not traditionally beautiful, she possessed a unique attractiveness that gave men pause. When combined with her intelligence, quick wit and fierce loyalty, I understood why Giovanni had fallen for her.

"You always make me smile Rachel."

"Are you going to introduce us to your friend?" Giovanni asked.

I flicked my gaze to Azrael, who appeared calm, but whose mind raced with uncertainty. When I met Giovanni's eyes once again, his face had hardened. He knew something was up.

"This is Azrael, my..."

"Lover?" Rachel piped up. Vampires had a tendency for bluntness.

"Boyfriend?" Giovanni asked with a smirk. He was not one to tease, but he seemed to be enjoying my reticence.

"Yes and yes," I replied. "And Azrael, this is my maker Giovanni and his wife Rachel."

"Nice to meet the two of you." Both vampires smiled in response to the deep timbre of his voice. His cheeks had flushed slightly from the reference to his being my lover, something I couldn't help but find adorable.

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"Now that we've been properly introduced, let's head back to my...ah, our place. There is a lot to discuss."

"I am starting to understand," Giovanni remarked. His brow wrinkled, and a slight frown pulled at his lips as he settled back against the seat. He gave Rachel a knowing glance, to which she returned an equally concerned expression, but didn't comment. As we started back through the dark streets I picked up on a stray thought from Giovanni.

This one is not entirely human.

I decided to let that sleeping dog lie until we were in the relative safety of my home. Azrael nervously drummed his fingers against the armrest on the door during the entire twenty minute drive. The sound grated on my sensitive ears, but I didn't chastise. I knew the attention to his discomfort would have only made the situation more tense.

We entered the house in a solemn procession, where Daniel waited dutifully with his infinite patience and unequalled calmness. The click of the lock into place offered me an unnatural comfort, though I knew as well as any that creatures more powerful than our own assembly circled in the night. The lock was an illusion of safety. Peril was always lurking, and sometimes it chose to look your way.

Daniel rose as we entered. He gave Giovanni a tight hug of welcome, and Rachel a quick peck on the cheek. I knew as well as he that Rachel didn't like him, but she was gracious and accepting of his greeting despite the flare of anger that his touch inspired. Rachel had also been through a traumatic experience, and the effects of her encounter with the mother of all immortals lingered still. Azrael absorbed the interactions

between us with thoughtful silence. He took a seat next to me on the couch, pressing his much larger frame up against the side of my body. Warmth spread into my cold flesh. I laced my fingers through his.

Daniel broke the silence. "I hope your trip was pleasant?"

"Yes," Giovanni answered. "I used a man I have dealt with before. He made the arrangements, and has some of the best security I have ever seen."

"It was lovely. I got to see some places I hadn't been to before," Rachel added.

"How is Australia treating the two of you? You have been here for some months now." Giovanni made unwavering eye contact with me as he spoke. If I could have sweated, beads would have been trickling down my back.

"It's wonderful to be back, though this isn't the part of the country where I grew up. But I love the city life," Daniel answered before I could.

"Kieran, how are you liking it?"

"Fine," I said, knowing Giovanni was only making small talk until I spilled the proverbial beans.

"Can we cut to the chase boys? There's obviously something funky going on. Your boyfriend here has the weirdest aura I've ever felt, not quite human and not quite supernatural either. What is he?"

Azrael squeezed my hand. "I was an angel, but the Supreme One did not approve of my feelings for Kieran. He took away my wings."

"You're an angel?" Rachel said, astonished.

"You've lost your wings?" Giovanni asked at just about the same moment.

I nodded. Giovanni pulled at his lower lip, and his eyes turned hard, as only an immortal's can. Rachel's initial astonishment slipped into concern. Worry tinged with fear rummaged through both of their supernatural brains, the fallout washing over me with a prickly, cool caress. Giovanni stood so suddenly that I jerked. He paced the length of the room for several minutes before speaking again.

"The Supreme One is your leader?" Giovanni asked.

"Yes, he controls all of those like me, as well as the various lesser beings that he has collected. He sees everything. His power is absolute."

Giovanni chose to ignore the broader implications of Azrael's statement. "Then he took your power from you, is that right? This was not a choice?"

"A choice to become mortal, absolutely not, but a choice to be with Kieran? Yes, I made it, and I would make it again."

"Do you think this Supreme One will stop at this? If he is as powerful as you say, then surely he could destroy the both of you."

"I cannot answer that. I know of no other situation remotely like this one."

"What are you thinking Giovanni?" I asked, not entirely sure I wanted to hear his answer.

He turned to me, hard eyes sparkling with the rush of his thoughts. "Kieran, Azrael, I am not one to pass judgment on any relationship, but this circumstance is unique, and from my considered opinion, dangerous. I do not think this

situation bodes well for either of you. I foresee tragedy ahead."

"You think we shouldn't be together?" I concluded, with sadness tightening my chest.

Giovanni shook his head. "No, I did not say that. I think it is quite obvious to everyone in this room that your feelings for one another are genuine and powerful. Allowing Azrael to become human must be some kind of test. I cannot believe that this will be allowed to go on indefinitely. I think at some point this Supreme One, as you call him Azrael, will end this one way or another. And when he does it will mean anguish for the both of you."

"What should they do then, Giovanni?" Daniel asked in a very quiet voice.

I'd almost forgotten he was there, the intensity of the situation had commanded my full attention. He looked at me, the expression on his boyish face difficult to read. Concern was present, for sure, but also a strange undercurrent of emotions. I felt influenced by equal parts worry, fear, and most surprisingly, jealousy. Eyes that were always bright had clouded, and his mouth set in a tight line. An odd compulsion to run from the room seized me.

This is not good.

"No it is not good, Kieran," Giovanni agreed. His connection to my mind was at times so clear and strong, it proved difficult to distinguish one's thought from the other. Being of his blood made this so, but I knew anxiety had lowered my psychic shields even further. "And as for what you should do? That I have not quite worked out yet. It would

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be best to think this over carefully, and not make any decisions in haste."

"Maybe we should run it by Charles? Or Alessandra?" Rachel suggested, naming two older and very powerful immortals.

"Perhaps." He sat down again. "Can you explain to us how this came to be?"

So I shared the story of how our relationship began. Azrael filled them in on some of the details of his past, his former mission, and the encounter with the Supreme One, which had led to the loss of his wings, and subsequently his supernatural power. My maker listened intently throughout the telling, and it felt good to be in his presence again, even under such dire circumstances. Our blood tie gave me comfort and a sense of protection. I trusted that he would find the answer to make the situation work.

Rachel and Giovanni then excused themselves to go out hunting. Daniel followed a few minutes later, leaving Azrael and me alone. The house screamed with indecision, worry a foul spirit that would not be laid to rest. I leaned my head against Azrael's chest, tracing a finger over the muscle definition in one arm. He sighed.

"No matter what happens, being with you is worth it. I have had more real happiness in these past few weeks together than in all the years I existed before. Until I met you I did not really exist. I had simply been a vessel, a grunt doing as the Supreme One instructed. Nothing was my own, if that makes any sense at all." His deep voice rumbled in his

chest as he spoke, a warm and pleasing sensation to my sensitive ear.

"I understand, I really do. I have lived for over a hundred years now, and I have always thought of myself as content, satisfied with the way things were. But with you, everything is exciting and fulfilling. I can't put this into words very well. Bottom line is, I never knew what love felt like before. It's changed everything for me."

"Show me." Then he pulled me to my feet and kissed me with such passion that every thought fled my brain.

With large, sturdy hands he picked me up and tossed me over one massive shoulder. He raced us down the hall towards our room, as I picked up on the series of lustful scenarios playing out in his mind. The door had barely closed behind us, and those same powerful hands reached forward and tore the shirt from my body. Sexual exhilaration rocked me. My growing erection strained against the front of my pants. As Azrael pressed against me, nuzzling at my ear, I could feel that his excitement equalled my own. Even without his otherworldly gifts, he was a powerful, commanding man. His rugged beauty stunned me every time I looked at him, and the sensation of his body against mine took me to maniacal levels of pleasure.

The sound of my zipper lowering snapped me out of my reverie. Adrenaline rocketed out from my overwhelmed brain, coursing through the sluggish flow of my blood. A wonderful ache tightened my groin. When we were both naked, I pulled Azrael to the bed.

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He rolled onto his back, offering his bare throat to me. I didn't resist. Hot, luscious blood filled my mouth, drawing the sensations in my body and mind to psychotic vibrancy. Passion and a sense of completion enveloped me. Nothing that felt so good could be wrong. Not to my skewed sense of morality anyway. Azrael gave a soft moan of pleasure as I sucked at his neck, arousing me even further.

When I dared not take any more I moved my mouth up to his, the taste of blood bold in our kiss. We made love with a desperation that neither could put into words. Even the distant possibility of being forced apart made us cling to each touch as though it would be our last.

Afterward I ran my hand through Azrael's hair, damp with perspiration, and tried to remember what it felt like to be human. I'd had a few bumbling, unsophisticated sexual encounters as a young man before Giovanni had found me, even a long-lasting, though unrequited crush on a girl from my village for several years. Looking back it all seemed a farce, a pathetic joke compared to my current circumstance. I kissed his warm forehead, and wondered if the loss of his angelic power was a curse, or a blessing. I wondered if Azrael enjoyed being human?

Then, out of nowhere, the craziest and most dangerous of ideas crossed through my mind. I knew it was the only way.

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Chapter Nine

"You cannot be serious Kieran!" Giovanni bellowed. His outrage manifested about him like a swarm of agitated May flies. I bristled at the intrusion of his surprised anger in my mind, the psychic sensation chaffing against my skin.

"Why not?" I demanded.

"Because it's suicide, that's why. You may as well go up to this Supreme One and beg for him to kill you. The both of you!" He closed the space between us as he shouted, not stopping until we were almost nose to nose.

"I can't lose him Giovanni," I said. My desperation surged so high I felt crazed. My skin pulled as though suddenly two sizes too small. A terrible throbbing appeared in my head, and my mouth became as dry as sand. I itched and ached all over. In frustration I burst into tears.

That stopped Giovanni in his tracks. He closed his eyes, letting a full minute pass before pulling me into his arms. With a spectacular rush of emotion I flashed back to the night Giovanni had given me the Dark Kiss. I re-lived the pain of being shot, and the cold weakness as my human life faded away. I remembered the feeling of his mouth on my throat and the sting of his teeth in my flesh. I remembered his blood scurrying through my veins, and the brilliance of my first night as vampire.

"Help me," I whispered, more confused and scared than I had ever been before.

"I do not know that I can, my dear one," he answered.
"But I will do my best."

We all took a seat in the spacious living room—Giovanni, Rachel, Azrael, Daniel, and myself—to put our heads together. I broached my suggestion again, this time in a much calmer and clearer state, and waited for the other's responses.

"I do not think this is a wise course of action," Giovanni answered, reiterating his earlier outburst with a more neutral tone.

"I second that," Rachel agreed.

Daniel made a pained expression, and nodded his head. "I get why you feel this way Kieran, I really do. You know I've come to love you very much, and that's why I will do everything I can to change your mind about this. Giovanni is right. If you change Azrael into an immortal, the Supreme One will surely destroy you, and perhaps all of us."

"And that's your true reason for opposing this?" I asked.

Daniel's eyes narrowed, a dare to say more. "Yes."

"Do I have a say in any of this?" Azrael interjected into the conversation, which had taken a decidedly hostile downturn.

Giovanni switched gears, and seemed to meet Azrael's query with an open mind. "Of course. This is your life after all. And your relationship." His expression softened even further as he took Rachel's hand.

"Love sometimes calls for desperate measures," Rachel commented.

Everyone took pause at that statement. Giovanni and Rachel had been to Hell and back to save their relationship. If

anyone could understand what I was going through, it was them.

"What do you want Azrael?" Giovanni asked.

"To be with Kieran. Plain and simple. I understood the consequences when I became involved with him. I knew that the Supreme One would discover our relationship sooner or later. And when he did, I challenged him to explain why our love for one another was wrong, knowing full well that it could result in my destruction." He turned to Kieran. "I am not saying that I want to become like you. I have to think that over. What I am saying is that I will give it serious consideration. And for now I am happy to be with you as I am."

"What are your thoughts on the ramification of being changed should you decide to accept the offer? Do you not think the Supreme One would be infuriated?" my maker asked, ever pragmatic.

"Of course he would be furious, Giovanni. But he is also wise and kind, at least I have always viewed him as so until these recent events. His capacity for tolerance is greater than any being I have ever encountered. I do not believe he would pass judgment out of hand, even in light of the situation we find ourselves in. Believe me, I understand fully the danger this could bring to all of us here. I would never bring harm to Kieran or his friends with selfishness. Remember he has interfered very little with your kind, only stepping in to deal with the most violent and reckless. He is that way with all the life forms of this world. He is aware of all whose lives you

take, and the fallout of those deaths, many of whom become mine to console."

"Why do you think he allowed you to live? To come back to Kieran?" Rachel asked.

"Because he believes in love above all else, no matter the form in which it comes. I think in his own way, he was trying to give me time to understand my feelings. He had to have known how strong my conviction is, to have turned my back on all I have ever known and been. That said, I also think he believes that in being given this time with Kieran I would come to see the error of my ways and return to him. He believes my duty will prove a stronger calling than my love."

"And if you don't return?" my maker wondered.

"When he understands that I will not return of my own volition, then any number of things might happen, the majority of them not to our benefit."

A terrible silence filled the room like poisonous gas. Supernatural brains scurried with thoughts. Azrael's mind churned through two distinct areas, which in truth were not mutually exclusive; his unquestionable love for me and his worry for all our safety. What could be done to prepare for a confrontation that may never come? And if it did, how could the Supreme One be conquered? Could he be compromised with, or persuaded to feel compassion for beings that fed off the humans he had dedicated himself to protect and nurture? It didn't seem likely.

I hadn't fed in a couple of nights, and that burgeoning weakness combined with the stress of the situation finally broke me. I needed blood. I needed fear to quiet the

tormenting thoughts racing through my overactive brain. The soothing darkness called to me, tempting me to flee into its cold beauty. There I could simply be as I was and pretend my problems didn't exist.

"I need to go," I mumbled before tearing out of the room.

Out in the night air the pressure eased, and the phantom hands about my throat and heart subsided. Without any conclusive plan I'd headed in the direction of the beach. I found myself at the damp shore. The water's soft lapping teased me, offering solace where I knew there was none to be found. A desperate urge to dive into the cool, liquid blackness and swim until I could no longer move seized me, taunting me with promises of peace.

"Don't do it Kieran."

Startled, I turn at the sound of the voice. Daniel stood less than ten feet away. His troubled expression was hard to face, even more so were the clearly broadcast thoughts, forcing their way into my own. An icy anger had been simmering within the usually quiet and reserved Daniel. He'd watched the growth of my relationship with Azrael in bitter silence, feeling our need and love for one another develop beyond the point where it could ever have been stopped or cooled. Daniel worried about me, cared about me. And since the night I'd taken him to my bed he'd carried a quiet, yet volatile desire that he could not escape.

"I won't." I turned back toward the ocean.

Then he was at my side, hand on my arm. "You have to let him go Kieran. It's the only way."

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"I can't do it. I love him more than my own existence!" I cried.

"I'll help you, Kieran. I will never leave you," he said, attempting to pull me into an embrace.

"Help me into your bed, you mean," I snapped at him bitterly. "I'm not one of your victims, you know. What happened between us was a mistake."

A flicker of rage shot from deep within that part of himself he liked to pretend didn't exist. Pain quickly replaced the anger, and I felt sick with shame for lashing out at him that way. Daniel had been nothing but a true friend, loyal and caring, and he didn't deserve to be dumped on. In truth his feelings were my own fault. I'd initiated the union without thought to consequence or the effect it might have on him. In his own way, Daniel was fragile. His whole existence walked a fine line between acceptance and remorse. Were it not for the monster he'd been in life, he would not be the monster he'd become in death. Sadder still, he knew the truth of this better than any, and did his best to pass his dark existence with careful consideration of every action he took.

"I come to you only as a friend. I don't expect anything else. My feelings are my own to deal with, and I'm sorry that what happened between us has changed our friendship. I only want you to be safe." His lower lip held a slight tremor, but he did not cry. He looked so young then, the moon washing him in silvery light.

I gripped his hand, bringing it up to my cheek. He stood still, as only an immortal could, his uncertainty in how to react permeating the damp air. My cold lips met his, and a

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shudder wracked his body. "You are my friend. Always. Let's hunt," I said.

For the first time in months, we strolled the busy Sydney streets together, careful of keeping our conversation light and sparse. Then was not a time to mend any rifts in our friendship. We could only muddle through the reality of the present, hopeful of coming out on the other side unscathed and with our friendship intact. The loss of Daniel was a void I didn't think I would ever fill, and I prayed it wouldn't come to that.

Soon, two drunken college boys stumbled into our paths. Without needing to speak we joined them, easily catching their intoxicated minds without supernatural influence. They led us back to the home they shared, a pigsty of a place that reeked of garbage and marijuana. Neither died, though they'd both be worse for wear when they awoke the next day. The blood loss would keep them weak for a couple of days, and their brains would itch with the loss of a stolen memory. It was a pleasant escape from a situation that seemed it could end no way but badly, however brief.

I found Azrael in the backyard upon our return. His warm, sensual energy touched me even before the house came into view. Our connection had become so strong in our months together that it seemed I carried a part of him in me wherever I went. He lived in my heart, my mind and blood. And as true as it was that I felt his love in the aura of his life, I also knew when he was troubled. A sourness tinged his usually pleasant temperament, alerting me to how deeply the worry for our future affected him.

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He looked up as I walked across the lawn. His smile melted the armour of fear I wore that night, stripping me down to the purest part of my being. I tried to reason with myself, and make sense of exactly what it was that affected me so. His kindness? His beauty? The answer to both was a resounding yes, but it boiled down to the selfless love he had for me, and an attachment that not even pain or threat could break. For whatever twisted, nonsensical reason, Azrael loved me with all that he was, and all that he'd given up.

"You feel better now?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You fed?"

"Yes," I repeated. "Daniel found me, and helped me calm down."

"He loves you Kieran," Azrael commented, but did not express any sentiment beyond that, though his inner reflection betrayed the true emotion behind his statement.

"We're only friends."

"Yes. For now."

An argument wouldn't solve anything, so I let the comment pass. Instead I took him into my arms, and loved him until the sun devoured the night.

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Chapter Ten

After many attempts to convince me that giving Azrael the Dark Kiss would be a horrific idea, and much research into anything that might shed light on a positive conclusion to my situation, Giovanni and Rachel bid farewell. Elder immortals had been consulted, even religious scholars had been contacted, all to no avail. Rachel had many contacts in the world of academia, herself a knowledge junkie, but even she could not provide any satisfactory answers. Answers simply were not available. No such circumstance had ever occurred before, and the only one who could alter the course we were on remained silent. Further confusing the situation was the fact that Azrael hadn't accepted or refused the offer of the Dark Kiss.

I promised Giovanni I'd stay in touch, and all major decisions would be made known to him in advance. His departure was not an easy one, for either of us.

Daniel stayed away as much as he could, and never questioned nor pressured me in any way. I knew he wanted me for himself, but I also knew he'd never attempt to intervene in my relationship with Kieran. His familiar persona touched my mind on occasion, wandering in and mingling amongst my own thoughts at times when I let myself fret. His touch was gentle, calming away the worst of the what-ifs my guilty conscience produced. I used that comfort as I had once selfishly used his body.

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As more weeks passed my paranoia ran wild. I lived with a brain overrun with one terrible scenario after another. I came to expect confrontation at every turn. My happiness was slowly being leached away, turning to bitterness. I felt undeserving of having Azrael with me. Guilt twisted my brain into knots, constricting tighter with each hungry kiss. Deep down I felt the truth of Daniel's words. I should let Azrael go, not just for his good, but for the good of all the people presently denied his comfort and assistance.

One night while Azrael and I strolled the downtown area, streets thrumming with life, I caught a group of young women giving the two of us a very obvious look-over. They all had the fresh-faced glow of youth, while the rampant lust of womanhood coursed through their overlapping thoughts. The group was seated on a restaurant patio, having a bite to eat and deciding which club to peruse that night. Azrael noticed me watching them, and gave me the silent "what's up?" I'd become accustomed to.

Standing there, appraising the allure of each individual woman, it suddenly struck me that Azrael had never known the pleasure of a female body. I thought back to the last woman I had been with, and recalled Azrael interrupting me with the pretty blonde on the beach. I remembered how sweet her hair had smelled, the press of her warm breasts against my body. What was it about me that Azrael was so attracted to? It could not be solely a physical attraction, for the pleasure we took from each other surpassed that of the body.

What was I getting at? Oh, how my brain ached. Best to act, not think.

One of the women had picked up on me watching them. She turned to whisper in her friend's ear. I couldn't help but smile when she told her friend how gorgeous she thought we were. Looking at my love, dressed in flattering modern clothes and his dark hair tousled, I had to agree. I took his hand, causing the whole group of women to giggle, and led him in their direction.

"Good evening ladies," I said with a smile. Four hearts suddenly upped in tempo, and the soft flush of nervousness and excitement touched their lovely faces.

When asked to join them, we agreed. A waiter brought two more chairs over, and Azrael and I found ourselves commanding their complete attention. Their desires couldn't have been more apparent. How easy it would be to have any, or all of them. The women were as equally smitten with Azrael, without the influence of supernatural suggestion. More than one of them wondered if all parts of his anatomy were proportioned to his large hands and broad torso.

His hand brushed along the back of my neck, and I turned to find him leaning in towards me. Before I could say a word he kissed me, igniting a spark of longing deep inside my core. The blonde beside me, Megan, took a sharp intake of breath. She'd never seen two men kiss in real life before, and though she'd suspected we were together the action surprised her.

"That's hot," said Jamie, a vapid, attractive brunette whose thoughts consisted entirely of clothing, make-up and money.

"So you guys are like a couple?" Megan asked.

"Yes," I answered, leaning into Azrael's warm body, enjoying the thrill it not only gave me, but also elicited collectively from the women.

"Why don't we head back to my place for a drink?" the one named Sandy asked. Behind the neutral tone of her question, lay the truth of her intentions—*where we can all get naked*. An image of a large hot tub flashed through her lust-heightened mind.

"Sounds good to me." I stood. Azrael had a moment's reluctance that washed over me like a cool breeze. The effect startled me, though I made no outward reaction. He didn't understand my interest in the women, and at that moment I didn't have a clear plan in mind. If I thought too much about it, I'd have to admit that the situation I had created was a way to test Azrael's devotion, and perhaps give him an out to a situation even I was losing hope of a happy ending to.

The ladies led us to a townhouse within walking distance of the downtown core, the type of place that cost way too much for the amount of space it provided, the price influenced by the close accessibility to shopping and other amenities. Inside it had been decorated with earthy tones and sharp modern furniture. At the rear of the main floor was a dining room, with a well-stocked bar, and sliding doors opening onto a private, professionally landscaped yard. In one corner sat the hot tub that had flashed through Sandy's mind earlier. She was itching to see both Azrael and myself naked and wet.

I felt warmth at my elbow, then a female voice spoke very close to my ear. "A drink Kieran?" Jamie's eyes were bright with lust.

"Wine, please." A few sips wouldn't hurt me.

Another thing that Azrael had yet to experience with any gusto—alcohol. It just may be the night to strike two birds with one stone. Soon an expensive crystal glass containing a nice merlot was placed in my hand. Azrael had been drinking beer at the restaurant, so Sandy appeared with a new bottle, cold condensation dripping down the glass. He took it with a smile, and chugged back half in one gulp. I raised my hand in "cheers" in his direction, winning me an affectionate look. I could tell by the impending fuzziness to his thoughts that the alcohol was taking effect.

"So you two are really gay?" Jamie said suddenly. Megan's face reddened with embarrassment over her friend's bluntness, but Jamie herself didn't feel she'd said anything inappropriate.

"Uh-huh," I answered, coming to Azrael's side and sliding my arm about his waist. I kissed the warm, salty skin of his neck.

"You must disappoint a lot of ladies, 'cause you are both gorgeous," Jamie continued in her frank and unintentionally insensitive way.

"Jamie," Megan admonished. "Please excuse her. She doesn't think about anyone's feelings but her own."

I smiled and shrugged my shoulder, indicating no hard feelings. Sandy had walked over to the tub, checking the heat. All the women were more than a little tipsy, Sandy more inebriated than the others. I gathered from a quick perusal of her mind that this was a common state in the last several months. The drinking problem and the home in which

we stood, had been the outcome of a recent divorce. She thought screwing the brains out of some hot, younger guy would make her feel better for her husband leaving her for another woman.

"How's the water?" I called out, flirtatiousness dripping from every word.

"Why don't you come and find out?" She smiled in my direction, determined to seem more confident than she felt. It had been many years since she slept with anyone but her ex-husband.

I walked over to her, and with a little wink shed my clothes down to my boxer shorts. She gave out a snort of laughter, then stripped to her own underclothes. She'd obviously had some work done and hit the gym on a regular basis, the expensive pink bra she wore highlighting her large, perky breasts. We settled into the bubbling, liquid warmth with our drinks. Azrael came to the side of the tub.

"What's going on here Kieran," he whispered to me.

"Just having some fun."

He looked like he didn't quite believe me, but by then Jamie had joined us, splashing her way into the tub. A spray of water landed on Azrael's face. I ran my tongue along one side, not at all surprised when Sandy joined me to lick the other. Azrael wavered between reticence and intrigue. Her touch felt good, but he didn't understand why I would want anyone else to touch him. Or why he wasn't enough to satisfy me.

"Come on in" Sandy purred.

"And someone get this man another drink," I called out.

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Azrael looked to me for guidance and I nodded. Megan and the fourth woman, Serena, were making their way over to us with a tray full of alcohol. As Azrael pulled his shirt off over his head, revealing his hard, impressive torso, Megan stumbled, almost dumping the drinks to the ground. Jamie let out a loud catcall. When he was all but naked, he took a seat next to me. Sandy snuggled up along side of him, running her hand over his chiselled abs. Serena placed another beer in Azrael hands, which he obligingly drained in short order.

I crooked my finger at Megan, who had also slipped into the water, and she came to me. Her nervousness was unmistakable, making her eyes bright and wide. *This can't be real*, she thought over and over again in her head. When close enough to touch I grabbed her by the hair at the back of her head and yanked her toward me. It wasn't forceful enough to hurt, but it definitely got her attention. When my lips pressed into hers, Azrael tensed beside me.

Sandy followed suit, straddling herself across Azrael's lap for better leverage. She had her mouth on his neck as we made eye contact, and with a quick nod I instructed him to relax. Soon Sandy had her tongue down his throat, and I returned my attention to my own potential conquest. I slid my hand up her side and over her ample breasts, garnering a small murmur of surprise. Jamie appeared at Megan's back, and unhooked the other woman's bra. As it fell into the water, she came around to my side, and I could see that she had already removed her own. I lowered my mouth to one of Jamie's breasts, flicking my tongue over her hardened nipple. She moaned.

Azrael's hand touched mine under the water, and I turned to find him in a similar situation. Serena had joined Sandy, and they were both caressing and kissing every part of him. He seemed a bit bewildered. I squeezed his hand and tried to read the thoughts racing as quickly as his pulse. The situation and the alcohol were both doing a number on him, and I knew if I pushed he'd go with whatever I wanted.

After a bit more foreplay in the hot tub, which alternated between me and either Megan or Jamie, or the two women engaging in some hot girl-on-girl action that I freely admit I enjoyed watching, I led the group back into the house. By then all inhibitions had been lost, and libidos were running wild. Once inside I bent Megan back over a beautiful cherry dining table, ripping off the wet panties that still clung to her skin. Jamie helped in making sure that both Megan and I were fully aroused, before taking a front row seat. She watched with unabashed interest as I had my way with her friend. Megan was a screamer, which only seemed to turn Jamie on more. She sat on the floor watching us and masturbating with enthusiasm.

When I finished, I did a brief scan of the room, trying to figure out what had happened to Azrael and the other two women. Jamie started to make sounds of protest when I didn't immediately have sex with her, but with a subtle pull at her mind she and Megan followed me into the other room like obedient puppies. There I found Azrael sprawled on a leather loveseat, while the two women at his feet alternated pleasuring him with their mouths. I sat beside him, naked and aroused.

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"Take one of them," I whispered in his ear.

He gave me a pained look.

"Which one do you like?"

He gave them all a quick glance, then pointed at Jamie. I grabbed her as I stood. "Where's the bedroom?" I asked Sandy.

She told me, looking more than a little put out that she wasn't the one chosen. I gave them all a silent reassurance that their time would come, then led Jamie and Azrael to a more private space.

We entered a beautifully decorated room, draped in a cloying aroma of expensive perfume. An enormous bed commanded the room, draped with a silk bed set that I would have bet cost more than most people's monthly salary. I told Jamie to lie on the bed, which she did without hesitation. Her body trembled with anticipation. I cupped one breast with my hand, lowering my mouth to her flesh. Azrael did likewise, mimicking my actions. I slipped my fingers between Jamie's legs, finding her warm and eager.

Then I dropped to my knees and continued what the women had been doing to Azrael in the other room. When he was hard as steel, I guided him inside Jamie's moist opening. She gasped at the size of him and pushed her hips up to meet his body. Azrael's sounds became more guttural with each thrust.

Once their escapade was fully underway I returned to the living room and fulfilled my promise to the other three women. When Jamie and Azrael joined us sometime later, all the women were sweaty and tired, but more than willing for

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another round. All types of sexual relations ensued, and endless positions and combinations were explored. In the end, both Azrael and I had been with all the women, and each other.

He had his head against my shoulder as I glanced at the clock on the mantle. About an hour remained before sunrise.

"We should get home," I said to him.

He murmured his agreement, and we started the chore of locating all of our clothing. When we were dressed we gave our hostess a kiss goodbye, but made no promises of a return visit. I left a parting impression with the women to forget what we looked like. When they awoke there would only be a hazy recollection of an alcohol-fuelled orgy, and the telltale physical signs of a night of wild sex.

Once we were back at our place, and lying on our own bed, Azrael finally let loose the thoughts that had troubled him despite the physical exhilaration of the night. "Why did you want this to happen Kieran?"

"I don't want you to miss out on anything. You have walked away from everything blindly for love. There are so many things you've never experienced as a man! Like tonight, you'd never been with a woman before."

"None of that matters to me. There is nothing missing from my life here, I have everything I could ever want. My love is for you only. Now I have to wonder if your feelings run as deeply as mine." Since the alcohol-infused compliancy had begun to wane, the stark truth of what had happened that evening became clear.

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Those words, soaked with his despondency, ripped my heart wide open. I'd brought shame to the one pure thing in my life—my relationship with Azrael. Deep down I knew I wasn't worthy of his love, that my very nature was an insult to everything he represented. The truth was, my actions had not been to please him or expose him to new wonders, they had been to push him away. I wasn't strong enough to leave him myself.

But I did love him just as much as he did me. That I could not deny, nor escape.

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Chapter Eleven

The night with the women left its mark on our relationship, as obvious and painful as a festering wound. I still felt that Azrael had come to his decision to be with me under the clouded veil of love and lust, which most knew could cause impulsive and sometimes reckless actions. And this course of action had not only changed Azrael's life, it would affect all the lives he no longer watched over. The longer we were together and the deeper our feelings grew, the more intense this sense of guilt became.

He'd forgiven me, and told me as much. I could tell his words were true by the thoughts that passed through his mind, and the continued strength of his affection for me. I knew then that he would love me no matter the depravity of my actions, and that truth sickened me beyond all reason. I could so easily twist him into a creature as vile and contemptible as me, draining away his goodness with each day in my bed. In a surprising way this realization troubled me, as I had never thought of myself in such a way before, despite the inherent nature of the creature I was. I'd always been at ease with what I'd become, flowing from one place or time period to another.

He stirred beside me, and I curled along his side, twisting my fingers through his thick hair. How could I live without his warmth, his piercing eyes, his scent? Whatever part of my humanity that had not yet been extinguished by my dark desires would surely perish if he left me.

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I felt the sun slip into night and I rose from bed, careful not to disturb Azrael as he slept. I washed my face and dressed in some clean clothes before heading out to feed. As I wandered toward town I made up my mind to do something special for Azrael upon my return. He deserved to be taken out and pampered. I needed to reassure him that my love was true and unwavering. I needed to make amends for my nefarious ways. Whatever time we were allowed together needed to be cherished. Azrael had been sound asleep, so I hoped to get to town and back before he awoke. He did worry when I left without telling him.

Plans were wrapping up in my mind when a form suddenly appeared before me. I had reached a residential area where the streets were quiet. Families ate and talked behind closed doors, none the wiser to what prowled the streets of their seemingly safe neighbourhood. I blinked and the figure appeared closer, mimicking an old vampire trick. The action caught me off guard. I tested the space about me with my mental abilities, discovering only nothingness. Not even the hint of the supernatural could be found. Whatever was approaching me could block my psychic touch completely. Even Azrael, who had been stronger than me in his angelic form, had given off some aura, a hint to his supernatural origin.

The face of my confronter materialized out of the hazy darkness. Like blinders had been lifted from my eyes, the face became startlingly clear. Before me stood a slight, rather nondescript young man with close-cropped brown hair. It was a face you could pass a hundred times, and never remember,

save for the haunting beauty of the eyes. I remembered that Rachel had had a similar thought about me the first night we met, except for her it had been my smile that changed her opinion.

The caramel-coloured eyes could not mask the power lurking behind the most innocent of facades. Not to a creature that carried its own taint of unnatural ability anyway. Suddenly the air about him hummed with energy, far beyond the norm of human life. It touched my skin like fire, leeching my own strength.

"Kieran, at last we meet." The voice that spoke was somehow more than sound, it was a force that penetrated all of my senses, blocking out notice of the world around me.

The disorientation and loss of control reminded me of the unfortunate incident with a poison dart in Peru, but this influence was far beyond the product of man.

"I believe I know who you are, yet the only name I have is the Supreme One. Is this the way you wished to be addressed?"

"What would you like to call me Kieran," he asked with a gentle squeeze to my grey matter.

For some unknown reason the image of my eldest brother Seamus, long dead and buried, popped into my mind. He'd been three years younger than me, and of all my siblings the one I'd been closest to. Losing him after my change had been difficult, and I'd locked his memory away so deeply it had been decades since his name had crossed my mind. Now his image taunted me, and once fully formed it would not be turned away.

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The figure began to shimmer and throb, pushing beyond the confines of its current human form and taking on a wholly new appearance. Right before my eyes the man became the spitting image of my brother Seamus, right down to the small scar on his left cheek, which had been acquired during an accidental fall from a hayloft in a neighbour's barn. I reached forward to meet the warm flesh with my trembling hand. Though I knew the presence was nothing but an illusion, I couldn't stop the flood of emotions at seeing a part of my past again.

"This isn't real!" I cried.

"Of course it isn't Kieran, but the feelings you're experiencing are. This must be cathartic for you, a real chance to grieve for the brother you abandoned when you became a part of this sordid life."

"What do you want?" I demanded, unable to prevent the crack in my emotional defences from widening. The shock of my brother's face before me ripped the scab off a hurt I'd believed fully healed and accepted. The telltale tightening in my throat had begun, and my sight blurred from the tears welling in my eyes.

"I want to give you a personal taste of what taking Azrael away from his mission is doing to the people of this planet. Without him, whether they are aware of his influence or not, many will not make it through the loss of their loved ones. That is not to say that they too will die in the physical sense, but that they may not be successful in passing through the stages of grief, which will enable them to carry on with their lives. Many will remain trapped in pain, anger and

resentment." He'd taken my hand as he spoke, and I noticed that even the cadence of his voice and his scent mimicked that of my long-dead brother, an unnerving trick on his part.

"I understand what I'm taking away from the world. I have struggled with this realization every day."

"Do you really understand, Kieran? Do you understand the millions of lives that Azrael monitors and guides? And beyond the ones still living, do you understand how crucial he is in guiding those lost souls to their final resting place? For you see this is not just his mission, this is his gift."

"Why don't you just kill me then? And all vampires? Surely you have the power to wipe us all off the face of the earth should you so choose!" I choked on the last few words, the sound incomprehensible, but I knew he understood.

What he did next surprised me. His thin arms wrapped about my body and he pulled me close. I found his touch both soothing and terrifying. His embrace created a pocket of protection, and yet I remained fully aware of how easy it would be to succumb to his captivity, to allow myself to become his victim. His power breathed warmth and love, but that love held an ominous undercurrent. His judgment was final and absolute, and could be passed quicker than the blink of an eye.

I wondered, while swimming in the overwhelming cascade of sensations his embrace offered, whether a creature that had never been human could truly understand the complexity of their needs and the driving power of their emotions and physical longings. Azrael had made it clear that his kind were not born of this planet, but that they had come to it sometime

in the very distant past. The details of his origins remained hazy, but I knew enough to understand that, unlike me, this creature had never been human.

"Why do humans need to be monitored? And why is it that you have taken on the role of ultimate authority?" I boldly asked as he pulled from the embrace.

"This is what I do, vampire. I help primitive beings evolve, guiding them to the point they can be left to their own accord. I have done it many times, and will continue to do so long after this world has been extinguished."

"Why do you talk in riddles? I am tired of playing this game with you. There must be someone else who can take on Azrael's role. All we want is to be left alone!"

"There are no riddles. I am telling you quite plainly that this relationship cannot be. You have been led astray, Kieran. Everything you take for truth is lies. Only I can set you free."

"The only thing I want to be free from is your intrusion. I will give you anything you want if you just leave Azrael and I alone."

"Then give me this—a chance to show you the how and when of your divergence from the true path." Then it was no longer my brother's face looking back at me, but Giovanni's. His blue eyes regarded me with cool contemplation, and for the first time since my change I felt a spark of anger towards my maker. Surely it was the product of the Supreme One's influence. I wasn't angry with Giovanni for giving me the Dark Kiss. I'd always embraced what I'd become. I enjoyed being a vampire.

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"I thought we should start from where this all began, or from where your life ended, might be a more accurate description," he said in Giovanni's cool, seductive voice.

Before I could even open my mouth to answer we were whisked away in a cyclone of stinging light and immense, throbbing pressure. My brain boiled within my skull, my fear a cold dagger in my throat. We hurtled through time and space like we'd been shot from a giant cannon, my body immobile and vulnerable. A cold spasm of terror shot through my blood at the realization that I was unable to protect myself from the disturbing course of action. The Supreme One's arms about me seemed to be the only thing saving me from slipping away, lost in a chasm of nothingness.

After an immeasurable amount of time I was regurgitated out of the unnatural plane in which we travelled, colliding with something solid, where I soon realized I had been dumped onto the hard-packed soil of a dark, flat landscape. The air held a familiar scent, which tickled at my human memories buried behind years of immortal existence. My eyes adjusted quickly, and in scanning the area about me it became clear where we were. And when.

The field we'd been deposited on lay adjacent to the land of my boyhood home, a desolate and unproductive bit of earth that could not support the number of bodies it currently housed. My house sat at the far end of the empty lot, rundown and inadequate in providing cover or warmth to those housed inside. The smell of mould and despair had been heavy in that house, and thinking about my years there brought the sensation alive. I remembered the hunger pains,

which had been as commonplace then as the rising sun each morning.

"I've taken you back to about a month after your change. To your family you have disappeared. Your mother was understandably heartbroken, with you being her eldest child, and the one she relied on to help with your younger siblings."

"But they managed?" I said, my words part question, part defiant retort.

"Most," he answered, and catching me by the elbow steered me towards the forlorn structure.

The faces of my brothers and sisters danced about in my rattled brain, eliciting joy and sadness, and a resounding sense of loss. Shelagh, Mary-Clare, Roisin, Seamus, Lochlan, Cillian, and Dermot all teased their way out of the shadowy vaults of my long lost human life, forever frozen in their respective ages at my change. All of our faces had been strongly similar, with blue eyes and hair in the fair to reddish hues. My locks had been the stand-out, a light brown like our father's, with a hint of curl.

My father's face, thin and aged beyond his years from heavy work, flashed before my eyes. A proud man he'd been, tough and resourceful, always the first to go without so that his wife and children would be looked after. Though he had been stern in his child-raising duties, he'd also had a tender heart. He took time with each of us to pass along the wisdoms he'd collected over his life; taking us fishing, teaching us how to handle a horse, how to sow a field. Best of all he'd share with us his beautiful voice, and taught us to

dance. The image of my family in one of those happy times captured me, a beautiful and cherished memory.

Then another memory wormed its way into my thoughts, one that wiped the smile from my face. The pain in my heart proclaimed itself, as bright and furious as it had been on the evening we received notice of his death from an unfortunate accident. My father had been one of the lucky men in the area to be picked for work on a nearby manor home that a wealthy family had wished to renovate. He had been crushed when a stone wall not properly secured, had given way. The money he had been bringing in had given the family fresh meat and ample firewood for the upcoming winter, not to mention new shoes for all the children. When he died, we not only returned to our former level of income, but we slipped even further into poverty.

I'd been the man of the house then, at barely fifteen years old. I had already been working about our home, and on a part-time basis at a neighbour's farm, but I was then forced to seek work wherever I could find it. It was not an easy task, the country was gripped with widespread famine after several seasons of poor crops, and the government had not been quick to respond. My anger has already asserted itself because of the poor and desperate conditions in which we lived, but my father's death pushed me over the edge. Though I did work, I squandered as much money on drink as I gave to my mother..

All of this had led me to my fateful encounter with Giovanni. I'd crossed paths with him outside of a home that I and a group of hoodlums had been robbing, a stupid thing to

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have done, I now know. Had he not stepped in when he did I would have surely died of the gunshot wounds I sustained when the owner unexpectedly returned.

Looking back on that night, I had always viewed it as a moment of re-birth, not loss. From this encounter I received a chance to experience the world as I had never even imagined. I was given access to riches, knowledge, travel, things so far beyond the angry, dirty life I'd been living. There are not adequate words to explain the impact of Giovanni's presence on my being. He'd saved me.

A tug at my arm returned me to reality. The faux Giovanni stared straight ahead at the dwelling, calm and silent. Each step closer to the house made my belly heavier with dread. The shutterless windows watched our approach like weeping eyes. Seeing it again, the house seemed even more desolate and sad than I remembered.

Once within an arm's length of the structure, the prickly, heavy sensation grabbed me again, and together we jumped forward. We'd somehow passed through the stone and wood, to find ourselves standing in the large, central kitchen where my family huddled about a low-standing table, finishing up the remnants of their evening meal. My mother's eyes were red and glassy, her plate sitting untouched before her.

I turned to the Supreme One, again startled to find Giovanni's likeness looking back at me. "Can they see us?"

"No, we are simply observing here, but I have given you the ability to use your senses, so that this experience will be as real as possible. I want you to see, and smell and taste the effect your disappearance had on your family."

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It was true, the moment felt real, unbearably so. The smoky air from the hearth gave the room a hazy, heavy feeling, and the lamb and stewed vegetables caught the attention of my keen sense of smell. The meal finished in near silence, a wide departure from the usual boisterous conversation and laughter that accompanied most meals.

I looked to each face in turn, drinking in every line, contour and freckle. Mary-Clare, the youngest at just over a year, lay in a homemade crib beside my mother. She stirred, catching my mother's attention, who lightly ran a hand along her back. My mother's appearance shocked me. She was forty years old, wrinkles pulling at her eyes, and the exposed skin on her arms and face mottled with sun damage. Generous streaks of grey filled her long mane of hair. I didn't remember her looking so haggard, so broken by life. Had my loss done so much damage in such a short amount of time? It didn't seem possible.

She looked up then, as though in response to my scrutiny, and the sadness in her eyes shamed me to the core. Despite the limitations of our financial situation, my mother had always been kind and loving, and took great pride in her family. She read to us, sang with us, tried to make our tiresome chores as enjoyable as possible. We all learned to read by her tutelage, and we all clamoured to be right at her side when she shared the legends and tales of her childhood with us on cold winter nights. Our collective favourite had been the story of Tir Nan Og and its mythical inhabitants. How many times had I fallen asleep dreaming of that fantastical place as a boy?

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This time, this life on display before me was so far removed from where I'd ended up. A poor Catholic farm boy to murderous, lust-filled monster, a journey too unbelievable to be true, and yet it was. But the life I now viewed, as true and real as it appeared, held its own falsehoods. Seeing it now, after so much time and so far removed from the feelings I'd known then, it was a romanticized version of what had really been. Now I could feel loss and remorse, when then it had been nothing but frustration, fear and anger. Why did the Supreme One think seeing this would make me want to turn my back on being a vampire? Further still, what would I find in this harsh, angry life that I wouldn't in Azrael's arms?

I watched as Shelagh and Roisin helped my mother clear the table and wash the dishes from the evening meal, as dutiful daughters of the time were expected to do. It was preparation for when they would have their own families and homes to manage. Shelagh had been fifteen when I'd disappeared, about a year and a half younger than Seamus, and Roisin ten. I'd never thought about it then, but I could see that Shelagh was much more woman than girl, and if I'd not met Giovanni I wouldn't have been surprised if she had married in the next year or so. She'd fancied a boy her age named Donal, who the family knew through church. I had always assumed they would end up together. I wondered if they did.

I guess it surprised me then how little I knew about what happened to my family. Giovanni and I had gone on to mainland Europe, wandering about for several years. I never made any attempt to contact my family or check in on them

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in any way in the seven years he and I had spent together. Any number of things could have happened in that amount of time. Look at what had happened in my own life in a matter of months.

When we'd parted ways, I'd continued on to Eastern Europe and Asia, or the Orient as it was known then. After that I had flitted back and forth between the Americas and Europe, occasionally passing through England, and even Wales, but I never set foot again in my native Ireland. Unconsciously I must have been avoiding the turmoil I left behind, but I'd never let myself acknowledge the fact.

"What happened to my family?" I asked my companion, now desperate for the truth.

"Shelagh married Donal, just as you surmised she would, but unfortunately she died in child birth about a year later. Not uncommon for the time." His words were soft, but not without feeling, and he spoke the truth of a time before modern medical assistance and antibiotics, which now helped save many mothers and newborns.

"The baby?" I asked.

"Also died. Another dark time in a series of unfortunate incidents for your family. Seamus went on to marry and had a large family. Many of his descendents are still in the area. He even took in the youngest three—Mary Clare, Lochlan, and Cillian—after your mother died during a cholera outbreak in the area, and raised them with his nine. Roisin went on to become a nun, and Dermot married, but had no children of his own. I can give you more details, but I think you can understand what life was like after you left?"

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"Yes, I understand," I said, defensive and sad. "It was a hard life, with constant struggles. And I could have made it better by at least giving them money. There were lots of things I should have done, but didn't because I'm selfish."

"You are a vampire after all, Kieran, a species not known for its kindness or compassion for others, though it's not to say it never happens. Your maker, Giovanni, for instance, can be especially violent and cruel, yet is also known to love fiercely and to offer protection and financial assistance to those he considers friends and allies."

"Yes," I agreed, remembering a night a few years after I'd been changed.

Giovanni had disappeared for a few days time after we had settled in an area near the Spanish-Portuguese border. I didn't question his absence, as he did this from time to time, but when he returned his mood was unlike any I had observed in him before. He was neither pleased nor unhappy, but decidedly unsettled. After many days of this I questioned him. He simply told me that he had visited the area where he had grown up, but didn't offer any further details.

In those earlier days of my change I'd never had much luck in accessing his mind unless he was willing to allow me in, and this was a matter he clearly did not wish to share. His inner conflict filtered out to me, bathing me in feelings of remorse and anger, the touch too indistinct to give me any further clues. By then Giovanni had been immortal for more than one hundred and fifty years, and his control with those newly changed like me was near absolute. At least until Rachel came along, but that's a different story entirely.

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About one week later he came to me, and spoke to me about his human life, the one and only time that he offered anything more than vague comments or abbreviated versions of events. I had known that his visit still weighed heavily on his mind, but after being rebuffed I hadn't tried to speak with him about it again.

"I grew up in an area not far from here," he told me as we strolled the dark streets of a sleepy Portuguese hamlet in proximity to where we had recently settled. "I try not to dwell on the past, as nothing can be done to change events that have already transpired, but I do like to get a taste of what I left behind every so often. Yet each time I go back more has changed, and it gets harder to remember what it is that I think I've missed. The faces are different, towns have grown and buildings have been altered or replaced." His voice had been so wistful I could almost taste his homesickness for a life long gone.

"Do you keep in touch with your family?" I asked.

"No. After my parents and siblings died, the part of me attached to my human life also disappeared. I am aware of descendents and such, but I have disconnected myself from any feelings I might associate with them. It does no good to hang onto feelings for people long dead."

I took that comment to heart. Though my own family had yet to pass, I knew that I could never go back. In a superstitious age, as it had been then, and to a society by and large adherent to Christian sensibilities, there would have been no way to explain what had happened to me. The best course of action, I had thought then, was to just disappear. I

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locked my feelings away, along with my memories, as though the human Kieran had never existed at all. Truthfully I had never been bothered by this, in all the years that had passed since. My life had been good, exciting, dangerous at times, but I'd enjoyed every minute of my immortal life. I wouldn't have changed it for anything.

Outside of a few inconsequential childhood memories, I did not get any further information from Giovanni that night. He did not speak about his own change at all, not then or at any time in the next few years we spent together. That topic was strictly taboo. A full century it would take me to learn the truth, and of the events following the cruel circumstance which would ultimately lead to his abduction and torture. Another terrible time that offered goodness, for from these incidents I had met many other immortals, including Giovanni's maker, and Daniel.

"You love Giovanni?" the Supreme One asked me.

"Yes, I do. Like a father, or brother. He is my blood. His departure from my life, as abrupt and unexpected as it had been then, now makes sense and I have forgiven him. I trust him, and admire him for all he has endured."

"He is a powerful creature."

"Yes," I agreed.

"And his companion Rachel? What are your feelings for her?"

"Friendship, respect. She is Giovanni's true love, and they are meant to be together. I am thankful he found her." A warm tingling started in my chest as I thought about their love, understanding fully how it felt. Azrael had awoken those

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same feelings in me, and once experienced nothing else could compare.

"Seamus, did he find his true love? Was his marriage a happy one?" I suddenly had to know, as though that could somehow atone for my absence and lack of support.

"Yes, it was. He loved his wife very much, and she him. Why does this matter to you if you are so at peace at having walked away from this life?" His blue eye shimmered in the darkness, and I realized that we were no longer in the house, but standing in the lane where I had taken a bullet, meeting my dark fate.

The spectre of Giovanni and myself lay on the muddy ground, in our respective roles. The bright, angry burn of his bite seized me. I grabbed the side of my neck as though I could stop the pain, fully aware that it was all a trick of the mind. From this voyeuristic position I appeared so young and fragile, and Giovanni's eyes burned with demonic glee.

What if this had never happened?

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Chapter Twelve

As soon as the thought left my mind the events set into motion. From the out-of-body experience of watching my own death I launched into a free-fall to an alternate reality. The longer the journey continued, the more I became aware of sensations that had been alien to me for more than a hundred years. Cold nothingness wrapped about my body, the sensation more than a passing acknowledgement of a change in temperature; it snapped at my skin with angry persistence, and my teeth chattered along with my shivering.

The hurtling, suffocating sensation came to an abrupt end, and only then did I realize I had my eyes tightly closed and my arms wrapped about my body. The coldness seemed to be draining away, and a soft whisper of warmth replaced its voyage across my skin. Even before my eyes opened onto the shock of brightness, I knew it was there. I turned my face in the direction of the source of heat and slowly my lids lifted.

The sun was high in the cool blue sky, draped with soft, filmy clouds. It peered down at me like a majestic eye in the Heavens. Instinctively I raised my arms to block its touch, and grimaced in anticipation of the surge of pain I knew would be coming. Instead the sensation of warmth grew stronger and more pleasurable, and I let my arms return to my sides.

"Kieran."

The Supreme One stood at my side, watching my reaction with reserved anticipation. He had returned to his original

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form of the night, a young man who bore no resemblance to anyone I had ever known. I looked back to the ball of light far above us in wonder and fear, then back to my own body, and specifically my hands and lower arms. I found myself dressed in the familiar clothing of my youth; a button up shirt with elbow-length sleeves, dress pants, and lace-up boots that were scuffed and worn. But it was my exposed flesh that startled me most of all.

Instead of the smooth, pale skin of an immortal I found tanned, freckled flesh with the telltale nicks and bruises of one who performed manual labour on a regular basis. I pressed my fingers against my arms, my chest and face, feeling body heat and elasticity. My immortal body had been firm, difficult to damage, but the body I found myself in was much softer and more fragile.

I stood, feeling a drop of sweat trickled down my face. The sensation rocked me.

"What have you done?" I demanded, grabbing the Supreme One by his shirt front.

"I'm letting you see what your life would have been like if you hadn't become a vampire. This *is* what you were wondering." His tone was even and pleasant, and he did not attempt to remove my hands from his clothing.

I looked about, realizing that we were in the town closest to my family home, in a small space between the feed store and the county clerk's office. They were the two most significant buildings in the area, outside of the few manor homes that dotted the countryside. I swayed, my head spinning, and his strong hands caught me about the arms to

help keep me on my feet. From the mouth of the alley came the typical sounds of that time of day; horses, wagons, voices, and far off the low, mournful whistle of a steam engine.

I was still trying to absorb the reality of what he had done when young male voice called out, "Kieran? That you?"

I turned, stunned to see my friend Charlie and his younger brother John strolling toward us. For the two sandy-haired siblings it may have only been a matter of days or hours since the last time they'd seen me, but for me it had been more than a century. It took my last bit of inner resolve not to run and throw my arms about them.

"Hello Charlie, John. What are you two up to?" I asked, trying to seem nonchalant. I thought I might start to hyperventilate.

"Ma sent us into town for some supplies. We're just waiting for Mr. Flannery to get our package together. Thought you was working at the Murphy farm?"

"Didn't need me today," I lied smoothly.

"Who's your mate?" Charlie asked, turning to look at the man at my side.

"Noah," the Supreme One answered. "Kieran and I met at the Murphy place."

"What the two of you doing in here then?" He asked, taking in how closely we were standing together, and the fact that "Noah" still had his hand on my arm. "Looking a bit *funny*, you are."

It did seem a bit suspect, two young men alone and in intimate proximity to one another. I forced out a snort of laughter.

"Piss off. Just feeling a bit sick is all. Think I ate something bad."

Charlie and John both broke out in a grin, and gave each other a knowing look. "Or you've been into the sauce already."

A flood of memories came back to me in full force, causing a noticeable stagger. My insides felt like someone had put them on a slow boil. Charlie and I had grown up together, shares many escapades. I remembered our innocent, childhood ramblings in the woods to the emergence of our attraction to the fairer sex. So many adventures we'd had together. I also knew, as Charlie did not, that he would be one of the men to die at Giovanni's hand in the months to come. At least if events were to happen as they had once already. Looking into his eyes shining with amusement, I shivered.

The smile dimmed. "You must be sick, mate. You're shaking and you've lost your colour," Charlie said.

"Yes, I think I should get home." I looked to Noah, who nodded agreement.

"Nice to meet you," Charlie said to Noah.

"You too. I'm sure we'll cross paths again."

We followed the brothers out of the alley to the warm, busy street. The sunlight was even brighter there, without the soft filter of shadow from the buildings. I squinted, eyes burning as pure, unrestrained light touched them. The shock

rang through, straight to my core. It wasn't until Noah shook my shoulder that I realized I'd stopped moving. Charlie and John laughed at my odd behaviour, then ran up the wooden stairs to the general store.

I couldn't shake the fear that gripped me. The sun had been my enemy for so long, its avoidance imperative to my survival. It touched my skin with tiny pinpoints of heat, and my mind repeatedly flashed back to the one and only time I had seen an immortal destroyed by sunlight. It was not an incident I cared to re-live, and that image only amplified my panic.

"You're safe Kieran," Noah assured me, leading me away. Soon we were leaving the boundaries of town. The main street turned into a one lane dirt path, leading to the farms, mining areas and manors. The intense familiarity overwhelmed me as I struggled to make sense of the unprecedented and fantastic situation. The sights, sounds and smells of my homeland intoxicated me, instantly pulling me back to a life I'd deliberately disassociated myself from.

My body seemed to move of its own accord, easily following the way from town to my family home, something I had done hundreds of times as a mortal boy. When the house came into view, seen across an expanse of sparsely planted fields, I had to take pause. The emotions that had been building inside me burst forth. I clutched at my chest, experiencing the tight, burning ache of losing my breath for the first time in a hundred years. My brain swelled, and hot—yes hot!—tears filled my eyes. Noah took my hand, silent until I composed myself. This time the dilapidated house

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didn't push me to anger, instead it touched me with poignancy.

As we closed the final distance from the stone bridge to the house, our cover story was concocted. There had to be some explanation for my showing up with a strange young man. In those days I had been moving from job to job, taking whatever paying work I could find. I'd built barns and roads, farmed, mined, delivered goods, anything that kept food on the table.

My mother was hanging laundry on the line, not ours of course, but clothing from upper class families that she washed, pressed and mended. This in addition to house cleaning, and caring for what crops and livestock could be kept alive. Cillian, Lochlan, and Roisin danced about my mother's feet, while Shelagh stood nearby also hanging laundry and scowling at her younger sibling's bit of freedom. Her long hair hung down her back, the sun picking up hints of gold. She turned in my direction, promptly sticking her tongue out at me until she realized I wasn't alone.

My mother finished pinning the blanket she was hanging to the line, then came to meet me and my guest. I embraced her, to which she tensed. When she pulled back there was a hesitant smile on her thin face, and I remembered with shame the way I had treated her the final few years of my mortal life. A hug was the last thing she would have expected from me.

"Ma, this is Noah. We met at the slate mine over in Vermont. We're on the list should they need any more men. He came from a long ways off, so I thought we could put him

up for a bit while we both look for work." This should ring true, as I had been signing up for work wherever men were needed in those days; mining, farming, trade.

Noah put out his hand, which my mother shook. "Only if it's no trouble ma'am. I'm happy to work for my keep."

"Well Kieran has needed someone to help him with the barn repairs. His brothers are a bit too young yet." The sound of her voice shocked me, not having had it touch my ears in so many years, and I took a hard swallow to stop the tears from coming again.

"Sounds good. Maybe I can work on that pile of firewood for now." He didn't wait for an answer, but walked over to the pile of logs that I had been putting off splitting.

Shelagh followed him with her eyes, and I didn't need my vampire abilities to understand that she found him attractive. Coming from such a small community any new addition was a cause for immediate fascination.

"Where's Seamus?" I asked my mother, trying not to sound as excited as I felt.

"He's at the McCreary farm, helping with the slaughter. He'll be back soon, and with some fresh meat, which I'm sure we'll all enjoy." A lock of hair blew across her face, which I pushed back with a gentle sweep of my hand.

"Are you all right, Kieran, you're acting a bit funny," she said, echoing Charlie's earlier words, while regarding me with obvious concern. Her blue eyes were so bright and clear, and in that moment I could not understand the anger I was supposed to be feeling toward her. Anger seemed to be the

thing I remembered most clearly from the years before my change.

After my transformation that same anger had disappeared, as though it had never existed at all. Forgetting everything that had happened in my human life had been as easy as flicking a switch, not something that all new immortals accomplished easily. I'd been quite content with my undead existence, at ease with myself and the world about me. It had been easy to take that for granted when everything came so effortlessly, but the magic of it couldn't be more blatant when faced with the life I'd managed to escape. Looking at my mother's face, weathered and aged beyond her years, I knew I'd been the lucky one. The Supreme One's attempt to show me all that I'd been robbed of seemed to be having the total opposite effect. I had to wonder what would happen if I didn't bend to what he deemed to be right. Nothing pleasant sprang to mind.

"I'm okay, was feeling a bit sick before, but better now."

"Why don't you help your friend with the wood, and bring some into the house?" She let the matter of my strange behaviour go, and returned to the laundry.

Cillian trailed behind me, his five-year-old curiosity piqued by the idea of watching "the men" use the heavy axes. He perched on a stump a few feet away, watching nearly a half-hour with a huge smile plastered across his freckled face. Soon, both Noah and I were drenched in sweat, and the sun had started its descent. Shelagh and my mother had gone to pick some vegetables after hanging the laundry, and the younger kids had scampered off to play in the nearby woods.

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We loaded the bin in the house full with wood, as my mother had instructed. We were both exhausted and overheated, so I suggested a swim at the pond. It was a small body of water encircled by our land and that of several neighbours. The families in the area used it to cool down on hot days, and for a bit of fun in an otherwise hard life.

Someone had built a small dock many years before, and as we made our way along it we shed our clothes down to our undergarment. In those days for men it was a pair of knee-length wool shorts. I stole a quick look about and it appeared that we were the only ones there. I dived in just ahead of Noah (how easy it had been to lose the compulsion to call him the Supreme One), the cold water a shock and relief. When I broke the surface Noah landed beside me, slopping a small wave up into my face. We splashed about, rough housing as young men do, then decided to take a swim a bit further down the shore. Under any other circumstances it would have been a fun, unselfconscious time, a break from the constant drain on the life of the hard-working poor.

Off to my right I caught a flash of movement. I moved until I could touch the bottom, calling out, "Who's there?"

Trees rustled and I turned to the sound. With a soft sigh of wind a slight figure emerged, the face draped in shadow as though Mother Nature had painted the figure with only shades of grey. As they came closer to the water's edge the sun finally caught them, highlighting the fiery hair and milky skin. *Jocelyn*. She smiled at me, bold and defiant as always. Without a worry to her reputation she pulled off her dress,

and wearing only her slip and underpants, walked out to meet us in the cool water.

When we were close enough to touch she turned in Noah's direction. "Who's your friend, love?"

"This is Noah. Noah may I introduce Jocelyn."

Noah nodded then continued on with his swim, leaving the two of us in relative privacy. I moved closer. Jocelyn smiled, knowing full well the effect she had on me, having commanded the full force of my hot-blooded lust since about the age of twelve. She was a spitfire of a girl, terrifyingly bright and unafraid. My lust and immature love for her had almost made me mad. How quickly I'd forgotten her after I'd been changed.

I felt her hand clasp about the back of my neck, her warm breath against my skin. I shivered, remembering so many similar, intimate moments, and felt the stirrings of arousal in my groin. When her lips met mine my body tingled, heat spreading through me despite the temperature of the water. I moaned when her tongue slipped into my mouth. My mind instantly became a black hole, where any thought that dared enter would be instantly drained away.

She broke the kiss, but stayed pressed against me so that her womanly assets could not be ignored. "It's been a while Kieran. I almost started to think you were avoiding me."

"Never," I answered, passion throbbing and begging to be satisfied. "Just been working away from home a lot."

She started swimming back toward the shore, and I had no choice but to follow. On the sandy shore she lay back, flicking aside her long, wet tresses. Her lovely face with soft

green eyes and full lips tilted up toward the sun, and the ache in my chest became more pronounced. I scanned the pond until I found Noah lying on the shore on the opposite side. He paid me no attention. I supposed he thought the reintroduction of Jocelyn to my life would accelerate the epiphany he believed I would come to.

I pressed against her body, cradling the back of her head with my hands. She met my kiss with eagerness, and my brain filled with encounter after encounter between us, from the innocent onset to the lust-fuelled present. We had not yet made love, but it seemed only a matter of time. Both of us were at an age where hormonal urges often overshadowed reason, and opportunities were to be taken advantage of.

As her hands slipped into my damp shorts, moving toward my growing hardness, guilt gave me hard slap to the face. For a few heart-clenching seconds, Azrael's face replaced hers. I pulled away to sit on the rocky shore with my face in my hands. A sob threatened to come forth, but I held it back by pressing my teeth into my bottom lip.

"Kieran, what's wrong?" Jocelyn asked, in her firm no-nonsense way.

I shook my head, still seeing his face, hurt and confused, much like the night after our recent incident with the four women. Slowly I opened my eyes, and Jocelyn sat before me, brows knitted together with concern. One strap of her camisole had slipped off her shoulder, the thin fabric clinging to her body and clearly outlining her ample breasts. I pulled the strap down even farther and lowered my mouth to her erect nipple, lapping at it with my tongue. She moaned softly.

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I lowered her back to the ground, only dimly aware that Noah was within viewing distance. I moved her legs apart, planting myself between them, and rubbed my erection against her. "Kieran, I think we should stop...it's too much, and I don't want anyone to see us..." Her words were breathy and not entirely convincing.

I adjusted myself and slipped my hand under the edge of her underpants. My fingers brushed her pubic hair, soft and unshaven as was the norm for the time. Lower my hand travelled, until reaching its destination. I gently rubbed her clitoris, feeling her arousal build, and slid my fingers inside her body. She was warm and wet, so inviting.

"Kieran stop."

Listen to her Kieran, a voice whispered inside my head.

Those four words stopped me dead in my tracks. I pulled away, hard and aching, and raced out into the water. I started back in the direction of the dock, thrashing madly through the water, as a bewildered Jocelyn sat watching my departure from the shore. My furious momentum continued until I made contact with the dock, where I gripped its edge, hanging on until my breathing returned to normal. Then it hit me—I *was breathing*.

I started to laugh. Footsteps sounded on the damp wood, then a shadow draped itself over me. Looking up, I found Noah regarding me with a look of confusion. I was acting like a mad man, but it had been so long since I'd been human that everything felt like I was experiencing it for the first time. Azrael must have been feeling the same way, though in his case it really was his first time. The laughter died in my

throat at the thought of him, far away and alone. I smelled Jocelyn on me and my stomach clenched.

Noah reached his hand down and helped pull me out of the water. He then joined me as I perched on the edge of the deck, feet dangling. A chill set in, but I relished the feeling. Temperature was not a concern for an immortal, and I'd completely forgotten the unique physiological reactions the human body could have in response to changes in the environment. It was a jarring distraction, but a welcome one.

"Why are you doing this?" I asked. I felt heat in my cheeks, and my eyes began to sting. My emotions rode a turbulent roller-coaster, where it seemed there was no chance of getting off.

"This is the life you were supposed to have. Falling in love, being with your family, and starting one of your own. Giovanni stole all that from you, as you are trying to steal Azrael's life from him."

I jumped to my feet, just about knocking us back into the water in my anger. "That's not true. Giovanni gave me everything! And I love Azrael. He loves me. That's what this is all about... you can't stand the fact that he would turn his back on you to be with me." My voice had risen to such a volume that a flock of nearby birds fluttered and squawked in startled response.

"You're playing on his weakness, just like Giovanni did with you," he said.

I turned, angry words on the tip of my tongue. Noah was no longer dressed in his damp undershorts, or even the outfit he had worn earlier in the day. He now wore a tailored suit,

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charcoal with a dark shirt and tie. Gone was the poor young man, and in his place a sophisticated, wealthy member of society. I blinked my eyes, but the image did not change. Looking down I saw I was also dressed, and with trepidation realized it was the clothing of the night I died.

The space about us grew dark, and the suffocating vortex of time displacement swallowed us again, hurtling us toward another moment of my long-lost human life. We came to a standstill like a slap to the face. My stomach lurched, and the abrupt stop made my bones ache. The night about me continued to swirl for a few painful seconds, until at last the scene I had been expecting solidified before me.

"Watch," he whispered, pulling us back into the shadows as the sound of footsteps touched our ears.

My heart pounded, the sound so loud in my ears I was sure that the outside world would be able to hear it. I watched in stunned silence as the group of young men appeared—myself included. Everything transpired just as I remembered. I was ordered to keep watch, while the others, including my friend Charlie, forced their way inside. I paced back and forth, sucking nervously at a hand-rolled cigarette. The air was pungent with tobacco and perspiration. I could hear the others bumbling about inside, followed by the distinctive sound of breaking glass.

Then Giovanni appeared, startling me so much that the cigarette dropped from my lips. He was so beautiful. The moonlight traced the highlights in his ebony hair and made his sapphire eyes gleam. As it had happened more than a century ago we shared our brief conversation, then I began to

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run. I hurtled through the darkness, scared and confused. The screams of the men left behind admonished me, but I did not stop. My heart was a thunderous drum, pounding as if to escape my chest. Then came my confrontation with the homeowner, from whose property I had not yet escaped.

At the time I had been so frightened my brain had not been able to process the physical attributes of my soon-to-be killer, and my memories were further muddled by the violent actions yet to come. From my vantage point I saw that he was a man in his fifties, with heavy jowls and a large belly that protruded over his waistband. His clothing was expensive, and the finger he pointed at me had a heavy gold and ruby ring on it. As he spoke to me, spittle collected in the corners of his mouth. His beady, dark eyes peered at me from his porcine face, but it was the pistol in his hand that drew my attention.

I bolted. I managed a good head start, but when I dared a peek back at my pursuer I slipped, and it took me several seconds to regain my balance. By then he had closed enough space to get off a shot that would change everything. I stumbled as the bullet grazed my shoulder. The second one took me in the back, and I went down. It was a fatal shot.

In a blur of white Giovanni appeared at my dying self's side. He turned me over from where I had fallen in the mud, exposing a fist-sized hole in my chest. By pressing his mouth to the wound he drank my rapidly expelling blood, but before he drained me completely he stopped to offer me the Dark Kiss. Without pause, I accepted. My fate was sealed.

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It was fascinating to watch my own death, and subsequent rebirth. Noah's hand on my arm startled me, and I realized that I had started to move forward, toward the vision. When I looked back there was only darkness.

"This is what did happen," Noah said to me in the silent pocket of nothingness, where time did not exist. "And this is what could have been..."

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Chapter Thirteen

The sound of children's laughter woke me from a heavy sleep. The remnants of a strange dream clung to my mind, coming through with me to my wakened state. My unconscious mind had conjured a world full of angels and memories of my human life and homeland. I shook my head, giving myself an internal chiding before it suddenly dawned on me that I was not in my own bed, and that children should not be in the near vicinity to where I slept. My eyes opened completely and I leapt from the bed. The white lace curtains fluttered in the soft breeze entering through the open window. It smelled of freshly tilled earth and the sea.

The sun was bright in the clear, cloudless sky, showing me that my experience had been much more than a lingering dream. Through a trick of mind, or the actual displacement of time, the Supreme One had me captive in a time and place of an alternate past. His determination to show me the error of my ways couldn't be more blatant, but the feelings the experience instilled in me were more exasperation and frustration than appreciation. I'd walked the path of an immortal for far too long to be swayed by his trickery, however genuine his conviction that this course of action would lead me to redemption.

My life was blood and darkness. And now also, Azrael.

As his name crossed my mind his image appeared before me, vivid and larger than life. The sunlight reflected off his indigo eyes, catching the flecks of gold in a way that

moonlight could never approach. I stepped forward with raised hand, reaching out to touch his thick, dark curls. A slow smile spread across his face, causing a gaggle of butterflies to flutter in my stomach. The words "I love you" were about to cross my lips when the image began to fade. A tear slipped down my cheek as the mirage vanished.

"Kieran," a female called from another part of the building, followed by the sound of footsteps moving in my direction.

I rushed to the mirror I spotted above a dark stained chest of drawers. The image reflected back at me startled me so much that I stopped dead in my tracks, cheeks still glistening with tears. It was my face, one I had looked on thousands of times over my long existence, and yet it was also an image completely foreign to me. My pale skin was tanned a golden brown, and a light sprinkling of freckles trailed across my nose and cheeks, even my chest and shoulders. My brown hair was longer than I usually wore it, full of gold streaks. My blue eyes regarded me intently, the frown pulling at my lips making me look older than my years. I relaxed my face, turning from side to side, amazed to find a fullness in it that was not present in my undead state, and what appeared to be the beginning of wrinkles at the corners of my eyes.

The door opened as I stood staring at myself in the mirror, so I quickly swiped a rough hand across my eyes to erase the telltale signs of my emotional state. Jocelyn entered, dressed in a clean, light blue dress that flattered her curvaceous figure, but didn't cross any modesty taboos of the time. Her auburn hair had been pulled back in a loose knot, tied with a piece of lace slightly darker than her dress. Several strands

had slipped free, and framed her face. She looked wonderful, with only the slightest hint that a good chunk of time had passed since our encounter at the pond.

She didn't seem to notice my odd demeanour as she simply swept into the room, pulling the bed covers up and smoothing them flat. She came to me, pressed a quick kiss to my cheek before placing her hand to my forehead. "You feeling all right, love? It's almost time to leave for church. The kids and I have already eaten and dressed."

Kids? "I'm fine, just a bit tired is all," I answered, hoping she didn't pick up on the slight quaver in my voice.

She looked as though she were about to say something else, so I leaned in and pressed my mouth firmly to hers, lingering for almost a full minute. That seemed to change her mind.

"I believe you're thinking with the wrong part of your anatomy, handsome. Save that for a bit later." With a smile and a soft chuckle she went to the closet to get out my Sunday clothes, then laid them on the bed. "C'mon then. Get dressed."

Her reaction got a smile from me as well. Jocelyn had always been a saucy girl, much too bold and smart for most men to handle in an age where women had a decidedly lower status in society. I'd never minded her quick tongue, or that fact that she could dance circles around me in the brains department. In fact those things, combined with her unique and unassuming beauty, had drawn me to her. As I turned back to the mirror I heard her voice giving directives in no uncertain terms to the other occupants of the house. These

were followed with shrieks of laughter and the familiar sound of dishes being placed in the wash basin.

Looking at myself more closely I realized that I appeared several years older than the last human experience I could recall. I judged myself to be in my late twenties, perhaps early thirties, a good decade after my mortal life had ended in my true reality. Defined muscles in my torso and arms showed the physical nature of my lifestyle, as did the calloused palms of my hands. I'd always been destined for manual labour of some kind, but looking about the room it seemed that I'd been at least moderately successful at whatever it was I did. If the bedroom was an indication of the quality of the rest of the house, then my married lifestyle had risen considerably from my childhood.

I splashed some cool water on my face from the basin on the bureau and dressed quickly. The bedroom led out into a narrow hallway, with whitewashed walls and a bare wood floor. The aromas of breakfast lingered and directed me to the kitchen, which in that time was always the largest space in the house. I cast a glance about, taking in the large table, empty and wiped clean, the dishes in the basin, and the field of green beyond the large window above the long stretch of counter space.

A horse whinnied nearby. I went to the door, stepping out into the sunlight and into the presence of my waiting family. Jocelyn stood with a toddler resting on her hip, smiling at two young children racing about the yard. The boy looked older, but not by much. He had the same auburn hair as his mother, while the girl had long brown hair closer to my own colouring.

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Both had bright blue eyes, which in that moment turned in my direction. They lit up with joy at the sight of me and charged in my direction. Tears filled my eyes again, this time from the pride I was inexplicably filled with for a family I didn't know.

I bit the inside of my cheek to snap my emotions back to a controllable level. Two sets of arms wrapped about my legs, almost toppling me to the hard-packed dirt lane. I scooped each child up, one after the other, to plant a kiss to their freshly scrubbed cheeks. The action elicited similar reactions from both; tiny hands scrubbing at the site of the touch as though the affection were not welcome, though their smiles clearly proved it was.

Their warm, soft bodies felt so alien in my arms, yet so comfortable and pleasing. I forced myself to remember that it was all an illusion, a forced emotional response to something that had never been and could never be. I had left this path long ago, and Jocelyn was rotting in the earth somewhere, not standing at my side. My heart painfully skipped a beat at the thought of her demise, and I could see that my reaction had become outwardly apparent. She frowned and lowered the toddler, a girl, to her unsteady feet. She took a few awkward steps before tumbling to the ground.

"Kieran, you sure you're up to going to church?"

I forced a smile. "Yes, just didn't sleep well. I'm fine."

Then with the older children loaded in the back of the wagon we started the several miles to town. As we moved down the lane it became clear that our house sat on a parcel of land that belonged to Jocelyn's father, and I mused about

whether it had been a wedding gift. There were fields of oats and potatoes, and a small herd of cattle.

Jocelyn sent a concerned look in my direction every now and again, but didn't ask me again if anything was wrong. I did my best to keep a pleasant expression on my face, even though my discomfort grew with each passing minute. My real life haunted me. If anything had been accomplished by being brought into this alternate reality, it was only to prove how much I loved my existence, vampire ways and all. And it made me even more certain my love for Azrael was real.

With the ghost of Azrael's kiss on my lips I gave Jocelyn my best, easygoing smile. She linked one arm through mine, keeping a firm grip on the toddler with the other. I noticed then how delicate and small her hands were, a drastic contrast to the enormous ones that my love possessed. That thought drove the knife even deeper into my heart.

I hope this is a terrible dream.

But it wasn't.

The older children laughed and played about in the back, at one point getting so rambunctious as to receive a stern warning to settle down by their mother. "Shelagh! Declan! Enough."

That at least let me in on two of the three children's names. I'd have to find a way to get the last one without setting off any warning bells. Soon enough the church appeared, and though the sight of it gave me a flash of poignant reminiscence, I couldn't get past what the purpose for its existence was. It was all a farce, humans blindly following the will of a power-hungry megalomaniac

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masquerading as their saviour. Friends and family members of my human past had congregated here to worship the one responsible for my current circumstance. That knowledge twisted in my gut, threatening to regurgitate all over my Sunday best.

I tied up the cart alongside the others, taking my time with the knot and settling the horses so I could get my bearings. People I had known all of my human life milled around me, chatting and laughing, completely oblivious to the fact that I didn't belong, that I was as much of an imposter as the Supreme One. More than once a specific face caught my attention, someone I hadn't seen or even thought of in more than a century, and I had to force myself not to react. I realized with a twinge of sadness that neither John nor Charlie were present, and assumed that they must have continued on with the past that had apparently been altered only for me. Charlie must have crossed paths with Giovanni, and John had drowned in the weeks before.

A hand on my arm startled me so much that I cried out. A feminine giggle caught my attention, a sound eerily familiar. I blinked, eyes burning with tears I didn't want to let fall. To my side stood a young woman, pale red hair hanging in shiny waves to her waist. She smiled, then crinkled her brow when she saw the state I was in.

"Shelagh?" I blurted out before I could stop myself, remembering too late that the Supreme One had informed me of her untimely death.

"No, it's Roisin. That's not funny Kieran." Her tone was harsh, undercut with sadness. Despite the five years between them, the sisters had always been close.

"Sorry, it just slipped out. You look so much like her now...sorry."

She sighed. "Are you coming? Dermot's waiting for us."

I followed her after a nod to indicate my agreement. A few men shook my hand as I passed, and several ladies smiled in our direction. I saw several cousins, and my Uncle Donald standing at the base of the church's staircase, talking with my younger brother. Much like my reaction to Roisin's appearance, I did a double-take upon seeing Dermot, who was now the spitting image of Seamus. I took a brief scan at the crowd, hopeful, but didn't see him anywhere.

"Roisin, where's Seamus?" I asked, doing my best to sound nonchalant.

She gave me another odd look, this one harsher than before. "What are you going on about, Kieran? You sound off your head this morning."

"Sorry?"

"Well, first you call me Shelagh, when our poor sister's been dead for ten years now, then you ask about Seamus, who you know full well is off at sea. Has been since he turned seventeen. You determined to bring up sore subjects today? Next you'll be asking about Ma, which you better not do in front of the younger ones."

By then we'd reached the rest of my extended family waiting at the entrance. Roisin and Jocelyn exchanged a look that told me they'd already spoken, and for the life of me

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nothing remotely believable came to mind to excuse my behaviour.

The sermon was a painful and a seemingly endless excursion into misinformation, which the unwitting crowd absorbed without hesitation or consideration of its validity. I hadn't realized what a mindless flock of sheep I'd been a part of, taking the word of our minister at face value, never questioning where this information came from or what the implications of accepting it would be. But why would anyone question the word of God?

I couldn't get back to the buggy fast enough. The sun cast its mocking warmth down on me as I sat waiting for a family that should never have been. I was trapped in a place I no longer belonged, lost in time from everything I'd ever known.

Azrael, please. Find me and bring me home.

* * * *

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Chapter Fourteen

Azrael awoke in the dark bedroom he shared with Kieran, alone. His lover's side of the bed was rumpled and cool, his scent lingering like a poignant memory. Around him the house was still and silent. The tight, aching embrace of worry wrapped about his chest, making it hard to breathe. As he swung his legs out over the edge of the bed, a cold wave of nervousness washed through him. For a moment he thought he might throw up.

After peering into the en-suite bathroom and finding it empty, he padded along the cool tile floor of the hallway toward the other bathroom, too unsettled to have even thought about pulling on some clothes over his boxer shorts. A damp towel hung on the rack beside the shower stall, and Kieran's cologne sat on the oversized vanity, condensation sweating on the outside of the bottle. He paused again, straining to catch any sound that might indicate the presence of someone else in the house. As he turned to leave he caught sight of his face in the mirror. The tightness of his features bore the signs of his anxiety.

He swiped a hand through his tangled curls, forcing his last conversation with Kieran back into his mind. He could not recall that Kieran had told him of any plans that would take him away from the house. He always let Azrael know when he'd be away, he was very conscientious of such things. He knew that his lover would worry, and in light of their history,

and the possibility of danger always lurking in the shadows, it was never a good idea to disappear without warning.

He felt sure he must have missed a note in the bedroom, and had started back in that direction when the sound of music startled him. He followed the direction of the music, which happened to be in the exact opposite direction of his room. With each step the sound increased, and the more certain he became that it was coming from Daniel's bedroom.

The music became loud and clear as he rounded the corner, and looking up he found Daniel stepping out into the hallway. He looked surprised to see Azrael in that part of the house, as he had been there only once or twice before.

Though the three men were roommates, there was an unspoken agreement that certain areas belonged to either Kieran and Azrael or Daniel. It took a fraction of second for Daniel to realize that Azrael's appearance wasn't a social call. He closed the space between them, a blur of white skin and dark clothing.

"What's happened?" Daniel asked, his usually calm manner shaken.

Azrael shook his head. "I'm not sure that anything has yet. But when I woke up Kieran was gone, and he hadn't said that he had plans, or a meeting of any kind. It's not like him."

Daniel patted the larger man's arm, trying to be reassuring. His hand was cold and alien to Azrael's skin. "Let's go double check in your room that he didn't leave a note. Did you try his cell phone?"

Azrael found Daniel's logical, focused way of thinking calming, and his own anxiety lowered in response. "No, I didn't try his phone."

They hurried back to the other side of the house, and seeing the door open wide gave Azrael a jolt of discomfort. He'd been so rattled he'd raced down the hall without a second thought. He paused at the entrance, feeling the slightest bit nervous about entering his own room. Daniel passed him, moving straight to the bedside table where the phone lay. He snapped it open and dialled Kieran's number. After a brief moment he closed it again.

"It went to voicemail," he said. His eyes quickly scanned the room, taking in the tangled bed sheets, the clean clothing waiting to be put away, the personal items on the dressers and bookshelves. "Is anything out of place, or missing?"

Azrael also looked about. "Not that I can see." That discovery did little to assuage the first gnaw of fear.

Daniel flipped the covers back and forth, then dropped to his knees to check under the bed. Azrael watched in silence, starting to feel uncomfortable and self-conscious about having another man in his bedroom, compounded by the fact that he was all but naked. A hot blush crept up his neck.

"Nothing," Daniel said, ignoring Azrael's reaction, though he could have surely read his thoughts with little effort. "Maybe the kitchen?" Then he left without waiting for a response.

Azrael used the opportunity to pull on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. He was just pulling the zipper up when Daniel

reappeared. Azrael turned at the subtle air disturbance created by his supernatural speed.

"Nothing there either. I did a quick peek about outside, and I get no sense of him nearby."

Azrael sat on the edge of the bed, pulling a pillow to his chest. Daniel took a few more steps into the room, joining him. "We can't panic."

"I know," Azrael agreed in his deep, rumbling voice.

"The only time Kieran has ever disappeared is when he was with you. And considering the situation you two are in, I don't think he would just leave without a serious reason."

"Or because it's not by choice."

"Yes, we have to consider that a possibility."

"Or that he has tired of me."

Daniel turned eyes like razors on the other man. "Don't ever think that. Kieran loves you. I know he does. I've felt it. He would never just walk away." He leapt from the bed.

Azrael nodded sadly. His throat felt hot and tight, and his eyes blurred with impending tears. Daniel was also very concerned, but he did his best to keep his emotions in check. He needed to focus on figuring out what had happened. There would be time to cry later. He dared a look back, finding that Azrael had lowered his face to his hands, and was sobbing quietly.

He threw his arms about the angel, absorbing his pain and worry.

"We'll find him, don't worry. We have to."

* * * *

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Many weeks passed, and with each day the waking hours passed with more ease. The charade of my life in this alternate existence became easier to perform without causing any type of upset. I did my best to avoid contact with others, and kept conversation to a minimum. At night, in my dreams, I returned to my true time and my home in Australia, to Daniel and the night. In my dreams I felt Azrael's arms about me, tasted his kiss. That was the only time when things made sense.

It turned out that I had gotten in at the nearby slate mine soon after marrying Jocelyn. Having been a dedicated worker I'd come to the attention of the owner, been promoted to a team leader, then most recently, an area foreman. It was exhausting, dangerous work, but a vocation that offered a financial gain that few others did. Many men had been injured, even killed. I'd been lucky thus far.

Jocelyn had prospered also. She'd become a teacher, and even managed to pick up work assisting doctors and other highly esteemed professionals with research and documentation from time to time. She was fluent in several languages, a feat she'd accomplished completely by her own hand, and was meticulous in her written recordings. She was often called in for translations, and helped with professional correspondences. Her success didn't surprise me at all, nor the disdain for it by some members of local society.

We lived a much better life than most, but we were always generous with loved ones. My remaining family seemed happy; my children in this alternate life were bright and healthy, and Jocelyn was secure in her love and dedication for

me. It was a charmed life in many ways, yet none of it made me happy. I was a smiling shell, with a misery like a swarm of maggots feasting on my intestines.

One morning on the way to work, the sunrise still a shimmery haze of purple and red in the western sky, the Supreme One suddenly appeared beside me on the wagon's front bench. I jumped, inadvertently yanking back on the reins and stopping the horses short. Absolute silence accompanied his presence. The wind ceased, not a bird sang or animal scurried. He and I were the only things in existence.

"I thought a face-to-face meeting would be best to give us a chance to catch up." As he spoke his presence morphed from a blinding shower of light to the familiar form of Noah. Once this show of power astounded me, now it only caused a seething rage.

"This is accomplishing nothing," I answered.

He shook his head, making a soft tsk-tsk sound. "I thought for sure that returning you to the life you were stolen from would bring you happiness and peace."

"This is not my life anymore, and I don't know that it ever was. I don't belong here—I belong in the present. And if anyone's stolen my life from me, it's you."

"This is very troubling to me, Kieran. You are forcing my hand."

"The only thing troubling you is my love for Azrael."

"It is not troubling, my son, because no such thing exists. Vampires are heartless, soulless creatures."

"I love Azrael! And nothing you say or do to me will change that."

He looked me in the eye then, and it felt as though I'd been dropped ten stories. I started to shake and sweat, teeth grinding as an unbelievable pressure surged inside my skull. Noah's expression remained soft, unperturbed, as he forced his way inside my mind, to the core of my being, to shake loose each memory, every feeling for thorough scrutiny. He withdrew as quick as a lightning strike, and I collapsed, almost falling from the wagon. The experience was so painful and disorienting, I couldn't be sure he was still there for several minutes. Then the world swam into focus, inching its way back to the point where my brain could make sense of what I was seeing and hearing.

"You are very solid in your conviction, I must acknowledge that."

"I love him," I croaked. The force of my feelings surged through my body.

"I see that you believe this to be true. But belief in something does not necessarily make it truth, no matter the emotional backing." He continued to stare at me with an expression of combined irritation and disdain, eyes silently challenging my love for Azrael.

"Like the human population's belief that you are deserving of their worship?"

The shining eyes clouded, turning a steely grey. Power hummed, pushing against me, and just as I felt the pressure reach the level of destruction it vanished. I recoiled, waited for the attack I'd provoked, but none came. Instead the

Supreme One burst into laughter, a magical sound like the flutter of hummingbird wings. I smiled in spite of myself, absorbing the residual effects of his amusement.

"I can see why Azrael is attracted to you. Despite your dark nature, you are bright and bold."

I hugged myself, following the trail of his cocooning warmth. "Then return me to him. Let Azrael love me. I will do whatever you wish. I won't take another life! Anything, please."

Then the smile faded, wiping away the happiness we had briefly shared. "That is a promise you cannot keep. At some point you will not be able to stop yourself, you will always be victim to your true nature. Death calls to you."

"Then kill us! Kill us all. Why let vampires exist at all?" I demanded, so angry I actually thought about wrapping my hands about his throat.

"It is not that simple, Kieran." A flash of something escaped, subtle and dark. I tried to reach it, but without my supernatural powers it was like trying to grab a handful of smoke.

He touched my shoulder, face as troubled as any I had seen. A shudder rode my body, causing me to gulp for air. In an anomaly of time and space, creeping shadows advanced to swallow the moment we shared, taking the Supreme One into the maw of darkness, his image vanishing. The horses jerked and made a pained sound in reaction to the phenomenon. I sat, chilled to the bone and alone as no other had ever been.

Azrael, save me.

A chorus of sound filtered in, hailing the return of the reality I'd been sentenced to reside in. The supernatural stillness evaporated as quickly as it had come, but the truth remained within me. Whether he'd meant to or not, the Supreme One had passed some important information along to me. There was more to the relationship between the angelic realm and earth's immortals than he wished me to know. The answer to my release and subsequent return to Azrael waited in this secrecy, and I made it my duty to find it.

* * * *

Daniel wore his worry close to his heart. Azrael was already upset, and there was no sense adding fuel to the fire. He forced himself to be calm, tucking the urge to panic into the ordered chaos of his mind. There had to be a way to find out where Kieran had gone. The trick was getting the information without alerting the wrong parties of their actions.

He snapped his phone shut and placed it on the desk in front of him. He'd made twenty similar and equally unsuccessful calls in the past few hours, no closer to the truth than he'd been when he started. A thousand explanations raced through his mind, some plausible, most unlikely. Time and time again he came back to the same thought—the Supreme One had taken him.

But taken him where? And for what purpose?

The sound of bare feet against the floor signalled Azrael's approach. For a large man his was quite nimble and graceful, but trapped in his human guise made him no match for

Daniel's immortal sense of hearing. He looked up, waiting thirty seconds before Azrael actually appeared. In the time he'd been on the phone, the former angel had eaten and showered, the aromas of pasta and shampoo lingering on his person.

"Anything?" he asked, leaning against the doorframe to the office. A ring of dampness darkened the collar of his shirt. He really was gorgeous, the type of man that with one smile could turn your insides to jelly.

Daniel shook his head. "Not yet."

"Stop your calls, they will not help us. I think you know as well as I do that we have not asked the correct parties yet."

The men locked gazes, both pained by the unknown. Daniel's lips pursed as he thought over Azrael's statement, and finding no sensible argument lowered his eyes. He thought the pain of losing Clellia had been a terrible burden, but Kieran's disappearance was affecting him just as deeply. They had not been friends for a long period of time, but their experiences together had built trust, their compatible personalities forging an unbreakable bond. On some level he had always known that he would lose Clellia, and that in truth when it happened it would be the best possible scenario for both of them, but he didn't know how he would fare if Kieran was taken from him.

Daniel was deeply affected by his friend's disappearance, but he could only imagine the anguish that Azrael must have been in. Frustration surged, turning his limbs to steel. He came to realize how close he was to losing his composure by the distinctive sound of wood splintering. He looked down,

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astonished to find that he had snapped off the inner edge of the mahogany desk. Bloody chunks of wood protruded from the palms of his hands, and the broken piece made a startlingly loud noise as it connected with the floor.

Azrael came to him, guiding him back into his chair. He knelt before him, and as gently as possible began to remove the shards of wood from Daniel's flesh. The smell of blood touched him, and the hunger flared. He tensed, fighting the dark lust back to a controllable level. *Concentrate on what you need to do.* "I'm afraid that I don't have a connection to the parties you're talking about."

Azrael concentrated on the meaty mess of Daniel's hands as he spoke. "I am not sure that I do any longer either. I feel no connection at all to my brethren. Some knowledge has remained, the secret language, but without the power to search out others of my kind, I don't know what good words will do."

Daniel shifted in his seat, the wafting aroma of his own blood distracting him. "But you will try?"

"Yes, but I need your help."

"My help?"

"Yes," he answered, pulling free the last remnant of wood. He placed a kiss to the palm of one hand, the skin already starting to heal. Daniel made a small sound in his throat. Then Azrael turned to Daniel, moving between the other man's legs and offering him his throat. "But first you must feed."

Daniel couldn't argue that he needed the blood. Or that he wanted it. With his body so close to Azrael's the heat was too

tempting, his scent intoxicating. Inappropriate sensual thoughts passed through his mind, fuelled by memories of his human past, as he brushed the damp hair away from Azrael's neck. Slowly he lowered his mouth, cool lips meeting warm, firm flesh. He moaned and allowed his imagination to run free.

He felt Azrael's arms sliding about him, and he pulled the man in closer, pressing them tightly together. Azrael's heartbeat quickened, exciting him further. His fangs broke the skin, and the fiery, tantalizing blood flowed. He allowed himself several mouthfuls before pulling away, far too aware of how intimate the contact between them had become. The twisted lust he fought every day to escape roared to life, but Daniel held firm. He was a monster surely, but not *that* kind of monster any longer. He would never force himself sexually on anyone again, no matter how long he may exist, and most certainly he would never do anything to betray Kieran's trust. A taste of blood was all he had been offered, and that's all he would take. It didn't matter that he wanted more.

He gave Azrael a gentle hug while pressing his face to the other man's hair. He allowed himself to linger, drinking in the sweet aroma of his hair, forcing his demon back into lockdown. The tension broke, allowing him to look Azrael in the eye again.

"Thank you," Daniel said. He placed a chaste kiss to Azrael's cheek.

"Are you all right Daniel?" Azrael asked in a gentle voice.

"Yes," he lied. Being so close to Azrael was driving him mad.

"You are a much better man than you give yourself credit for."

"No, I'm not."

"Forgive yourself Daniel. Clellia has long ago."

He felt a cool tear slide down his cheek at the mention of his cousin's name. "How do you know this?"

"Before I lost my wings, I visited her. She was not aware, I was merely observing. She thinks of you often. She misses you. Any hurt you caused her has healed."

Daniel cried softly for a few moments, burying his face in his hands. "Thank you."

Azrael hugged him, and when he pulled back he was smiling. "I consider you a friend, Daniel. And I know Kieran loves you very much. So I say again, please forgive yourself."

"Thank you," Daniel said again, regaining his composure. "Now tell me what you need me to do."

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Chapter Fifteen

I lay for a long time in bed the evening after my encounter with the Supreme One, unable to fall asleep. My brain buzzed with possibility, my apprehension manifesting itself as aching bones and an inability to be still. At last I threw off the covers and wandered to the kitchen. There I lit a small lamp and took a seat at the table. The quiet there was no less unnerving than it had been in the bedroom, and soon I was drumming my fingers against the wood surface, desperation and anger my ghostly companions.

"Jesus motherfucking Christ!" I snapped, and slammed my fist down against the table top.

"Do you know that for a fact or is that just the trouble talking?"

I whirled around at the sound of Jocelyn's voice, finding her in the doorway. Her expression was a mixture of amusement and exasperation, hardening her eyes. She moved to the chair beside me, and several cold, tense minutes passed before she spoke again. The beautiful auburn hair I'd loved since a young boy hung freely about her shoulders. A mad urge to run my hands through it seized me. *Why couldn't I just love her like the Supreme One wanted me to?*

"I know that something's been wrong for a while now. You've been out of sorts, quiet. I thought it would pass, but other people have mentioned to me how different you seem.

It's not going away. If anything, I'd say it's getting worse. I think it's about time you let me in on the secret."

"I can't."

"It's another woman?"

A snort of laughter escaped me, though I felt anything but amused by her question. "No."

"You're sick?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"Stop being an ass Kieran, and speak to me! I deserve better than this." She was close to tears, but her pride kept her from letting them spill.

"Yes, you do," I agreed. "But I don't believe that speaking to you about this will make things better. You'll just think me mad."

"I have always listened to you, and trusted you since we were small children. I'm asking you to do the same."

I turned, meeting her gaze full on. She placed her hands over mine, waiting in the quiet until I found my composure. As soon as I opened my mouth the whole twisted, fantastical story emerged, from the time travel to my vampire nature, my encounters with the Supreme One and my love for Azrael. I didn't spare one detail, and hearing myself talk about the things I had actually experienced, it sounded crazy. Jocelyn didn't speak, not even to ask a question. She remained stoic, contemplative. A few times her hands gripped onto me with urgency, but she displayed no other signs of outward reaction.

"You are really a vampire? And you've been sent back in time by *God* because of your love for an angel? This is what you're telling me?"

I cringed, waiting for the backlash. "Yes."

"Well Kieran, that is by far the most amazing thing I have ever heard told. And either that is the absolute truth or you are stark-raving mad." She remained calm, though her shoulders drew in and her brow puckered.

"It's the truth."

"You have to understand how this sounds." She pulled her hands away and shifted back in her chair. I met her scrutiny with downcast eyes.

Not being able to know the thoughts churning about in her brain exasperated me to no end. My psychic awareness, telepathy, whatever you wanted to call it, had never seemed more magical than when I sat there waiting for Jocelyn's next comments. The apprehension and uncertainty was palpable, and I did not need a "sixth sense" to pick up on the emotions she must have been feeling after hearing such a story. Several minutes of silence passed before I looked back to her face. She had turned slightly away from me and drawn her legs up onto the chair, wrapping her arms about them. When she realized I was staring at her she turned back, but did not smile.

"You know Kieran, if you were anyone else, I wouldn't believe you. That said, I am not saying I disbelieve either. I have to think on this for awhile. It's a lot to take in."

"I wouldn't believe it either. None of it." The absolute truth.

"So what do you expect me to do now that I've heard this?"

I shook my head sadly. "I have no idea."

"I'm afraid, Kieran."

"Me too."

She leaned in toward me, taking my hands in her own. "I'm afraid you are mad, Kieran, but as your wife I must stand by you. I need to help you through this."

"What if I'm telling the truth?"

"That is a fear I cannot even put to words, love. Such a thing would change my life completely."

"How do we go on from here?"

"I need some time. I need to think, and I believe I should speak with Father Kelly."

"He can't help you, Jocelyn, though I wish he could."

"Give me time."

Looking straight into my eyes, she did not need further words to make her feelings plain. To believe me was to lose the life she'd always known. She'd be giving up a husband, a family, putting herself on a path where the result could be an existence far beneath the one she currently had. The only consolation, to me at least, was that in reverting to my previous existence this one would never exist. There would be no memory of it for Jocelyn, no alternate truth, at least that's what I hoped.

"We'll make things right, Kieran."

Right? I wasn't sure I knew what that meant any longer. Right and wrong did not reside independent of each other; along the way the lines had blurred. I couldn't even defend

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my existence, or my relationship with Azrael. All I knew was that I had to get back, and that morality and consequence meant very little to me in whatever means would get me there.

* * * *

"Well this is a surprise," Charles remarked, tone chilly and curious.

"I am sorry to bother you," Daniel answered, anxiety tight in his chest. "I didn't know where else to turn." His words were truthful, and somewhat desperate. Of all the immortals he had come to know during the incident a few months back, Charles and Alessandra were the most powerful. Kieran also had a direct link with Charles through Giovanni, making Charles Kieran's immortal grandfather of sorts. Daniel reasoned that would warrant his involvement.

"Has something happened to Kieran?" He always was sharp and direct.

"That's one way to put it. He's missing."

"Give me the circumstances of this disappearance." Charles's tone left no room for argument.

"Well Kieran has become involved with someone in recent months, and this relationship has caused problems. I'm not sure how to best explain this..."

"Stop stammering boy, and just spit it out!" Charles ordered.

"Kieran has fallen in love with the angel Azrael, and they are both now the targets of Azrael's ruler, the Supreme One."

A heartbeat of silence. "An angel?" Charles asked, incredulous at the thought.

"Yes, and not just any angel, one of the highest realm. The Supreme One is very angry. He took Azrael's wings and power, sending him back to earth as a mortal man. Though things have been quiet, we all knew on some level it was only a matter of time." Daniel's words picked up strength and momentum as he continued, but he still felt inadequate in dealing with the much older vampire. He was even shaking a little.

"This is most troubling Daniel. Not just for Kieran, but for all of us. I know little of the angelic ways except myth, and if the Supreme One is even half as powerful as he is depicted in the scripture, then we are all at his mercy."

"So you'll come?"

A long pause followed before Charles spoke again. "Yes. Give me at least forty-eight hours. I'll call you when I've reached Sydney."

The line clicked off. Daniel stood, holding the phone in his hand and listening to the dial tone, which turned into a mocking, acerbic noise. With a quick press of a button the sound ended, and he found the ensuing silence even worse. Danger could be tasted in the air.

When Azrael appeared beside him, he gave a little jump. Then feeling sheepish, Daniel forced a smile to his face.

"He's coming then?" Azrael asked, unable to hide his nervousness.

Daniel found it difficult to reconcile the impressive stature of the man before him with the emotional fragility he carried.

Azrael was an alluring bundle of contradictions. Daniel could see how easy it would have been to fall for him from a physical perspective, as Azrael possessed a beauty that transcended traditional views on gender or sexuality. Daniel also knew him to be kind and loyal, thoughtful and painfully honest.

"He'll be here in a couple of days." He gestured for Azrael to follow him out of office, which the larger man did. "Have you given any more thought to how we might gain the upper hand? The Supreme One must have some weakness."

"I have. It seems strange now being in this position that I have never wondered about such things before. I have always accepted his word as law, never even considering that he could be wrong, never having a reason to want to challenge him. Until very recently he could do no wrong in my eyes. Now I feel misled and betrayed."

"Not everything he's done is wrong, Azrael. He has given much to humanity, protected many."

"And he has allowed many, many terrible things to happen. Famine, war, illness, crime, intolerance of all kinds. I wonder why I could not see this before?"

"Sometimes the greater good requires personal sacrifice and pain."

Azrael surprised him by giving a small chuckle. "Such philosophical notions from a vampire. Is this what you think of when drinking a human's blood?"

Daniel laughed also, enjoying the brief respite from the mounting tension of the situation. "Not at all. I am only thinking about myself, and satisfying my dark desires. In

truth humans become little more than cattle when I feed. But once upon a time, the church played a part in my life."

"That's what the population as a whole must seem like to the Supreme One. Cattle to corral, to control, and slaughter."

"I have seen many terrible things in my time. I have *done* many terrible things, but I know there is goodness. To give balance to creatures like myself, there must be light. And though right and wrong may blur on occasion, there are actions and choices that clearly fall to one side or the other."

"What are you trying to say, Daniel?" Azrael remembered the things that Kieran had told him of Daniel's past. The man he knew, the one he had come to look on as a friend, seemed a different person entirely.

"I'm not sure. I just know that for the world to be as it is the Supreme One can't be a malicious, contemptible monster, he must have the capacity for love and forgiveness. Though I don't believe him omnipotent or infallible, he must have wisdom and goodness beyond all the other players in this situation. You yourself were one of those beautiful beings, Azrael, like him, driven to comfort and protect without thought to your own happiness. You must hang onto this, keep your ability to reason, while we look for a solution. The Supreme One's vision and his desire for the protection of mankind may be the way to resolve this. He needs you."

"You think I can barter with him somehow?"

"Yes. That may be the only way. Remember how I said the greater good sometimes comes with personal sacrifice?" Daniel asked, and Azrael nodded. "This may come down to

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your sacrifice Azrael. You may be forced to make a painful decision to get Kieran back."

After a long period of thoughtful silence, a strange look came over Azrael's face. "There may be someone who can help."

Daniel prayed he was right.

* * * *

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Chapter Sixteen

Forty-eight hours passed like pouring cold molasses from a jar. When at last his phone rang Daniel felt a prickly wash of dread, not the best feeling to have for someone whose help he desperately needed. He yanked it from his pocket, not surprised at the number appearing on the display. If he could have taken a deep breath to calm himself, he would have. As it was, he closed his eyes and allowed a second ring to complete before answering.

"Hello."

"I have arrived. Come and get me at the airport." Charles's upper-crust English accent caused Daniel to practically cower. He had a fleeting thought that Charles must work hard at maintaining it, as most immortals' accents tended to fade or change over the course of their long existences.

"On my way."

He closed the phone without a goodbye, and slipped it back into his coat. With Charles on the scene, Kieran's abduction and the idea that Azrael had proposed to him two nights earlier, Daniel was rattled. Even more rattled than he'd been when battling Harshika, the first vampire, and her minions in the jungles of Peru. Though their chances at winning had been bleak, the conviction among his fellow immortals had instilled a sense of strength and surety. Now he saw defeat lurking in every shadow.

Azrael accompanied him to the airport, and said little to him during the short drive. He didn't need to speak. The extent of his anguish covered all bases.

The airport was still busy at that time of the night, lots of late flights coming in and early ones going out. Charles had texted him the details of his flight earlier, so he and Azrael made their way to the gate where his flight had landed. Charles could not be missed.

With his above average height, lemon-yellow hair and pale skin, his appearance was as compelling as it was unsettling. He reeked of undead power, affecting the humans in proximity in ways they did not comprehend. Minds swam with thoughts of lust and fear, unable to latch on to only one, inevitably causing erratic behaviour.

Charles had dressed in a dark suit and carried a pale grey trench coat over one arm. At first glance the ensemble could be taken for understated, even unremarkable, but upon further scrutiny Daniel could tell that the fabric was very expensive, and that the suit had been tailored to fit Charles's lanky frame. The older vampire made eye contact, but did not wave or smile. When they were close enough to shake hands his gaze flicked in Azrael's direction, but he addressed Daniel. "This is him, I take it?"

"Yes. Charles may I introduce Azrael."

Azrael held out one giant hand, which Charles surveyed with cool indifference, before placing his own against it.

"A pleasure, Charles," Azrael said in his deep voice.

Daniel thought that Charles may have squinted at the sound of the angel's voice, but if he did he covered his

reaction with amazing speed. He remembered Charles's incomparable control and ability to ward off pain and other types of supernatural influence from the weeks spent with him in preparation for the attack on Harshika. Charles had such restraint that his reactions were generally unreadable, his affect often appearing blank, yet serious. Daniel knew him to be intelligent, cunning and, when needed, vicious.

"Likewise," Charles answered. His tone verged on haughty, almost a challenge to question his sincerity.

"Let's get your luggage then?" Daniel interjected.

"Yes, let's."

He turned, coat swirling out as he did so. Daniel and Azrael followed him to the luggage carousel to retrieve a small leather case. They didn't speak as they made their way back to the car.

Charles watched the city pass by the window as he sat quietly in the backseat. Daniel wasn't sure if Charles had been to Australia before, and didn't think from what he knew of him that he was one to make idle small talk. A soft rain, barely more than mist, began to fall.

When they reached the house, Daniel led Charles to the guest room, where Giovanni and Rachel had stayed a few months earlier. He'd made every effort to make the room appealing, even going as far as to purchase expensive new sheets, and bouquets of fresh cut flowers. Charles strode in, took a quick perusal, and deposited his case on the bed.

"We should get to it then," he stated.

Daniel nodded and escorted him to the den. Azrael was waiting, his large form almost filling the brown leather

loveseat on which he sat. Charles took a spot on a chair next to him and blatantly looked the angel over.

"I'm surprised you're a man," he said at last.

Azrael frowned. "I beg your pardon?"

"I always think of angels as being asexual, and further, I didn't know that Kieran enjoyed sexual relations with men." His blunt words could have been mistaken for admonishment or judgment, but with Charles the cold insensitivity was just part of his charm.

"I do not think he did either, until we met." Azrael sounded more perplexed than angry.

"No matter. Makes no bearing on the situation from our point of view. Though perhaps it does for your Supreme One?" He let the question sit.

More than once Daniel had wondered the exact same thing. When in church as a young human boy he had heard many sermons admonishing homosexual relations, and even in the present day many fell back on scripture as "proof" that relationships between two members of the same sex was immoral. It had been Daniel's opinion that such views were rubbish, and the conviction came from the misinterpretation and twisting of words written thousands of years previously by fallible human beings. A sense of fear and hatred was often man's reaction when dealing with something unknown or foreign to their way of life.

"The Supreme One does not think in concepts of male or female, for in our true forms we are neither. And to clear up another misconception, the Supreme One is not the maker of the human race, merely a guardian. He, along with the

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several of my brethren, came to this world many thousands of years ago, and finding the struggling, primitive life forms that we did, decided to stay. This has always been our way, though this is the longest we have stayed in one place as far as I can remember. For some reason the times before this planet do not come easily to me, as though something is preventing me from knowing. For some reason, the Supreme One is very attached to your species."

"So the nature of your relationship is not what bothers him, but that you have turned against his way?" Charles asked.

"Yes. Never before has any of our kind interacted in such a way with any of the lesser life forms we've come across."

Charles's eyebrow arched, but he did not comment on being referred to as a "lesser life form."

"And your powers, do they grow with age? How is it that he is able to control you, and take away your powers?"

"The Supreme One has always been stronger than any of the angels, and though he has never said as such I believe that he found us at some point in his long past, much as he has humans. Again, the deepest recesses of my past are vague. My memories seem to be slipping away from me, as my powers have already done."

"So your powers may not even be indigenous to your kind?"

"I don't know. I am not sure if this came about from him breeding with one of our kind, or if we were compatible in some way as to allow him to share his unique gifts." Azrael

seemed genuinely puzzled over the lack of knowledge of his own past.

"Is there anything in this that we may use to our advantage?" Charles asked in his blunt and unapologetic manner.

"There may be. As I have discussed with Daniel, I think there may be someone who can help us."

"Whom may that be?"

"Raphael."

* * * *

"Kieran."

I opened my eyes. Jocelyn lay beside me, her breathing deep and steady. I listened to the sound of it for several seconds, wondering if I had imagined the voice or if Jocelyn had been talking in her sleep. The unexpected touch of a hand on my shoulder let me know I hadn't imagined anything.

The contact startled me so much I jumped from the bed, managing to land on one foot and falling to a knee. My heart pounded like a jackhammer. Noah's pale face appeared in the darkness. He offered his hand, helping me to stand. The hand moved to my cheek and the cool bedroom vanished.

The disorientation lingered, making it impossible to understand where we had ended up. Time and geography meant nothing with the Supreme One; he passed through both with indifferent ease. As my dizziness cleared, the sound of lapping water touched my ears. I realized he had taken us to the pond near my mother's home. We stood on the damp

dock. I remembered one night with Giovanni and Rachel, and my despondent urge to dive into the ocean and swim until the waters overtook me.

Noah's face, reflecting the Supreme One's feelings in human form, for the first time looked upset, even sad. "I feel I've failed you, Kieran."

"In what way?" I asked, uncertain where this was headed.

"I thought you would come to my way of thinking once you had returned to your human life, but if anything, it seems to have made you even more enamoured of your immortal existence. Why is this so?"

When he turned, tears glistened in his eyes, and for a moment I was so taken aback I couldn't speak.

"This is not my life anymore. I've embraced my dark ways, and I love Azrael. No matter what you offer, or what tricks you play, that will always be the truth."

"I could leave you here to die."

I knew his words were true. "That will not change how I feel."

"I realize that now."

"Then send me back."

"I can't."

"Why?" I cried, my voice piercing the cold silence.

"Azrael will never give you up willingly."

"He won't return to you willingly either."

A tear slipped down his cheek. When he raised a hand to his cheek and found it damp, he seemed surprised. "You may be right."

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"Leaving me can't be the answer. I know you are powerful, but Azrael believes you to be kind and wise. Find a solution that will be acceptable for us all."

"I do not know that I can, Kieran."

He disappeared, leaving me alone. I cried the entire walk home.

* * * *

The energy in the room throbbed, contorting the pressure about the three men to excruciating levels. Azrael knelt on the floor, clasping hands with both Daniel and Charles, reciting an ancient and confidential summons in a language that touched the vampires' ears like a red-hot poker. The further into the recitation he delved, the fuller the haziness that filled the room became, swirling about them in such a way that Daniel kept having flashes of the scene in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* where the spirits are set free to roam among the gathering of Nazis. In fact the haziness at times seemed to take on a several separate forms, only to disappear to the churning indistinctness once again when Daniel tried to focus on any specific one. The space became a hothouse, close and sticky. Then the drain started.

Azrael had warned them both of the effects, or what he suspected would be the effects, prior to the attempt. He could not offer sureties, as nothing like this had ever been attempted before. The endeavour was to summon Raphael, using Azrael's knowledge of the ancient language and ritual, while drawing on the supernatural power of the two immortals

as fuel to push the communication past the boundaries of the human realm.

In losing his own powers, the angel had been left without the awareness of their presence or influence in the world about him, much less be able to contact them in the reality that had become natural to them. The divide between them surpassed the concept of space and distance, a destination reachable only by power and supernatural perception. Yet at least some of his past remained a part of him, clear and accessible, and hopefully the redirected power would give them an advantage, a chance to be heard.

The harsh effects of the power drain hit Daniel first, as he was the younger and less resistant of the two. He swayed, fighting to remain alert. Panic fluttered in the back of his mind, threatening to overtake his focus on the task at hand. He had to keep it together for Kieran's sake, knowing that his personal weakness could mean the difference in success or failure, and he refused to be the reason for his friend's demise. His limbs became rubber, his bones ached. His fangs enlarged, scraping along lips pulled back in a grimace against the pain. Blood would help.

Azrael's eyes were tightly closed. His face was calm, lips moving with terrifying speed as he released the words needed to summon another of his kind. The determination to succeed could not be ignored. Several times his hand, clasped in Daniel's, jerked violently. The jarring movement snapped him back to manic awareness. As though someone were flicking a light the room disappeared, replaced with a blinding whiteness that stretched as far as Daniel could see. The

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transition between the two places, the overlapping levels of reality, flip-flopped several times, seemingly unable to hold them in one or the other. Being pulled to the whiteness made Daniel's ears pop, and his body shuddered from the alien pressure of a place in which he did not belong..

When he felt as though he could withstand no more, the sensation came to an abrupt stop. He took several seconds to allow the gut-wrenching dizziness to dissipate before opening his eyes that had been tightly clenched against the disorientation of being in two dimensions at once. They were still in the large sitting room with the furniture pushed back to the farthest corners of the space, indicating to Daniel that for the time being the reality of the twenty-first century earth had prevailed. An eerie silence filled the room. Azrael's hand slipped from his own, and as the larger man rose to his feet Daniel realized they were not alone.

Before them stood a giant of a man, not dissimilar in stature to Azrael. He wore a loose tunic-like garment that fell to mid thigh, and his feet were bare. The rest of his body was uncovered, exposing bronzed skin over a gorgeously toned physique. Giant, white wings were closed, but visible on his broad back, and Daniel experienced an overwhelming urge to touch them. Light brown hair fell in tangles to the man's shoulders, and piercing blue eyes regarded his audience from a face as close to male perfection as any Daniel had ever seen. His beauty only paled beside Azrael's.

The stranger took several steps toward Azrael, and the two men embraced. Daniel stood up, feeling dwarfed by the two large men before him, even more so when he looked in

Charles's direction. His fellow vampire was above average height, his thinness only making his stature more pronounced. The other two had not only height, but breadth to their advantage. The closer Daniel moved the more aware he became of a pungent, yet pleasant aroma, which stirred awake a sensual longing from deep within his person. It took every effort to keep this reaction in check. He closed his hands into tight fists at his sides.

"Raphael," Azrael cried, unable to hide his relief and amazement at finding the angel before him. He had filled Daniel and Charles in on their closeness and the pain at the loss of the relationship. They responded to each other with an intimacy reserved for the closest of friends, a casualness to their touching that only came with a certain level of trust.

"Azrael, brother," he responded with a gentle kiss to each cheek. "But how is this so? The Supreme One stripped you of your power, yet I heard your call." His voice held a similar deep, melodic timber to Azrael's.

Daniel shivered as the sound touched his ears.

"I took a chance," Azrael admitted. He indicated in the direction of the vampires. "I drew on the power of my companions, combining this with my knowledge of the old words. I had no way of knowing if I would be successful, but I had to try. I also took the chance that you would respond."

With solemn eyes Raphael surveyed the two immortals, and his indecision became another presence in the room. Clearly he was torn between his duty and a long-held friendship. "Now I have been summoned. Do you wish to introduce your companions?"

"Yes, of course. This is Daniel and Charles."

Both men shook hands with the angel, but did not offer further information.

"Vampires." The word was a statement from Raphael, not a question.

"Yes."

"Friends of Kieran's?"

"Yes, they are."

"Then you have remained with him? Continued the relationship?"

"Yes, I have."

"I told you before that I cannot help you Azrael. I do not understand this obsession..."

"As a friend of Kieran's I can understand your conflict. You must feel torn between loyalty to Azrael and loyalty to your kind," Daniel suddenly interjected.

"You do not understand anything. We are protectors of life, and you are takers of it. Your existence is in defiance to everything we stand for! Azrael knows this, and that is why I cannot support him on this. I told him as much when he came to me."

"If our existence is such an abomination than why do we exist? Why did your Supreme One create us?"

"He did not create you!" Raphael blurted out with such conviction the glass in the windows rattled. Daniel took a step backward, wincing from the force.

"Then who did?" Charles asked calmly. He stood his ground under Raphael's accusing stare.

"You are an accident of biology, nothing more!"

The men were silent as they thought about the curious origins of vampire kind.

"Then let me rephrase my query. Why does your Supreme One not destroy us?" Charles asked.

Raphael fell silent. The pained look on his face spoke volumes, making it clear to all in assembly that there was more to the situation than Raphael cared to share. Daniel flicked a cautious look to Charles, then Raphael, feeling the outrage began to quell.

"The Supreme One is not so sure it would be the right thing to do perhaps? Or is it that you do not possess the power to control or destroy all at your wish? There must be worry of retaliation," Charles said.

Raphael sighed and gave Azrael a pleading look. "This is not right, brother. We are above this kind. We should not protect them, nor love them."

"Yet I do. I love Kieran with all that I am. Brother, you know as well as I that the Supreme One can be indifferent, impulsive, and sometimes even cruel. Yet we have always done his bidding with the belief that he knows best. In this matter, I must question that belief. This seems simply a matter of control, and nothing to do with goodness or righteousness. Keeping Kieran and I apart is not for any greater good. The destruction of their kind as a whole does not seem to be a good idea either, even to the Supreme One. He has tolerated immortals for thousands of years, watching as their ranks swelled."

"What about your service to protect these fragile humans? To give them guidance and comfort? Does this mean nothing to you now?"

"Of course it does, but I see no reason why I cannot have both."

"You are speaking blasphemy Azrael. Why have you summoned me here?" Raphael's face reddened, and tears brimmed along his lower eyelids.

"I summoned you here because despite your protests, I believe you do have questions about the Supreme One's actions and you believe in the sincerity of my love for Kieran. This is not as black and white for you as you want us to believe."

"There are no clear choices of right and wrong here," Daniel offered into the debate.

"I think you have reached a point where you are questioning your leadership, and perhaps your right to judge and rule a world that is not actually yours," Charles offered.

"We do not have our own world any longer, only those we borrow. Isn't that right Raphael?"

He did not respond to Azrael's question. "You would give up all we are, all we have become for such primitive notions as love and sex? We are so much more than that."

"If we are so much more, then why can we not have it all?" Azrael asked.

The room fell into a stunned silence. Daniel was fatigued to the point that his legs trembled, and his mind kept slipping one step behind in the ensuing dialogue. He needed blood

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badly. Minutes ticked by like hours, prolonging his discomfort. At last Raphael sighed, a deep, rumbling gust of sound.

"You are right. I do question some of the Supreme Ones decisions. I also question why I can no longer clearly remember my own origins, or why I have followed this creature with the blind conviction I have."

Azrael grabbed his hand, bringing it to his chest. "Then help us get Kieran back. Help us find a way to reason with the Supreme One, please."

"I can do better than that," Raphael answered. "I can help you get your powers back."

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Chapter Seventeen

A full year had passed since Noah left me on the damp dock, and I had stumbled back to my would-be home in a state beyond hysteria. By the time I reached the house I had no tears left to cry, the ones already spilled burning trails of grief down my cheeks. Each day since then had been nothing more than minute after endless minute of mind-numbing loneliness, despite the myriad people dancing in and out of my existence. Each smile, every conversation filled me with dread. The ache of missing Azrael ate away at my heart like cancer. I couldn't remember the last time I smiled. Until I saw his face again, I didn't know if I could.

Jocelyn grew more and more detached as the time went on, and I didn't blame her. I was a shell, a husband in name only. Though she lay beside me each night, it was Azrael I dreamed of. I longed for his closeness so badly I sometimes felt the ghostly touch of his lips to mine, and in each instance the imagined sensation brought tears to my eyes. A few times I thought I caught a whiff of his distinctive musky scent, and couldn't have stopped the shiver of pleasure it elicited if I tried.

She put her distance from me to good use, that I could not deny. She spoke with several members of the clergy, medical doctors and academics, reviewing anything that might bare an answer to the unique and troubling situation she found herself in. Many times I discovered volumes on such subjects as *Maladies of the Human Brain* and demonic possession. She

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engaged in correspondence with those who claimed to be experts on the subject of angels, specifically those with any knowledge on my beloved Azrael. Yet her research and open mind did not seem to sway her fully to any one way of thinking, and in truth deepened her sadness. While she struggled I kept my place at her side, continuing to live the lie as best I could. Hurting her made me miserable.

Many nights I ended up on the banks of the nearby pond, or in the loft of the barn reliving moments of my too brief time with Azrael. I remembered his laughter, his smile, our friendly quarrels. I thought of the many nights we'd walked the deserted beach, talking for hours, exploring every aspect of our unique existences.

During these reminiscences my mind would inevitably wander to our more intimate moments. Every thrilling, gorgeous detail of his body lived inside of me, so vivid it kept my sanity in check. The details of his face and the sharp blue of his eyes in the darkness played over and over again in my mind. I remembered the soft sheen of perspiration covering his ruddy skin as his arousal grew, and I could almost feel the hard, cut lines of his muscled body beneath my hands. His teasing whispers and moans of pleasure begged me to come back to him.

In my dream-memory state I stroked the coarse hair on his chest with my fingers, following the trail down his defined abdominal muscles to the lower parts of his anatomy. The lovely, tingling ache filled me, anticipation edging me on. My hand moved lower still, until my fingers brushed the part of him that had given me so much physical pleasure. The size of

him never failed to amaze me. I let my fingers tiptoe down the length of him, rubbing my thumb over the sensitive tip, just the way he liked me to. Cupping my hand around the shaft, I started to stroke him, feeling him grow harder with every pass. Soon, the soft, silky liquid trickling from him let me know he was ready for more.

Many times I would come to from these reveries to find I was pleasuring myself, imagining Azrael's hands caressing me, exciting me until my erection was so hard I thought I would lose my mind. Often I would continue to climax in anguished frustration, tears streaming down my face. Hatred for the Supreme One was always my companion during these times, a shadow I could not shake.

One evening I awoke with a painful start, an unreleased scream held in my parched throat. I was drenched in sweat, heart hammering, with an erection as hard as rock. I made a determined decision to ignore the physical side effects of heartsickness, and rose from the bed to head to the pond for a moonlight swim.

Jocelyn caught my arm with her small hand as I swung my legs out over the side of the bed. The touch startled me. I turned toward her, the intensity of her expression a slap to the face. She regarded me like something she wanted to eat, and as I resisted the growing urge to flee I gained some understanding of what the victims of my former vampire state must have experienced.

"I can help you with that," she said in a deep, throaty voice so unlike her natural tone. In all the months since my admission she had not once tried to touch me sexually.

"Jocelyn..."

Without another word she slithered across the bed and lifted the edge of the nightshirt I wore. Her hands moved up my thighs. She cupped my testicles with one hand, kneading gently, as she wrapped her other around the base of my engorged penis. With a soft moan she brought her lips to the tip, sliding her mouth slowly downward, taking as much of me as she could. Her tongue probed and teased along the bottom of the shaft, making me shudder with pleasure. I closed my eyes, seeing Azrael's face. "Yes," I cried out.

I lay back, letting her have her way with my body. I floundered in the haze of sexual rapture, riding wave after wave of pleasure, while forcing back the guilt that threatened to intrude. Soon Jocelyn's hands began to paw their way up my torso until she was straddled across my body, sucking at naked throat. She was damp between her legs as she rubbed against my hard-on. "Use me," she whispered in my ear. "Please!"

With a shocking burst of energy I flipped our positions. Like a mad man I ripped her nightgown from her body, exposing a voluptuous female form. I grabbed her full breasts, squeezing them roughly before taking each one in my mouth in turn. I sucked at each nipple until they were hard and erect. I lowered my hand between her legs, remembering as my hands passed the soft mound of hair that women did not wax and shave themselves in this time as the women of the future did. As my fingers slipped between the lips, slick and hot with arousal, she whimpered.

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I didn't need any further invitation. I repositioned myself, then slammed into her with enough force to make the bed shake. By instinct my mouth went to her throat, and for a moment it surprised me that I had no fangs to pierce her flesh with. For so long sexual excitement and bloodlust had been interchangeable for me, difficult to separate.

With an exhilaration that bordered on fury I continued pounding into her, each thrust harder and faster than the one before. She wrapped her long legs about my body, putting her own force behind each movement, helping to bring herself to a powerful orgasm. She screamed, a guttural, animalistic sound that spurred my own impending climax. As I ejaculated I collapsed against her body. Then I began to sob.

"I'm sorry...so sorry..." Each word was more painful and less clear than the previous one. I rolled off her, curling into a foetal position.

"Kieran, it's all right. You've been here for more than a year now, and you haven't once laid a finger on me. I wanted this."

"I need to get back to Azrael!" As soon as the words left my mouth, I realized how insulting they were and immediately wished I could take them back.

She sighed. "Then use me and think of Azrael. Until we figure out if your beliefs are a trick of the mind or truth, there is only us."

Truer words had never been spoken.

* * * *

"You can what?" asked Charles, so surprised he was unable to hide the reaction from his voice. There was the slightest flicker from the fingers at his side.

Raphael gave an almost unperceivable smile. "I can return Azrael's powers to him."

"How can this be?" Azrael demanded.

"In the months that you have been away the Supreme One has taken me under his wing. I believe he is not as sure of his judgment against you as he would like us to believe. He has spoken of it to me many times. He is troubled.

"Now, you may not be aware of some of the factors at play. I, unlike you and many of the others in the highest realm, have memories of the time before this one. For whatever reason I have retained some knowledge of our origins, and the former missions we have been a part of. I know the source of the Supreme One's power."

"What do you mean the time before?" Azrael asked.

Azrael, Daniel, and Charles had closed in on Raphael, forming a half-circle before him, enraptured with the tale as it spilled from his lips. A strange, dreamy look had come over Azrael's face, as though the words were pulling lost memories free from the shadowy hideaways of his mind. Perhaps the loss of his powers had also dissipated a barrier to past knowledge that Azrael had not even been aware was in place.

As he continued to speak, Raphael's skin seemed to clear and brighten before the other's eyes, becoming a flawless expanse. His irises turned a furious, blinding blue.

"Once we were all from the same world, all of equal status. The discovery of a new element, a phenomenal source of

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power, changed everything. To best understand it, think of the most powerful elements of this planet, plutonium or uranium. Now imagine that in their purest form they were a million times more powerful and you would have our...well, I will call this Everlast. The absorption of the Everlast changed us. Because of this discovery ours became a world far advanced from the others known to contain life. We had evolved past the point of flesh and bone, existing as a pure form of energy. We could no longer be affected by hunger, disease, becoming essentially immortal. We could communicate without words, manipulate the environment with our minds.

"In our new forms we were able to travel vast distances, learning invaluable knowledge of the universe. We also discovered travel did not have to adhere to the confines of traditional thought, that it was possible to manipulate time, and travel to other universes that existed alongside our own. We lived for eons, but like the stars, were at times susceptible to burning out. In bypassing our former manifestation, we also lost the ability to reproduce.

"The Supreme One, though he had a different name then, was one of the highest order, the longest lived, and one of the very few who knew the source of our power and longevity. He was the only one to know when our world began to die. With this knowledge he began to plan for his escape. He gathered a select few, you and I among them Azrael, to travel in search of a new homeland.

"He took fifty of the strongest for the voyage, along with pieces of our homeland, which he knew would keep us strong.

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Everlast was found only on our home planet, and only in very small abundance. With that knowledge kept to himself, he'd studied the effects of the Everlast, learning what it could and could not do. He also hoarded the purest samples for his own use, pushing his power level far beyond everyone else. What remained he kept in a special container in his quarters, not only to hoard and protect the Everlast, but to prevent too much direct exposure. Though the element gave power, too much could overwhelm, damage, and even kill. This proximity pushed his strength farther still, making him as close to omnipotent as any life form has ever been. With the gain of this extra power, he learned to manipulate those around him in ways that had not been possible before, thereby defining himself as the leader of those that survived the death of our world.

"Through our travels, some of us have been left to guide other worlds, and new life forms have been manipulated by this source. With those who have remained by him to exist in his current place and time, he shares this power, feeding us the runoff from what he does not absorb. Now, those left behind will not continue to grow in strength as we will, but barring unforeseen events, neither will they lose what power they possess.. Those that stay with him grow as he shares the element's effects, but only when and to what degree he chooses. He dictates where we go, what forms we take, everything. And each time we move on, he takes our memories from us. Well, he attempts to anyway, but he is not always successful with me. If I take you back with me to the realm in which we now exist, I can bring you to where this

container is hidden. One touch and your powers will be returned."

Azrael shook his head, brows drawn together. "I don't understand how you know this. I remember nothing of what you have described. There is only the vague understanding that this place is not our original home."

"The Supreme One keeps it this way. As his powers have grown, so has his control over those closest to him. He does not let us remember, or have too much power. Only I remember bits of our long time in existence. Only I know the truth."

"If you got a hold of this container, took this element or source of power, could you not in essence become ruler yourself?" Charles asked.

"You know not what you ask, vampire."

When Raphael met Charles's gaze a brief flash of energy passed from angel to vampire, filling the room with blinding light. Charles shuddered as the power struck him. Raphael clasped his hands onto the smaller man's shoulders, holding him in place to give him a further, more intense transfer of energy. For a few terrifying seconds Charles's body convulsed, his tongue lolling in the corner of his mouth. Daniel drew his hands to his face, shocked and uncertain if he should try to intervene. When the phenomena ceased, Charles slumped to his knees, and if Daniel hadn't dived to catch him, his head would have smashed against the wood floor.

"What did you do to him?" Daniel cried.

"Gave him more strength than he could ever imagine possessing."

"What are you talking about?"

A small spasm shook Charles body, like an earthquake aftershock. When his eyes opened again and their sea-green fury passed by his face, he couldn't have been happier.

With impressive speed Charles was on his feet again. "Yes, what are you talking about?" He staggered, then got himself under complete control. His hands closed into fists.

"I am sharing some of my power with you, as I will with Daniel. I need strong allies when we return, in case we encounter any resistance."

"What about Azrael?"

Raphael gave a sad smile. "I'm afraid that a transfer to Azrael would take up too much of my own power to help at this point, thus defeating the purpose. He has essentially been reset to zero. You and Daniel already possess some of your own supernatural energy, and a small infusion of mine should simply amplify this."

"Is our power of the same source as yours?"

"No, it is not. There are many things in this world, and in the many worlds we've encountered, that possess a unique strain of energy, power, strength, ability, whatever you choose to call it. Though the Supreme One would lead you to believe that he is all-powerful, it simply is not true. He is not the creator of human life, nor any of its mutations, such as creatures like yourself. Any time he has tried to share power with living things outside our origin, at best they turn into

weaker versions of what we are. He takes these changed beings as drones to do his bidding."

"The lesser angels are of the Supreme One's manipulation?" asked an incredulous Azrael.

"Yes, brother. The Dominions, Virtues, Powers, all beings he has stolen from other worlds and infused with..." He emitted a sound that Daniel thought would make his ears bleed. This was obviously the name of the source of their power, and from a language that would not be able to be spoken by inhabitants of the time and place in which they all now resided.

"Please don't make that noise again. Just call it Everlast," Daniel pleaded.

Raphael looked to the obviously pained Daniel.
"Understood vampire. Only because you possess some of your own supernatural power are you even able to remain conscious upon hearing the old words. Our language has been known to cause death in humans."

"So have you yourself tried to share power with creatures who already possess some of their own?" Charles was opening and closing his hands with rapid succession, as though trying to alleviate a bad case of pins and needles.

"No, not I. Nor any of our original group that I'm aware of. I don't believe any of us, except for the Supreme One, has ever shared power at all."

Azrael shook his head, concern pinching his handsome face. "I have never heard of such a thing."

"How do you feel, Charles?" Raphael asked.

Charles smiled, something he rarely did. "Strong."

"Well, I'm going to take that as a success. I know that the Supreme One has attempted to bring members of your kind into his fold before, always to unexpected results. Come closer Daniel."

Daniel hesitated, his fear as evident as his exhilaration. He closed the space between Raphael and himself, before giving Charles one last look. Charles nodded his okay in return. "I'm not as strong as Charles. And what do you mean unexpected results?"

"I am aware of that. I can taste the level of power you possess. Let us attempt this transfer of energy before we get into things that have happened in the past." Raphael's voice was steady and kind, with a sensual, almost hypnotic quality to it. It eased Daniel's tension somewhat, but didn't drain it away completely.

"All right, I'm ready," he said, grimacing in anticipation.

Raphael caught the slighter man's gaze, and the same blinding flash filled the space about the four men. Daniel stumbled backward, arms jerking and eyes bulging from the intensity of the transmission. Raphael came to him, giving another infusion, and this one took the younger immortal to the floor. His limbs trembled, his body bucking and contorting at unnatural angles. A thin trickle of blood escaped from his ear. Charles bent down to cradle his head, and the convulsions came to an abrupt stop. The smell of burnt toast saturated the air.

"Daniel. Daniel." Charles shook him by the shoulder, looking for any sign that he had pulled through.

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His body lay still, his natural pallor making it impossible to gauge the seriousness of his condition. Charles lifted his lids, one after the other, finding the eyes bloodshot and fixed. The angels had drawn in close to the two immortals, and while Raphael appeared calm, Azrael's worry mirrored the flurry of emotion that Charles was experiencing. Despite his hardened disposition and inability to display affection, he'd found that losing friends and comrades was not something he could toss off as easily as he once had. Genevieve, his love and now eternal companion, had given him this.

"He will be all right," Raphael said at last. "I feel him returning, and I can feel that his energy is much stronger than it was."

Daniel stirred. Charles pulled him up against his body, to a position that was more or less sitting. It took another fifteen minutes before he was able to keep his eyes open, and speak coherently. Raphael offered a large, warm hand to assist him to his feet.

"That was amazing. It felt like liquid fire being poured into my body. I saw many strange things, things that didn't make sense, like I was absorbing some of your memories along with your essence. Even now I can feel the power humming through my body." Daniel looked to Charles for reassurance, unable to contain the smile stretching across his boyish face.

"Yes, I agree," Charles said. "That was quite an experience." His cold reservation had drawn up tightly about him, cloaking his emotional reaction, but his eyes shone in a way Daniel had never seen before.

"Now you two can be of some assistance when you come with us to..." Raphael said something that was not of any language that either Daniel or Charles had ever heard before. The sound seemed to slide into their ears, giving their brain a sharp jab.

"Stop that, I'd like to be able to use my brain when we get to wherever it is we're going," Daniel said, causing Charles to actually chuckle in response.

"Our destination is what many of this world call heaven," Azrael explained.

"But which is not exactly a place in any literal geographical sense, but more a reality that has been transposed alongside this one," Raphael explained.

"What will happen to us there?" Charles asked, always practical.

"You should be fine. You are strong creatures, strong enough to have surpassed death. The infusion of power will protect you from any ill effects of entering a different reality."

"You say this with confidence, but you cannot be completely certain can you?"

"No, but I have seen it done with other life forms."

"By the Supreme One?"

"Of course."

Charles pursed his thin lips, pausing as though carefully choosing his next words. "But with immortals there have been unpredictable results? Isn't that what you said earlier?"

Raphael had no choice but to be honest. "A few times the immortals that have been infused with the Supreme One's

power have either perished, or seemed to not have been able to absorb the power."

"Have any absorbed the power and lived?" Raphael gave Charles a strained look. "You know what I mean."

"Yes, but when left to their own devices they attempted activities beyond their faculties, ultimately destroying themselves."

"Have any ever been taken to this realm where you need us to go?"

"Not that I am aware of."

"Fantastic."

Daniel ploughed ahead. "Let's do this. We need to get Kieran back."

Raphael offered him his hand, which Daniel took without missing a beat. The other he offered to Charles. "We need you, Charles."

A strange look flickered across Charles's face before he took it, clasping his hand tightly against the angel's warm flesh. Azrael completed the circle by joining with Daniel and Charles.

Instantly the atmosphere changed. The air thickened as a crackling charge swirled through the space. Charles felt the otherworldly influence tickle along the sensitive spot where the neck meets the hairline, and had to fight the urge to pull his hands away from the others. The feeling couldn't have been more distracting or repulsive if a group of spiders had taken up residence on his bare skin. The temperature dropped, plunging the room into a coldness associated with a harsh Canadian winter. The angels' hands burned in

comparison, seeming to melt into Charles cool, tough flesh. He experienced the most maddening urge to rip his clothes off, as though to release himself from encroaching confines of an unseen force. He feared being swallowed up by this force, never to be seen again.

As the definitions of the space began to dim, a lurching, swirling movement overtook the occupants, as though the room had become a sadistic carousel, bent on tossing off anything that dared to take a ride. The building pressure caused an itchy tightening of the skin, and a dull but persistent ache that seeped through flesh and bone. Charles's teeth mashed together.

It took tremendous effort to turn his head, but when he did he found Azrael and Daniel in a similar state. Their eyes were closed, lips pulled back in a grimace against the assault of pain and disorientation. A faint humming joined the movement, too distant to make any sense to Charles's ears. An explosion of light overtook any lingering familiarity of the den where they had gathered, showering down upon them until there was nothing but a great expanse of whiteness, like a blanket of pristine snow. The distant sound became the crashing thunderous flapping of a thousand wings. Azrael cried out, a terrible sound that caused Charles's insides to clench and shift, as though trying to climb under his ribcage to hide. A bright spasm of fear shot through him, an emotion that Charles rarely felt and did not welcome. In his experience fear inevitably lead to rashness, something that he could not allow in the current circumstance. He needed his wits about him.

The spinning sensation slowly eased, taking with it the strange auditory affects, leaving the men in a pocket of reality devoid of sound. The odd, empty whiteness stretched as far as the eye could see, giving no indication of life or destination. Charles was instantly on alert, eyes narrowed and body tense. Daniel came to his senses less than a minute behind Charles, taking a full three hundred and eighty degree perusal of their new environment. Charles felt Daniel's confusion scurry by.

"There's nothing," Daniel commented.

"Our needs are simpler, more pure than yours, Daniel. I assure you though as we near the heart of this place, there will be many wondrous things to experience. Many places and items from our past have been transported or recreated here, though those who do not have their long memory as I do, do not understand the fulfilment such things bring. We revel in beauty as much as any race does, sometimes to the verge of vanity," Raphael said.

"I did not realize how much I'd forgotten until returning here. My brain is bustling with memories and lost knowledge." Azrael looked about in wonder.

Raphael looked as much pained as he did enlightened. "We are close to the source, brother. It calls to us, energizes us. You would have not had the same reaction before when your powers were active. It is a slow and constant absorption that is next to unnoticeable. The Supreme One keeps the full influence for himself, funnelling much smaller quantities to his followers. I believe that when he stripped your powers, he inadvertently stripped you of the shield he had created about

you to hold back the knowledge he did not wish you to keep. He never thought you'd find a way to return to this place."

"I have many strange images in my brain, places that are neither here nor on earth. It seems I should know them, but the significance is not there."

"Perhaps in coming here, without blinders as it were, you are open to retrieving memories that have been blocked. This might be an unforeseen side effect of taking away your powers." Raphael seemed to consider the suggestion himself, as he offered it to the other men.

Azrael didn't look well. His skin had taken on a greenish-grey tinge, not unlike the look of someone suffering from food poisoning or seasickness. Beads of sweat dotted his hairline. His massive shoulders slumped.

Raphael took the lead, moving with confidence to a destination that only he seemed to be aware of. The others stumbled along in his wake, seeing nothing but the endless whiteness, unnerved by a silence so absolute it consumed their attention, begging to be spoiled. Off in the distance a shimmery illumination appeared, breaking through the nothingness in intermittent flashes. Charles surmised that although they seemed to be heading in a straight, unobstructed path, they were in fact following a more rugged trail, which allowed glimpses of the area ahead from the higher vantage points. He could have drowned in the depth of his bewilderment, a desperate whimper caught in the back of his throat, but Charles was nothing if not controlled. He swallowed the bitter pill of his fear and refocused.

When the sight came clearly into view for the first time both Charles and Daniel stopped dead in their tracks. Every word that sprang to Charles's mind to describe the beauty before him couldn't begin to do the location justice. His brain scrambled to process the details his eyes were drinking in.

A crystalline structure with an inner source of iridescence appeared front and centre, commanding the group's attention. Charles was reminded of a giant carapace, a shed exoskeleton from a radiant arthropod that had somehow taken root in the sterile soil of never-ending whiteness. The structure also brought to mind the haunting, biomechanical-influenced work of an eccentric Swiss artist that Charles had been fond of many years before. Several pieces of the brilliant and disturbing art still hung in Charles's home in England. He hoped he lived long enough to see them again.

No separation existed between the ground and sky, there continued the vast, uninterrupted nothingness, which seemed to be the essence of the place.

Without words, an understanding came from Azrael that this beguiling structure was where the archangels resided. The lesser beings were housed in a separate area just beyond the scope of Charles's vision. At the farthest reaches of this settlement the Supreme One kept his personal residence and court, where he met with his followers and passed judgment on the various occurrences that intrigued, pleased, or angered him. This was also where the source of this world's energy lay.

Charles swallowed his awe like a painful gasp for air, knowing it was not a time to revel in the sight before him. He

needed to remain sharp and undistracted. Beneath this overwhelming beauty lay danger, obstacles that must be passed to get Azrael where he needed to go. He felt Daniel touch his arm. The other immortal's thoughts spoke loudly, the intensity harsh and prickly, but something Charles was able to ward off the effects of. He squeezed Daniel's hand to show solidarity, and though the act was welcome, it caught Daniel off guard.

Let's do this, Daniel thought.

* * * *

Friends and extended family had gathered to celebrate the sixtieth birthday of Jocelyn's grandmother, a stern and bewitching woman, with a tongue sharp enough to draw blood. Even at her age she remained an attractive woman, tall and thin, like her granddaughter. Thick, reddish hair now streaked with grey, and lines gathered at the corner of her eyes and mouth, but neither sign of aging detracted from her natural beauty. She was in essence a preview of what Jocelyn would be in later life.

Her husband had passed a few years before, a not uncommon occurrence for the time, and the demanding lifestyle. He'd been a stonemason, working till his very last day of bodily existence. At the story of his passing, I'd wondered if Azrael had guided his spirit to wherever it was that human energy ended up after physical death, or if he'd ministered to Anne's grief.

As Jocelyn and I had the most suitable house for such an event, we spent the better part of two weeks preparing to

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receive up to fifty guests. Gardens had been weeded, fences painted, and the house cleaned from pillar to post. Even the barn had been scrubbed and organized, every tool hanging in its proper place. Only the faintest aroma of damp hay and horse manure lingered. The chores had been a welcomed distraction for me, pushing aside my misery for sweat and exhaustion.

As the day arrived, the celebration only served to push my feelings of despair and isolation to the forefront. I stood, surrounded by folks who clearly cared for me, yet to whom I felt nothing in return. In the midst of their collective happiness, where children's laughter danced on the air and the voices from several generations joined in chorus to sing of our glorious homeland, I stood alone, a black hole of discord. Jocelyn knew of my emotional state, but no words or actions from her would assuage the deep-seated pain. Her comfort would have been a gesture only, not a real understanding of my discord. She had yet to take my revelations at face value. I knew she wanted to believe me, but common sense kept her from taking that final step. I did my best to make small talk when approached, but otherwise remained just outside of direct involvement in the festivities.

Much beer and wine flowed through the afternoon and into the evening. I myself had several glasses, a decision that had most likely not been a wise one. The alcohol lurched about in my stomach, souring with my mood as the hours passed. Many times I felt a rush of heat swelling my throat until my shirt collar felt as though it were strangling me. I scooped two fingers under the starched collar, reminding myself to

breathe, then brushed off the sensation as a mixture of nerves and impending inebriation. At that point passing out would have been a welcomed relief.

As I busied myself with clearing several of the tables, a touch to the arm took me by surprise. I turned, expecting Jocelyn or one of my siblings, but found the guest of honour instead.

"Can I get something for you Anne?" I asked, with what I hoped was a fetching smile.

"Yes. A moment of your time," she answered. Her grey eyes dared me to refuse.

"Of course." I looked about for a quiet spot. "Shall we go into the house?"

"I believe your wife and several other young women went in to wash dishes and allow some quiet for those with babies. The barn, perhaps?"

I didn't see any reason to argue, and nodded my agreement. We strolled along, so as not to draw unwanted attention. As we closed the distance I realized that I was as close to drunk as I'd been since being deposited back into my human past. Anne was sharp, she'd use the fact to her advantage if possible. Holding the door open to allow her to pass, a wave of nausea took me, and stepping inside the building with the trapped heat and acrid smell only made the feeling intensify.

I took slow, deep breaths through my mouth as I waited for her to begin. She took her time, giving the space a thorough perusal before she settled herself on the edge of a large crate.

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"I know I'm not around as much as some of the other folk here today, but that hasn't stopped me from seeing the difference in you, Kieran." Blunt as always.

"I don't know what you mean, Anne."

"Do not play games with me, boy. I'm too old for that nonsense. You are not the same man who married my Jocelyn. In fact if I weren't seeing you with my own eyes, I'd think you were a different man altogether."

Bile burned in the back of my throat. "Everything is fine."

"No it's not. You are sullen, too quiet. Your own family talks about the change in you. They say you don't speak with them anymore, you never smile. Jocelyn of course will not betray you, but I can tell she's keeping something from me. What has you in such a state?"

The room began to swirl. Sweat trickled down my face, and plastered the back of my shirt to my body. "This is between Jocelyn and I, please."

"Jocelyn is my granddaughter. When I see the spark in that girl start to die, then it becomes my business. You found another woman?"

I needed to get out of that barn, out of that life. "No there's not another woman."

Her eyes were hard and cold, boring into me. "Then what. Is it drink? Are you sick?"

I shook my head.

"Have you spoken with Father Michael about your problems?"

The last question sent me over the edge. My fury exploded from me, no longer containable. "There is nothing that Father

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Michael, or any fucking priest for that matter, can say to me to make this right. It will just be more lies, fed to those pathetic drones from the biggest liar of them all, that they in turn spew all over the masses. You think God is going to help me?" A crazed, bitter laugh escaped me. "He's the reason I'm here, He's the reason I can't get back!"

Anne kept her cool, but I could tell my words had unnerved her. "Kieran, you're not making sense. Get back to where?"

"Where I belong!"

"This is where you belong, son. This is your home, your family. Where else would you go?"

"You don't know anything. This is all a trick, none of it is real." My eyes were stinging with tears, and the rush of blood to my face threatened to topple me. Anne's face blurred before me, my legs suddenly contained no bones.

"Kieran, you're sick. I think you've caught fever. Let me get Jocelyn." She started to walk toward me, arms held out in front of her.

"I am sick. Sick of the lies, sick of being here! I need to get back...back to Azrael." Then the world tilted and I crumpled to the floor.

A blur of movement passed me by, what I assumed was Anne racing to get help. Overhead was a flutter of wings and a soft coo from a family of barn owls that had taken up residence in the rafters. The sound brought me back to the night when Rachel and I first met, and though the night was but a few years in the recent past, the memory was so far removed from any truth I currently knew, it could have been

a century ago. I was trembling, burning from the inside out. Turning my head to the side I retched, expelling the alcohol and dinner I'd consumed in a hot, violent rush.

Hurried footsteps sounded. A shaft of light spilled into the barn as the door opened, sweeping over my face. I screamed though I knew it couldn't harm me. I screamed because I wanted it to burn me, prove that everything I'd been experiencing was nothing more than a sick dream. *Please let this be a dream.*

A hand touched my cheek, my forehead. I could no longer see clearly, and if it wasn't going to be Azrael's face before me, I didn't care if I would ever see again.

"He's burning up. Get Donal and a couple of other men. We need to get him into the house." Jocelyn's voice, rushed and frightened.

"Let me go Jocelyn," I mumbled, my tongue made of lead.

"Shut it Kieran. I'm not going to let you die."

The fire in my body intermittently surrendered to bouts of violent chills. Voices became foggy and indistinct. I felt my body being lifted from the ground by several sets of rough hands, but I no longer seemed to reside in the hunk of flesh that was my physical self. I hovered above the chaos, unsure where to go.

Azrael appeared in a magnificent shower of wind and light, blowing aside truth and reservations to take centre stage in what remained of my consciousness. He'd come in his angelic guise, muscled body draped in the tunic that bared more than it covered, and his curls damp and loose about his face. His

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dove grey wings opened and closed softly, in tempo with his breath. "Kieran, you must not give in to nothingness."

"Help me Azrael. Please! Take me back with you." I tried to reach out to him, realizing I had no hands with which to do so. In my pain I'd surrendered to spirit.

"I cannot save you, my love. I am also lost. All I can offer is my heart, and the promise that I am waiting for you, and will wait for eternity if I must to have you returned. You must fight, Kieran." His face was so sad, anguished.

So I fought, with every bit of strength, resilience and determination I could summon. I seemed to return to my body like a punch to the gut. A sound like the release of air from a balloon roared by. As I tried to track its path a new sensation took me, a hand to my arm, warm and firm. The world had drained away, leaving behind a vast expanse of blue, cloudless sky. Against this backdrop I found Azrael, as gorgeous and commanding as the first night he'd come to me. The hand on my arm, his hand, moved up to my shoulder with a current of heat so delicious I wanted to roll in it, inhale it, ingest it. Fingers whispered across the back of my neck, into my damp hair.

"Kieran," my love said, before crushing his lips down onto mine.

I surrendered to the contact, drinking in his heat, his scent, his taste on my tongue. A stream of power and joy poured down my throat, expelled from Azrael's supernatural form into the empty shell that I'd become. I filled with his light and energy, a rush like nothing I'd ever experienced before. At first the experience was glorious, connecting us as

no two others could, but soon the process turned ominous. It was too much, too fast! I feared I might burst from the burden of this energy, thus forever losing my physical body and closing the door on any chance of regaining the union with Azrael I so desperately wanted. He didn't seem to notice my panic, continuing the kiss with unbridled passion. I began to choke, drowning on his love.

I pulled away, ripping my lips from his. "It's too much!" But it was not Azrael I found myself embraced by, the Supreme One had replaced his form.

"I told you he didn't love you," he said, eyes as black as coal.

The hands on my body moved, leaving stinging trails in their wake. I looked down, horrified to discover my arms had been ripped to shreds. The hands had become claws, black, mummified flesh topped with razor-sharp nails. I screamed and tried to pull away. The claws pierced my torso, forcing their way through muscle and bone, hungry for the soft organs hiding within.

"He is mine," the Supreme One said, the sweet face of "Noah" morphing into a hideous, rotten thing, plucked from the depth of my childhood fears.

"Azrael," I whimpered.

"It's Jocelyn, love," the familiar voice of my wife said, startling me to such a degree that I bolted upright, which in my condition was not an advisable move. My brain sloshed about within my skull.

A splash of water distracted me, pulling me away from Jocelyn's concerned face. My hands fell to my sides, no

strength left to lift them with, becoming immersed in a cold, liquid cocoon. I was naked I realized, sitting in a container full of water and chunks of ice. Jocelyn leaned against the side of the tub, the front of her dress damp and clinging to her bosom. I shuddered, once again transported to the space between the reality of my past and present, a position, place, a condition that allowed me contact with the one I needed above all others.

"There's not much time," he said.

I took Azrael's hand, and we walked from the realm of never-ending sky into a pristine field, vibrant with yellow and purple wildflowers. He bent to pick a small bouquet, and as he handed them to me he tucked one stray bloom behind my ear. The smile on his face was brighter than any sun I'd seen in the many months of my detainment. I touched his full lips with my shaking fingers, sure that his presence was nothing more than a mirage conjured by my fever-swelled brain. When he didn't disappear I laughed, the sound echoing like thunder across the empty landscape.

"Is this real?" I asked, walking at his side.

"Nothing is real," he said. "Everything is changing."

"I don't understand." His words scared me.

"Be strong Kieran, and I will find a way to bring you home. Believe in me, and I will make things real again."

"I believe Azrael. I love you."

"I can never be real again without your love," he answered.

A shadow crept across the land, momentarily hiding the sun's light. I shivered, and Azrael pulled me close. His lips

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pressed against my forehead, so soft. He brushed a strand of hair from my eye. Raindrops of blood started to fall from the sky, a taste of dark ecstasy on my tongue. The field froze over, smothering the carpet of plant life until there was nothing but barren earth.

I blinked, and when my eyes reopened he was so far from me I could just make out the features on his face, now twisted with grief.

I started to run, but he only slipped farther away. "Don't leave me!" I cried.

"Never. I'm coming for you, Kieran."

Then he was gone.

A cyclone swept through the empty field, dragging me into its twirling, writhing vortex. I smelled damp earth and anger, floated on restless waves of pain. The sun shrivelled and died, dropping me into the waiting coldness.

"Kieran, Kieran!" A bolt of pain erupted on the side of my head, followed by a rush of fire in my cheek. My heavy lids fought to open, giving a hazy, lopsided view of the space about me.

Jocelyn was half in the tub with me, shaking me by the shoulders. The pain, I assumed, had been a slap across the face to bring my consciousness back. I could hear voices, murmuring and admonishing. "Why doesn't she just let him die?" I thought I heard the unseen chorus ask.

"You're not going to die," Jocelyn said. "I won't let you."

Azrael won't let me, I thought, and smiled.

"I understand now, Kieran," Jocelyn whispered against me ear. "I know you've told me the truth."

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I looked to her. She smiled, though tears streamed down her face.

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Chapter Eighteen

With a nod of his head Raphael gave the instruction to continue through the entrance, moving them deeper into the heart of the beast. A chill caught Charles as he took his first steps forward. If he'd been a superstitious man he'd have taken the incident as an omen, a warning to abandon their plan of action and turn away. Since he was a ruthless, arrogant hard-ass, he continued on. Without touch or words the gates began to slowly open inward, and Charles moved as one with the other men into the unpredictable hands of Fate.

A rush of energy, like a warm, dry wind, rattled by as the gates securely closed behind them, and even that did not give Charles pause. Raphael gave an appreciative sigh, which Charles identified with when he felt his own wondrous surge of power, as though simply being in such a place gave his supernatural abilities a charge. A lovely ache seeped through his flesh. When he looked to his side the dreamy half-smile he found on Daniel's lips told him the other immortal was in the grips of his own rapture. If Raphael's earlier infusion had been a lightning strike, this new sensation was a like a sip at a smooth glass of liqueur. It came in gently, a feeling to be savoured.

Charles realized then that he still held Daniel's hand, something that under normal circumstances he would never have willingly participated in. Even with the awareness of his actions bright and undeniable, he did not wish to end the experience. In fact he made his grip even tighter, pulling

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Daniel closer to his side. Daniel turned his head, hazel eyes clear and kind. The younger vampire smiled at the action. Charles had never felt so aware and imperishable before.

Azrael did not appear to be faring as well as the other three. His fragile mortal state was far from ideal in such a place, part of the reason humans did not visit while still attached to their corporeal bodies. His movements appeared laboured, as though fighting through a density in the environment the others did not feel. Though his efforts seemed to drain great stores of energy, they held a strange beauty, like a ballet performed in water.

"Is he all right?" Charles asked.

"In this reality the pull of gravity is much stronger than on your earth. You and I do not feel the effects as such, because of the touch of our world's power. It gives us resistance, and without this shield Azrael must expel great amounts of his energy to function. Again, this is one of the many things I do not have a complete understanding of. The Supreme One has made himself strong not only in power, but in knowledge, especially that which he withholds from others."

"Can this have any permanent repercussions?"

"I do not know, Charles. You are the first to be here that do not come from my world, or have not been altered by the Supreme One's power directly. And Azrael, though he comes from the same origins as I, he is essentially nothing more than a man at this point. My hope is that some of his true essence lingers, and will protect him."

Charles became aware of several other beings in the near vicinity. He let his gaze wander, trying to be nonchalant so as

not to draw attention to their strange assembly, but the effort did not come easily. The presence of the others itched and chafed at his skin, like walking through a sand storm. Imaginary tentacles reached out, probing him, but not in any corporeal way. This connection tasted of his fundamental nature, his dark essence, which he no longer fully understood himself since Raphael's share of power had changed the abilities he'd grown sure of in his many years of immortal existence. Those that examined him were curious and hungry. As he forced himself to concentrate, he realized that there were many different types of energy connecting with him; some that touched him with the hot, urgent manifestation he had experienced earlier with Raphael, others were cooler, more diluted, but nevertheless, perceptible.

Some of the beings bore the familiar appearance of angels, man-like but large in stature and winged. It was strange for Charles to now realize that their appearance came from an adaptation to human life, and not the other way around. Angels, or whatever their true name was, were idealized images of man, the form brought to humans by the process of evolution, perfected by their unnatural influence. Perhaps in time humans would reach this stage; larger, stronger, and able to access abilities that now only lay in the realms of dream and science fiction. For the time being, the closest things to this perfection on earth were vampires.

Catching a glimpse of some of the others beings in the area made him feel as though he'd been transported into a novel by Isaac Asimov or Robert Heinlein. Many possessed a basic humanoid form, with the requisite head, trunk and four

limbs, but that's as far as the similarities went with life forms as he knew them. A small group they passed all bore the indistinct features of a store mannequin, an outward facade that unnerved Charles to his core. They filed by, moving in a coordinated, gliding mass, their movements too quick to be certain that their feet actually touched the ground. When one brushed against his arm in passing his throat narrowed to the size of a drinking straw, but he forced himself not to recoil.

Many others were nothing more than flowing spectres of light, a manifestation that could be admired from afar, but once up close the brilliant shower of energy proved too pure to be looked at directly. Charles kept his blank mask locked firmly in place, giving no outward reaction to the alien surroundings, but to do so took an enormous amount of self-control. Daniel was not as successful in keeping his reaction in check. Charles, with his hand still clasped in Daniel's, gave a yank to get the other man's attention. The action seemed to alert him to possible consequences of his behaviour, and he quickly drew his focus back. They needed to appear as though they belonged in such a place. Charles suddenly wished that Genevieve could be there with him.

"We don't have much time," Raphael prompted, and the men picked up their pace.

Charles and Daniel took the rear of the procession, all too aware of how vulnerable Azrael was in the current circumstances. Oddly none of the beings they passed seemed to bear them any mind, which Charles was silently thankful for, and more than a few acknowledged Raphael with a reverence held for those of higher status. It seemed that

since Raphael was one of the Supreme One's inner circle, his actions and company were not to be scrutinized or questioned. This offered them a unique level of protection as they continued to their destination. Their camouflage was their blatancy.

Soon the scurrying, overlapping energies of the beings they passed dissipated as they moved from the active common area to the vicinity where only those of the highest order were permitted. The gatherings thinned until they were the only four left. The multiple, overlapping points of energy was replaced with a singular, but much more commanding sensation. The energy throbbed and waned like a heartbeat, at the high end being the physical equivalent of walking into a foghorn. Daniel stumbled the first time the pulsation occurred.

A similar structure to the one at the front gate appeared, draped in a filmy, bluish substance that clung to the constitution like damp smoke. If he stood and observed for ten human years, Charles would never have been able to make out all of the intricacies of the structure's formidable exterior. It was a beauty that not only touched one's eyes, but seeped into one's being, extolling a joy that had no words powerful enough to describe it. Charles felt the need to look away, as though he were not worthy enough to know the existence of such splendour.

He could tell that the artificial heartbeat came from deep within the bowels of the structure. The front doors watched their approach with hungry reticence. Never in his long existence had Charles wanted to desert plans already

underway more than he did in that instance. He did not belong, and the truth of it curdled his blood.

Once within arm's reach of the entrance Raphael emitted a series of sounds that seemed less like language, and more like an oral, gouging assault on the immortals' ears. In response to the words that only the angels could understand the doors opened inward with a soft yawn, letting escape a dazzling opalescence. Daniel raised his hands to the show of light, as though warding off a physical attack. The display did seem to mimic a summer-bright burst of sunlight, yet there was no warmth attached to its presence. In fact the touch of this energy came to their skin as a lick of frost. Raphael seemed unaffected as he passed through the doorway into the maw of waiting radiance.

Azrael followed his supernatural brother inside, with the vampires close on his heels. The interior offered many sensations. The air tasted like a clean, spring rain and the intensity of power that had been obvious on the outside amplified ten-fold. Charles felt as though he'd been thrown in front of a sonic boom, the waves of force striking him with bone-rattling vigour, the protective shield he'd been under having vanished completely. Though his disposition and recent infusion of strength helped to lessen the effects of the power source, it was still uncomfortable and disorienting. He moved as though walking a corridor lined with marshmallow.

Daniel tugged at his hand, making Charles realize he'd momentarily forgotten he was there. "We're close."

"Yes, I feel it."

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Raphael darted a suspicious look about him before charging ahead to a place in the blank interior that did not appear any different to Charles than the rest of the space about them. In fact it was quite difficult to discern the confines of the space at all, so he proceeded with caution, unsure where and when he might run into a wall or other containment structure. The angel stopped. His arms rose to shoulder height, head turned slightly away from a specific slice of white space. Again he spoke in his strange, almost painful language, his body tensing with the effort.

A breach appeared in the whiteness, an expanding band of luminescence, providing a glimpse into the hidden space beyond. Once the opening was wide enough to allow Raphael's massive form to pass he strode inside. The three others followed, filled with equal parts amazement, fear and anticipation. Inside a simple, unadorned box sat atop a protrusion from the room's floor, an imposing, rounded stalagmite. Raphael came to the container, snapping it open. Like Pandora's Box, this simple act unleashed a wave of power that dominated the room, affecting all to varying degrees.

An eerie, green luminescence came from the box, dripping over the sides like fog. The smoky residue crept up the angel's arm, twining around the limb. From the container's interior came the source of the effect, but Raphael's body effectively blocked its view from the others. He reached his hands in, jerking when he made contact with the unseen matter. The well-defined muscles in his arms tensed and bunched, and all the visible areas of his skin flushed an

alarming shade of red. With much effort he pulled one hand free and reached back toward Azrael. Through gritted teeth he said, "Take my hand. Let my body conduct the energy."

Azrael grabbed his hand without a second thought, his reaction to the influx of energy instantaneous. His head snapped back and his eyes closed. A visible tremble rode his body from foot to head. Like Raphael, a pronounced flush filled his skin, a stark contrast to the pristine white background of the room. The vampires watched the transfer of power with awe and reticence. When Azrael began to convulse and a wet, light-showering froth spilled from his lips, raining over them like drops of acid, they made a simultaneous decision to intervene. They were moving forward to pull Azrael free of his brother's grip when suddenly a giant spark erupted from the men's clasped hands, knocking Raphael into the container and taking Azrael to the floor.

A loud, painful grunt came from Azrael as he fell. Daniel rushed to his side. As he was about to lay his hands on the man, the alarming redness of his skin vanished, replaced with the ruddy complexion he had possessed upon Daniel's first encounter with him. Wings sprouted from his back in a shower of massive feathers. A halo of orange, pulsating light encircled his body, lifting him from the floor to spin him about with reckless abandon. Daniel stayed crouched, looking as though he didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

When the transformation was almost complete his spinning began to slow, then take on a strange translucence. The man-like form disappeared into a brilliant, throbbing mass of light.

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Daniel shrieked, clasp hands over his eyes as he turned away from the phenomenon.

Charles also shielded his sensitive eyes, then turned his attention back to Raphael, who had crashed into the protrusion on which the box sat with enough force to snap it in two. The container had fallen to the floor, spilling forth its otherworldly contents. A trail of greenish, glass-like particles lay across the white floor, varying in size from grains of rice to the equivalent of a modern baseball. The pieces were shaking along the floor like Mexican jumping beans, emitting wave after wave of incredible power. The atmosphere took on a hazy, liquid quality, where sound became distorted and maintaining balance was an exercise in futility.

Charles charged forward, feeling coltish and disoriented, a state that only increased the closer he came to the source of power. Raphael struggled to get control of his functions, before motioning Charles to come to his assistance.

"We... need...to...get...the pieces back in the container. Too much exposure to a pure source like this will quickly do more harm than good," Raphael instructed despite his obvious discomfort. A piece that lay against one arm appeared to be melting away soft tissue, though the wound did not bleed as much as release an unnatural glow.

The men looked back to Daniel and Azrael. The vampire cowered as the angel continued to fluctuate between his true form and his familiar angel guise.

"This can't be helping him," Charles said.

Without waiting for a reply he scrambled toward the debris on the floor. He righted the box, then reached for the closest

piece. As his hand closed over it, a terrible force overtook him, feeling as though it were imploding each individual cell in his body. He dropped the piece into the container, not surprised to find a distinctive, burn-like effect on his palm. He opened and closed his fist, trying to will the pain away. A blur of movement to his right made him refocus on the task at hand.

Raphael had returned several of the larger pieces to the container. He too now appeared to be in great pain, and in response his movement became stiff and laboured. Charles clenched his teeth, mentally preparing himself for the burst of pain to come, before leaning down to swipe the smaller, dust-like pieces into the box with the length of his arm. The sleeve of his shirt evaporated, the skin underneath reacted immediately by puckering into a multitude of angry blisters. Similar wounds could be seen on Raphael's exposed flesh.

When the contents were returned to their container, Raphael grabbed the box and made his way back to Azrael, still lying cradled in Daniel's arms. He dropped to his knees, and with a look of gritty determination pulled out a palm-sized piece of the strange element. He pressed this piece to Azrael's chest, at the area where a human's heart would lay beneath its protective covering of flesh and bone. The skin bubbled and writhed against the contact, eventually beginning to cave in, allowing the piece to be swallowed into the meat of the angel's body. A wave of heat radiated back at the others, but Azrael did not show any outward reaction himself for several minutes.

His eyes suddenly flew open and he snapped into a sitting position, knocking Daniel aside in the process. His skin had become scarlet, the discoloration staining into the whites of his eyes, which made the blue even more startling and electric. He coughed, expelling a damp rush of greenish air. The particles danced across Charles's lower arm, a tingling warmth over his rapidly healing burns.

"Brother, are you all right?" Raphael demanded, as he reached out and grabbed Azrael's shoulders.

Azrael nodded his head, blinking several times. Each time they reopened their colour struck Charles like a laser. Azrael allowed Raphael to help him to his feet, where he tested each of his limbs in turn. He gave one last transcendence into pure energy, before emerging in perfect angelic form.

"I feel stronger than I ever have before," Azrael announced in his deep timbre, the power resonating along Charles's spine.

"As do I," Charles said. He looked to Daniel, who nodded his agreement.

Raphael snapped the lid of the container closed, placing it gently beside the rubble of what had once been its pedestal. Immediately the disorienting effects receded, but the infusion of its power remained within all of the beings in the room.

"Let's get out of here." Raphael was already heading in the direction of the room's entrance before any of the others had a chance to reply.

"The only place I'm going is after Kieran," Azrael replied. The conviction in his words raised the hairs on the back of Charles's neck.

Raphael stopped short. "How do you plan to do that?"

"You gave me the ability when you forced the Everlast inside of my being. I've absorbed that energy into my pure form, and I can feel the strength building even as we speak. When I think of Kieran I can picture where the Supreme One has taken him. He is lost in the past, waiting for me. I can feel his presence as though he were standing as close to me you are. I can go to him."

"Azrael, none of us has ever had the ability to go through time without the Supreme One's assistance. What if you are unsuccessful? What would happen to Kieran then?" His worry was evident in his tone, and the hardness of his expression.

"I will find him."

"Let him go Raphael. I believe he can do this." Daniel's words surprised them all. He had been so quiet until that point, a shadow to the others' decisions and actions.

"I agree. Azrael has a connection to Kieran."

Without further discussion Azrael's eyes slipped shut. He clenched his massive hands at his sides, body tensed. A vacuum swallowed his form, covering him in a thin veil of milky residue, and forcing the others back from the spot where he stood. As his figure began to fade, his memories of his lover were forced onto the others, the strength of his need to be reunited with him took them like a blow from a jackhammer. A cyclone of energy swirled about his form, moving faster and faster, until it was impossible to discern whether the angel still remained beneath its camouflage. The pressure from the phenomena was almost too much to bear, rattling through Charles brain. He clasped his hands over his

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ears, sure that they would burst. A tiny trail of blood slipped from his nose.

With a flash that touched his eyes like a knife's blade Charles dropped to the ground. The pressure vanished, leaving the space cold and silent. He allowed himself several seconds before he dared to open his eyes again. When he did he found Daniel and Raphael in a similar state, sore and uncertain.

Azrael was gone.

There was no time for Charles to contemplate what that meant, as a multitude of otherworldly beings began to pour into the secret chamber.

* * * *

I walked down the damp path to the water's edge, my shoes nothing more than a whisper against the ground. The woods were silent and watchful, as though debating on whether my presence was something to be alarmed about or not.

As the first year had passed into the next in what I had come to view as my "unlife," wandering down to the water in the dead of night became habit. More nights than not, despite weather or need for sleep, I came to this same spot, as though the solution to my dilemma could be found in the water lapping against the shore. At best I found solitude and a quiet time for contemplation, at worst the stillness worked to compound my sense of isolation. The fever incident had further alienated me from any connection to those in my past. Even Jocelyn, who had spent weeks nursing me back to

health, had adopted a reservation in dealing with me. I simply existed, and waited.

My foot upon the relic of a dock caused the wood to give an awkward moan. I became aware I was not alone. Someone who was not as adept at travelling that particular route as I had faltered somewhere in the darkness behind me. A sharp snapping sound came, followed by a deep exhalation of air. My keen ears caught that the sound came from the right, perhaps ten feet behind where I stood.

I whirled about to confront my stalker. "Who's there?"

There was no answer in words, but slowly a small figure began to emerge from the veil of darkness. My heart gave a shuddery, off-tempo series of beats, breath catching in my throat. As the darkness clinging to the form let go and the face came into clarity, the sense of anticipation fell to a quick death. Jocelyn, wrapped in a long coat over her nightdress, stood before me. She seemed caught between defiance and sadness, neither emotion quite able to capture her completely. She dug the toe of her shoe into the damp soil, where the path gave way to the dock.

"I was worried, so I followed you." She didn't meet my gaze.

"There's nothing to worry about. I simply couldn't sleep." I couldn't contain the tiniest edge of anger that had crept into my voice.

"It is a worry when most nights find you out of our bed, doing God knows what. Each time you leave I can't help but wonder if it will be for good."

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Oh, how I wished that were true. I couldn't be mad at Jocelyn. In the time I had been trapped there, we had developed a forced closeness, a relationship built on a secret only the two of us shared. Though I didn't want to, I had come to rely on her presence. She in turn didn't want to feel for me what could not be reciprocated, but still cared enough to want my pain to end.

"I'm sorry Jocelyn. Nothing I do is meant to hurt you."

She came to my side. "I know. You have to understand that as much as you are looking for a way back to what you feel is your real existence, this is mine. I have nowhere to go after you leave, and you don't know what will happen if you do. I may be left with my memories of a life that shouldn't have been, or I may have no memories at all. I don't know which will be worse."

"Jocelyn..." I started, but there were no words to refute the truth of hers. Instead I took her hand and led her down to the water.

There we removed our shoes and sat, feet dangling in the cold liquid. We stayed in silence, shoulders pressed together, a chasm of unspoken resentment between us.

"I saw him." Her voice was so soft I strained to understand.

"Who?"

"Azrael. The night of your fever. Several times when you slipped into unconsciousness there were brief flashes...of something. I saw a face and a form with wings. At one point I even thought I heard a man's voice calling your name."

"Why didn't you tell me before now?"

"I was afraid. I don't want to lose you."

"Jocelyn, none of this is real. This is not the life you were destined to have."

She sighed. "I know that now."

A violent wind suddenly rattled through the surrounding forest. The cool air acquired a strange heat and density, which prickled along my scalp, impossible to ignore. I jumped to my feet as a series of explosions, like dazzling fireworks, disrupted the night. A whirling, angry whine built, accompanying the visual stimuli in an overwhelming assault to my senses. I shivered, but for the first time in months felt hope. Beside me Jocelyn moaned, and when I turned I found she had collapsed.

The water rippled, the contact with the shore now more urgent and sloppy. The dock swayed underneath me, and my already upset stomach lurched in response. As I leaned down I realized that Jocelyn was not unconscious, only disoriented. I scooped her up, and as I stood placed her on her feet. She was unsteady at first, clinging to my arm for support, but each step we took in unison found her more secure.

A loud crack slashed through the night, wiping away everything else from my awareness. I was sure I would turn to find that a bolt of lightning had struck one of the large trees, but as I scanned the area about me, I found nothing of the sort. The sound had been so loud and close, I'd felt it ricochet through my flesh. The night was suddenly eerily silent, and I realized I was trembling.

There was movement in the forest, a loud procession of footsteps with no intent to mask their approach. As a figure

emerged from the darkness, much as Jocelyn had earlier, adrenalin started to surge through my body, and I was madly aware of my throbbing pulse. Dampness dotted my hairline. I tried to remember how to breathe.

"Kieran!" When the voice touched my ears, the shock almost overwhelmed me. I bit my tongue and found that my legs had turned to rubber.

I lunged forward, Jocelyn's hand slipping from mine, then began to run madly towards the figure before me. Tears stung my eyes and streamed down my cheeks, making it even more difficult to ascertain if what I saw was real or a figment of my imagination.

I crashed into the hard, muscled body, feeling granite arms wrap around my body. I cried out as the arms closed too tightly around me, feeling as though my ribcage might be crushed. The warmth of the figure's flesh against my cheek distracted me from the pain of the embrace. The grip loosened, but did not let go entirely. I felt lips on the top of my head, then trailing down from my forehead to my eager lips.

The strong arms lifted me from the ground, spinning me about as effortlessly as though I were a child, and not a full-grown man. I laughed in spite of myself. When I was placed back on my feet, and for the first time clearly saw the face of the one before me, the rush of emotions stunned me, making it impossible to speak. Azrael reached forward and ran one hand along my cheek, through my rumpled hair.

Then he leaned down and kissed me with more passion than I could ever have imagined to exist. His lips all but

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crushed mine, hot tongue probing my mouth. I returned the kiss with all the strength my human form possessed, crying and moaning with euphoria at my lover's reappearance. My hands ran along the chiselled muscles of Azrael's arms, to his powerful shoulders. I pressed into his body, coming alive in ways I had not been sure I'd ever feel again.

A soft coughing behind us suddenly reminded me that we were not alone. In that moment everything else had disappeared. I pulled slightly away from Azrael, looking back at Jocelyn, who stood uncertain a few feet from where we were embracing. She looked as shocked as I felt.

"This is Azrael, I take it?" She was crying too, but the emotion had not affected her voice. Jocelyn had always been strong.

I leaned my head against Azrael's chest, not wanting to let go. "Yes, this is Azrael. Azrael this is Jocelyn—my wife."

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Chapter Nineteen

"Daniel!" Charles shouted, but the other vampire did not need any prompting. He was ready, having jumped to his feet with fists clenched and fangs protruding.

Raphael inadvertently took the lead, having moved closer to the entrance before Azrael's disappearance, and he easily took out the first five beings with a simple sweep of his arm. The power flew out from his body like droplets of water, needing only a few to connect for the attackers to go down. Charles briefly wondered how long Raphael had been thinking about the plan they had just pulled off, and whether his control over his new powers was from mimicking the Supreme One's actions, or simply sheer will.

Could he manifest his new power into whatever form he wished?

Two beings of the humanoid-shaped, blank-faced variety charged at him, and without a clear thought in his head he raised his hand out before him, releasing a stream of power that penetrated the closer of the two beings, causing him to explode in a shower of light and heat. The second being faltered, clearly surprised at Charles's abilities, which he promptly used to his advantage. He grabbed the second being and ripped his head off. A shower of light purged from the neck of its still standing body, before dissipating in a similar fashion to the first being.

A second wave of beings entered the space, several of which had the traditional angelic appearance of Azrael and

Raphael. Their beauty hurt Charles as much as the fear their presence invoked, making it difficult to think clearly. One of them actually had a hand about his neck before he was able to bring his focus back. With an iron-strong grip he pried the fingers from his throat, only to have the being before him fade away. The angel then reverted to his true form, a being of pure energy, thus slipping from the vampire's grasp. The ferocity of light the being exuded momentarily blinded Charles, but he chose to let this action be a prompt, rather than a stumbling back.

Charles closed his eyes and concentrated on forcing his power outward, visualizing it as a brick wall that the angel could not penetrate. He imagined this brick wall striking the angel, crushing it beneath its weight and density, leaving no possibility for escape. This physical manifestation of power shook beneath him as the angel tried to resist, but in the end it was no use. A light, like an exploding star, filled the space about him, then was extinguished forever. When the energy left the other being, it briefly passed through Charles, adding another layer to his newly acquired powers.

Charles quickly surveyed the room, striding over to join Raphael as he grappled with several of the disconcerting blank-faced beings. Underneath whatever outward appearance the various creatures displayed, there existed a base form, one of pure energy. This uniform nature had been imposed upon them by the Supreme One, a transformation forced on their existence by the stronger influence of his ancient power. If Charles and the others had not been exposed to the pure source of this supernatural power, they

would have had no way to defend themselves against the onslaught.

The destruction of each being brought a dazzling display of radiance and heat, an experience so intense it left Charles with burning eyes and tightness in his chest, like all of his internal organs had been trapped in a giant vise. Only his quick wit made him plunge ahead, his brain keeping one step ahead of his over-stimulated body. He reached Raphael as the angel had the last of his attackers clenched in his massive hands. The creature struggled, its faux visage waning as its power drained, exposing the filmy orb of light beneath. As the eminent explosion began, both Raphael and Charles turned their heads, not wanting to look directly into the spectacle. The heat from the creature's demise breathed over both the vampire and angel, scorching their skin and leaving the ghostly imprint of its fleeting power on their altered nature. Then there was silence.

Daniel was at Charles's side. He could tell without even looking at him, the feeling of his presence was different from the other beings in the world they found themselves. That disparity offered Charles an indescribable comfort. He found himself pulling the smaller vampire to him, wrapping his long arms around Daniel's smaller frame. He heard Daniel's warm chuckle, then his arms squeezed him back. The action was so out of character for Charles, and yet somehow felt completely natural. He pressed his face into the soft fall of Daniel's hair.

"We should go. More will come soon." Raphael's voice was solid and even.

"Can we leave from here? With our new power I mean?" Charles asked, pulling away from Daniel and returning to his usual stony demeanour.

"No one but Azrael has ever tried that I am aware of. This is the Supreme One's private sanctuary. I have only ever been summoned here a handful of times. He keeps this whole area of our realm under his control, so that he can be aware of all his minions at any given moment."

"Where is he now?"

"I do not know. He rarely shares his activities, only when it suits his purpose. He could be on earth, another dimension, another time."

"How can he be aware of all of his followers when he is gone to these places?"

"He has been infusing himself with this energy for thousands of years, Charles. His power knows no bounds."

Charles searched the angel's face for any sign of doubt. "You know this as fact, or is this what he leads you to believe? Just like he leads those he steals to believe that they have always been in his following?"

"I think we're forgetting the most important thing here," Daniel suddenly interrupted the conversation that was quickly becoming heated. "What about Azrael and Kieran?"

"Yes, we don't know if Azrael's been successful in finding Kieran, and if he has, does he have enough power to get them back to the correct time." Charles let his anger turn to more practical concerns.

"You're right, the exertion of power needed to propel him through time, then return the two of them, may be more than

he has at the moment. There are so many unknowns and too little time to find the answers. We need to trust that he can do this. Our best chance for success is to get out of here, and wait for them back on earth, in your time." Raphael's indigo eyes searched the vampires' faces, his expression a silent plea to take him at his word.

"Now, now. Why run off so quickly, my dearest Raphael? There is so much to talk about."

The three turned in unison, shocked to find the figure of a dark-haired, unremarkable man standing not ten feet away. He watched their grouping with solemn eyes, and a gentle smile pulling at his lips.

Raphael slid Charles a look of equal parts shock and dismay.

"The Supreme One, I take it?" Charles asked.

The question needed no answer.

* * * *

Azrael couldn't have been more hurt or shocked if I'd struck him. He looked from me to the strange woman and back again, before shaking his head. One giant hand clenched into a fist, and the anguish pulling at his features made my heart feel as though it were being ripped from my chest. It was not as I had planned our reunion to happen.

"Your wife?" he finally managed to spit out.

"Let me explain, please."

Azrael hesitated, and for one horrible moment I thought he might flee. Then his shoulders relaxed, and he pulled me in to his warm body. His arm wrapped around me, a protective and

yet defiant move. He silently dared Jocelyn to call him on his right to touch me in such a manner. She simply met his gaze.

"Then explain."

"The Supreme One brought me here, to this time to reunite me with my childhood love," I began, indicating the still silent Jocelyn, "in hopes that I would see how immoral our relationship is."

"And did it?" Azrael's voice was barely a whisper.

"No. If anything it made my love for you even stronger."

Jocelyn lowered her eyes, clearly hurt.

"But you have stayed with her, living as her husband?"

"What else could I do Azrael? I had been stripped of all my power, made human again! I had been sent back in time, far away from you and everything I know. I have been here for nearly two years, waiting for you, dreaming every night of your return. What would you have had me do?" Tears streamed down my face, as the years of pain and frustration were released.

"Two years? You have only been gone for a few weeks my love."

A sob caught in my throat at his words. "I don't understand..."

"Nor do I."

"He speaks the truth. He has been with me for near two years' time." Jocelyn's words were strong and pointed.

We both startled at the sound of her voice. She had moved to stand within arm's reach of us, an odd expression frozen on her face. She raised her hand, moving it forward as though to touch Azrael's chest, but stopped short of actual

contact. He grabbed her hand in his much larger one, then pressed his lips to the back of it.

"I thank you for looking after him. I do not know what would have happened to me if he were lost."

Jocelyn and Azrael shared a private look, the meaning not lost on me.

"You're not as I imagined," Jocelyn declared.

"This is not what I expected to find either."

Azrael looked to me, eyes shining in the darkness. "I do not know if I could have survived two years away from you. I can only imagine the pain you must have been in."

"Every minute away from you has been an eternity."

A soft wind rushed by, lifting Jocelyn's loose hair and fluttering the feathers in Azrael's massive wings. The occurrence caused me to suddenly see a truth that my happiness at his return had made me overlook.

"You have your wings back. Did the Supreme One return your power to you?"

"Not exactly."

"What does that mean?"

Azrael smiled, a beautiful, mesmerizing smile that seemed to make time stand still. "You sound different."

His words were the last thing I had expected to hear, and I couldn't help but laugh. "My accent has come back to me. Hard not to, being here."

"I like it." The hungry look in his eyes told me how much.

"You're not going to tell me what happened?"

"When we're safely out of here."

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I turned back to Jocelyn then, looking on the face of a true friend. "I will miss you," I said as I hugged her tightly. "I'm sorry this had to happen."

"Me too. But this is not where you belong. Never once in all the months you've been here have you ever looked at me the way you look at him." Then to Azrael. "Be good to him."

"I will."

While clasped in Azrael's arms, the night began to swirl, building momentum with each pass. The stars turned to trails of light, vibrant streaks across the velvet blanket of night sky. The air became dense, heavy with heat, as though the cosmos had taken a huge inhalation, drawing us in with the air. My body became rigid, like being wrapped in an invisible coil. Time and space no longer made sense, and there was no sound, except for Azrael's heart pounding against my ear. His musky scent was a safe cocoon.

We hurtled into the reality of the present with enough force to make my bones rattle. The bottom fell out of whatever invisible force had been keeping us contained, dropping us to a hard, uneven surface. The world about me continued to spin for several minutes, before I could make any sense of where we had ended up. We could have been in limbo for minutes or hours, a slice pulled from time and redeposited where we desired it, not where it might fit. When I could focus, I saw neon lights in the distance and heard the distinctive sound of racing traffic, making it apparent that we had found our way to modern times, perhaps just not *my* time. Azrael stood beside me, obviously unaffected by our unconventional means of travel.

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He reached a hand down to me, easily pulling me to my feet. "We're at the park, near your house in Sydney."

The world around me started to fall into place piece by piece, but the sound of my blood racing in my ears made it hard to concentrate. I realized I was panting, my breath drawing in and out with painful gasps. That realization answered a very important question: I was still human.

As though in response to that understanding, I started to retch violently, acidic bile burning my throat. Dizziness seized me. Azrael's strong hand kept me steady until the feeling passed. We both realized how vulnerable I was in my human state, and I spoke aloud the words we both were thinking.

"Can you change me back? Into a vampire?" My voiced sounded breathy and wild, completely foreign to my ears.

"I do not know." Azrael seemed uncertain, perhaps scared.

"Try!" I screamed, much more forcefully than I meant too.

Azrael took no offense from my outburst. He closed his eyes, jaw clenching as his powerful arms rose to shoulder height. I was thinking about how wonderful he looked as the night tensed around me in anticipation of the events about to happen. I was overcome with an irrational panic that this infusion of power would not restore me, but instead choke the human life out of me.

The wave of energy hit me harder than a blast from a fire hose. I was tossed, ass over teakettle, across several meters of dark grass to land in an unceremonious heap. Azrael rushed to me, and if I'd been able to I would have laughed. His concern was so evident it was almost comical. My body felt heavy, unmovable.

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A twitching, burning sensation began in my chest, spreading like wildfire through my veins. I wanted to cry out and claw at my skin, digging deep enough into my flesh to allow the terrible poison to escape. Then the phenomenon seized my brain, burying its effects deep within the matter where no cure could ever find it. I started to convulse, eyes rolling back in my head, limbs smashing against the scraggy brush and hard-packed dirt. Azrael was screaming my name when blackness overtook me.

* * * *

Raphael seemed torn between falling to his knees in worship and charging his leader for all he was worth. In the end, he did neither. The Supreme One came to the men, scrutinizing Daniel and Charles from head to toe. Charles kept his gaze locked on him with unapologetic boldness, which the Supreme One met with a casual smirk. Daniel remained at Charles's side, defiant in his own quiet way. The angel would not look at anyone. When he thought that his loyal assistance had been lost to fear, Charles heard his voice inside his head.

The box.

Surprise replaced the look of mild amusement and curiosity on the Supreme One's face as Daniel, Charles and Raphael all made a mad dive for the box. As a group they made contact, once again spilling the powerful contents to the floor. Raphael pulled himself ahead of the other two, essentially rolling his body over the powerful element, despite the obvious pain it caused him. Charles grabbed a large

chunk that sat glowing by his hand, and as he had seen Raphael do earlier, pressed the piece to his chest.

The agony was immediate. His flesh reeled back in horror, essentially producing a new orifice to allow the foreign matter to pass to the interior of his body. As the piece slipped from his fingers, the flesh knit itself back up behind, leaving no evidence of its existence. Yet inside it burned and writhed, boiling Charles from the inside out. His brain engorged, becoming too tight within the confines of his skull. Like an epileptic in the throes of a grand mal seizure his body thrashed about, smashing into many more pieces of the powerful element, prolonging and amplifying the torturous process. Through bloody, bulging eyes he could see Daniel hesitating, but Raphael was already back on his feet.

Raphael and the Supreme One met with outstretched arms, two of the most powerful beings to have ever existed intent on destroying each other. They slammed into one another with such force that Charles was lifted from the ground, only to be dropped once again with a teeth-rattling thud. The two, now locked onto one another, sailed over the top of Charles like one conjoined entity. He forced himself to his hands and knees, and with a lock-jawed mouth ordered Daniel to do what he had to. "Just do it!"

Daniel needed no further prompting. With two hands he swept a handful of the greenish dust up into his face, as though it were nothing more dangerous than water. As the foreign matter hit his skin it instantly began to sizzle, eating away at him like acid and scarring Daniel's handsome boyish face. Charles though he caught a flash of burning flesh. The

younger vampire screamed, raising his hand to his face. In a matter of seconds the incident passed and the scars had vanished, leaving his skin milky smooth.

Daniel jumped to his feet, yanking Charles along with him. "Raphael."

The vampires joined the chaotic struggle, doing their best to separate the two supernatural beings. As the Supreme One and Raphael rolled and pulled at one another they alternated between their faux humanoid appearance and their pure energy form. Their bodies melded and twisted about each other in unnatural ways, moving with a speed that the vampire's eyes could barely track. In exasperation Charles simply threw himself atop of the twisting, angry mass that the two had become, his presence seeming to momentarily force them to become two distinct entities.

When the Supreme One assumed his young man guise Charles latched onto his throat with startling precision, sinking his fangs into his assumed flesh. For an instant he actually bled before reverting to the throbbing mass of energy that Charles had no chance of holding on to. Then in the blink of an eye he disappeared completely, only to materialize on the other side of Charles, with a fresh vantage point to attack Raphael. Instead, Daniel intervened, and taking a cue from the elder vampire sunk his fangs into the Supreme One's cheek.

In almost the same instant Raphael reached forward, thrusting his fist through the chest of the Supreme One's human form, letting a mass of light and heat escape from the wound, instead of blood. Charles clamped onto his leg, tasting

blood once again that quickly turned to another substance altogether. Then with a resounding cry of rage, the two vampires and the angel were blasted back from their victim, tossed in various directions. All three hit the ground hard, but were instantly back on their feet and ready for another round. The Supreme One also rose, albeit a little slower than the others. He placed one hand to his chest, closing the wound, and with the other threw forward a wave of power that blocked any further attempt to approach him.

"You cannot win. I am stronger than the three of you combined."

"We have fed from the same source as you," Raphael answered, his bitterness giving the words a hard edge.

"Not for as long as I. Your only chance for survival here is to submit to my will." The Supreme One stood his ground, but he did not seem to be aware that the taste of his energy source had not only increased and added to the others' supernatural powers, it had allowed them a tenuous link to his internal thoughts. For a few bright, clear seconds the others felt his fear and uncertainty.

Like a being that had been divided into three parts, Charles, Daniel, and Raphael suddenly dived forward, grabbing hands as they did so. Their shared focus brought with it a melding of power, strong enough to knock aside the invisible barrier preventing their assault on the Supreme One. The suddenness of their movement and magnitude of their combined strength took the Supreme One off guard, a break in his psychic armour that left him vulnerable. The three crashed into his unshielded form, not only taking him down to

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the ground, but forcing him far away from the place and reality that had offered him protection for so long.

* * * *

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Chapter Twenty

"Wake up Kieran, please wake up!" Azrael felt the words escaping his throat like an army of angry scorpions. His terror at having hurt his beloved burned on high, making his skin uncomfortably tight.

He had rushed Kieran home from the park, moving like a phantom through the night with him cradled in his arms. Tears blurred his eyes. Once the house came into view he charged, knocking the door from its frame with one powerful kick. He lay Kieran down, nearly choking on his panic, before realizing he had better punch in his code to the security panel before the delay caused the police to be called. How in the world could he explain what was happening to a member of law enforcement?

His large fingers were hard to manipulate in his state, but somehow he managed to get the terrifying blinking red light to turn green. With that minor success he whirled around, admonishing himself with the sudden thought that with his new powers he probably could have stopped the alarm just by thinking of it.

As gently as he could he transferred Kieran from the floor to a nearby couch, then knelt before him. He pressed his lover's hand to his cheek, forcing himself to think rationally. He focused on only one thought; returning Kieran to his natural state. With that held firmly in his mind, he felt his power being drawn from him, escaping as gently as a sigh.

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His hand became impossibly warm, tingly and heavy, as the one he held slowly had the opposite reaction.

He let his eyes open, still concentrating solely on Kieran's restoration. The strange tanned complexion he had found Kieran with started to lose colour, his skin taking on a fair then snowy visage. The unnatural warmth drained from his flesh, the softness of his human body replaced with preternatural rigidity. A shallow breath escaped his lips, as though forcing the last bit of air from his lungs, which Azrael understood was exactly what had happened. Lips that he had kissed a hundred times pulled back into a tight smile, exposing cruelly sharp fangs.

At the sight of those fangs, which had been used upon his body more times than he could remember, he began to both laugh and cry. As Kieran's eyes opened, the veil between fantasy and reality vanished. They regarded each other for a moment, neither wanting to spoil the moment they had both longed for, fought for in ways unimaginable to the average life. Their love had met in the shadowy realm between life and death, a place that none should ever think about, let alone linger in. Yet there, a union that should have never been thrived, building something so unique it could never be duplicated. Polar opposites in constitution and mission had blended, caressing the boundaries of their divide until it had weakened, allowing the two to taste the heart of the other's essence and survive.

* * * *

"Are you going to kiss me or what?" I finally asked, unsuccessfully trying to cover my eagerness with cocky bravado.

"Anywhere you want me to," Azrael answered.

As our lips met, the hunger for one another broke down the walls of containment, exploding forth in a maddening rush of need. The ice and fire of our respective compositions clung to one another, licking passion from one another like condensation on a glass of wine. My groin tightened, fingers biting into Azrael's back. When a hand reached down to open the zipper on my pants, I was already hard as steel. The brush of fingers along my erection sent a jolt of electricity through my body.

Just as Azrael's weight began to push me back to a prone position on the couch, a fantastically loud boom shot threw the room, followed by a series of tremors that threatened to topple the house about us. Azrael's face knocked against mine as the couch flipped to its backside and slid several feet across the dark wood floor. All amorous feelings evaporated in a heartbeat, and I hastily yanked my zipper closed and jumped to my feet. Azrael took a protective step in front of me, a move that made me smile.

A blinding flash exploded out of midair, licking its fiery tongue along my exposed skin. The feeling was so close to the one time I had been exposed to sunlight and burned that I couldn't help but recoil in terror. From out of this mesmerizing, chaotic mass dropped several bodies, hitting the floor in a succession of painful thuds. I could barely believe my eyes when Charles and Daniel emerged from the

group, followed by the Supreme One and another angelic being I assumed to be Raphael, as he resembled the angel I had seen in Azrael's memories.

Charles caught my gaze and gave a terrifying half-smile, before he crashed into the Supreme One with the butt of his angular shoulder. He took the powerful being down, and before I could overcome my surprise enough to contemplate the full meaning of such an occurrence the others were on him like a pack of wild dogs. Azrael raced ahead to join the mob, me a fraction of a second behind.

Another thunderous roar filled the room, shattering the glass in all of the windows. It showered down upon the room's inhabitant as crystal rain. A large shard caught Daniel in the side, which he pulled loose and tossed away with no discernable reaction. All of the players were moving with incredible speed and viciousness, something that was beyond what I would have expected from my vampire counterpoints.

A wall of power struck me, knocking me back several feet. The others, including Azrael, had also been affected and the Supreme One stood set apart as though protected by an invisible barrier. He looked hurt and bewildered, eyes wide and dark. For a moment too quick to hold onto he phased to his light form, which even as brief as it was seared my eyes. I cried out, stumbling backwards.

I felt warm, strong hands on my body, then Azrael's voice against my ear. "You're okay. Trust me."

I opened my eyes again, finding Azrael's words to be the complete truth. There was no lingering damage, I could see every aspect of the room with clarity.

"Do you wish to continue with this?" the other angel asked of the Supreme One, with his back to me. His massive wings were pressed tightly to his broad back.

"Your vindictiveness and determination surprises me Raphael. These actions do not seem to be of your choosing."

"I am done being told which actions I may or may not make. I am here because I chose to be." His voice was deep like Azrael's, commanding and passionate.

Azrael came to stand at the other angel's side, brothers in cause against a common foe. "He helps me as a friend."

"You persist with this still Azrael? This so-called love for your vampire? After all you have done in your long existence, after all the truths you have discovered. You would give up everything, even try and destroy me, just to be with him?" The incredulousness he felt gave an awkward tug at his humanoid features. It seemed to be a feeling he was not accustomed to.

"I know this is not something you can understand, but I love him. If I cannot be with him, I no longer see purpose in anything I do."

"And I do not see how keeping them apart is a good thing. It brings discord to all of us, and happiness to none. You give us power, yet no free will. We have seen and done many things, Supreme One, but there is still much we have not experienced. Such as love. Let this be, I am begging you, " Raphael pleaded.

I came to Azrael, pressing along my lover's side. I boldly made eye contact with the Supreme One. "I will not change my mind, even if you make me live a thousand lifetimes

without him. I love him, and you cannot command that away."

The Supreme One viewed the faces before him thoughtfully.

"We are strong now. I do not wish your destruction, but if you will not let this be then you give us no choice." Raphael meant every word.

"Why is that you are here, acting in the capacity that you do?" Charles suddenly interjected. "Are you and your followers not supposed to be helping mankind? Isn't the purpose of your presence here to guide people to happiness and health, offer them comfort?"

"Yes. We have lived much longer and are much more evolved than the life forms on this planet."

"Then why does that not also apply to yourselves?" Charles demanded.

"We do not need to satisfy such base needs as love, we are so much more than that. That is why we continue to be your shepherd, humanity would self destruct without us. They need protection, guidance and sometimes reprimand."

"Everyone deserves to be loved," Daniel said.

"You deserve nothing, vampire. You are disgusting, loathsome creatures. I allow you to exist only because you can be helpful in ridding this world of its lesser inhabitants, the weak, sick and twisted. But more and more you do not keep to this selection, you have no discrimination in those you kill."

The wall of power separating the Supreme One from the others began to pulse, sending throbbing waves of energy

outward to the others, building in force and tempo in conjunction with the rise in his anger. Azrael shoved me behind him, taking the full force of the blow himself as I fell into the safe caress of his giant wings.

"You may not feel love, but you are obviously capable of anger," Charles snapped, to which the Supreme One's attention turned fully on him.

Charles suddenly grabbed at his throat as though he were being choked. Daniel reached for him, but Raphael saw the flaw in the Supreme One's actions. With his attention elsewhere his protective shield slipped, and it was just enough to allow the angel to get a physical hold on him. Charles dropped to the floor, sputtering and shaking his head. Raphael and the Supreme One collided, sending out a roll of power that had the others reeling. I smashed my head against the floor, seeing stars and swallowing a flash of blood from a torn lip.

When I looked up I witnessed the most amazing sight. Floating several inches above the palm of the Supreme One's hand was an enormous ball of light, a writhing mass that he looked on with the same awe that I felt. The manifestation throbbed like an oversized heart, sending out streams of energy with each fierce beat. The energy streams burned holes in the floor, the walls, narrowly missing those watching the spectacle before them. It took several moments for me to understand that somehow Raphael had been reduced to this state, and perhaps would not be able to protect himself from further damage.

Seeing his friend in peril, Azrael rushed forward to assist him. The Supreme One was ready, but instead of meeting Azrael's attack head-on he went to his weakest point—me.

An invisible lasso lifted me from the floor, wrenching me forward with violent force. Charles caught the tail of my shirt, cold fingers brushing my skin, but could not hang on. As I passed by, Azrael's warmth stroked me and our eyes met. Then I was in the Supreme One's grasp, immobile and terrified. All of the things that Azrael and I had not yet done raced through my brain.

"No!" Azrael screamed, and the beam above their heads dislodged from its position in response. A shower of plaster fell onto his dark hair.

Azrael rushed him, and the Supreme One had no choice but to let one or the other of his captives go, indicating to observant eyes that his seemingly limitless power had indeed been drained. He could not seem to keep control of all the factions fighting about him despite his intention to do so. The ball of light leapt from his hand, rolling away to suddenly burst into Raphael's angelic figure. As soon as his feet touched the ground he turned and joined Azrael in his attack.

Azrael had his hands on my arm about the same instant that Raphael reached the Supreme One. With a rough shove Azrael handed me off to the other vampires for protection, before resuming his assault. His power joined his brother's, meeting their maker's strength inch for inch. The three crashed about the room, feverishly alternating forms and manner of battle. Charles and Daniel pulled me to safety, and forcefully kept me from running into the heat of the struggle.

"I have to help him," I sobbed.

"You're not strong enough. You'll just distract Azrael."

Charles didn't even look at me when he spoke, his eyes never left the altercation.

The three supernaturals crashed into an exterior wall, becoming coated in loosened plaster before tearing through the construction and tumbling out into the backyard. Charles scrambled forward to get a better view, pulling me along with him. The three stood in a crude triangle, at a standoff. Raphael gave Azrael a look and they both dived at their leader, one hitting him about chest level, the other connecting at the ankle. At the contact all three dissolved into natural forms, a display too dazzling to look directly at. Their presence filled the dark sky, overshadowing manmade lights and stars for many miles. A terrible keening accompanied their transformation, hitting our ears with more force than a lighting strike.

The blinding light quickly vanished, finding the Supreme One off to the far edge of the property, his face hidden in shadow from the canopy of trees. The angels were together, strained but not out of the race. They allowed their individual power to join and move as one, bringing them to the object of their rage with jarring, frightening precision.

"Stop!" The Supreme One cried.

Surprised, Azrael and Raphael abandoned their strike. They looked to one another, passing silent knowledge between them.

"Please, I see that this is not a matter that will be solved with brute force." The Supreme One's words were poignant,

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hanging in the air in an offer of truce as blatant as a waving white flag.

"What are you suggesting?" Azrael asked.

"Azrael and Kieran must be allowed to be together. It can be no other way."

The Supreme One could see that Raphael meant the words he spoke, and after the display of power he'd been on the receiving end of, he could no longer argue that his demise was not a possibility.

"Perhaps we can reach a compromise."

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Chapter Twenty-One

"Did you pick up my stuff from the dry cleaners?" I called out while madly moving about my clothes-strewn room.

A half full suitcase kept a precarious balance atop a pile of items, which had been scrutinized and summarily deemed not acceptable. Though it seemed a bit juvenile, and perhaps a bit sad, I hummed a series of syrupy love songs as I continued packing. It was impossible to keep my mind in the present, with the moment I'd been dreaming of for the better part of a year so close at hand.

"Daniel?" I called again, this time with more urgency, and stepped from the room into the hallway, where I collided with the object of my query.

"Jesus, I heard you the first time." My roommate smiled and handed over several plastic-wrapped garments. "You are so wound up."

Anxiety had me firmly in its grasp. I glanced at the Breitling watch on my wrist, a cherished present from Daniel, noting that less than two hours remained before I would be departing. That realization shot another wave of nervous joy through me, tightening my insides as though my ribcage had suddenly shrunk. A small chuckle escaped my lips. I walked the freshly laundered clothing over to the suitcase and laid them on top of the items already inside. Then I sat on the edge of the bed, silent.

Daniel came to me, sitting so close that our shoulders touched. Where once the intimacy would have been

uncomfortable, maybe even tempting, now it was a sign of trust and mutual respect. He gave me a playful check with the side of his body, garnering a smile and helping the tension to drop by several levels. I needed his friendship, as he needed mine, but it was a good feeling. I firmly believed that certain people came into your life when you needed them; the ones who stayed were those you were meant to love. Love had become a broad term to me in recent years, though while it might have varying levels and aspects, for me it remained an exclusive club, one that Daniel held an honoured place in. I kissed him on the cheek, impulsively, to which he crossed his eyes and stuck out his tongue. He knew me so well.

Then he walked across the messy room to grab a pair of freshly-polished black dress shoes and dropped them inside the suitcase. "Can't forget these. I imagine you two will be going out at least once or twice. There is more to a vacation than just sex you know." He teased, but a slight note of jealousy had crept into his voice.

"We only have a month. Got to cram as much in as possible," I joked, but the comment led to a wistful, yet comfortable moment of silence between us.

A lot had happened over the preceding year. We had come to terms with the powerful events leading to the current situation, in addition to having made peace with our own ill-fated and not-to-be-repeated intimate encounter. Not that we hadn't enjoyed ourselves, which we had, but we both understood that the incident had been a mistake. That our friendship had come through this unscathed, and in fact

stronger than ever, was a testament to our respect and love for one another.

I stood and pulled Daniel against me. We wrapped our arms around one another, squeezing one cool, firm body tightly against the other. A hundred memories of times we'd spent together shuffled through my mind. I brushed aside a wayward strand of Daniel's hair before placing a chaste kiss to his lips.

"I'll miss you when I'm gone."

"No you won't. You'll be too busy to even give me a moment's thought." I started to protest, but Daniel stopped me with a winning smile. "It's fine. You deserve to have this time. And if I had a gorgeous hunk of man like that I wouldn't be thinking about anyone else either." He gave me a conspiratorial wink. I hoped he would find a partner soon, someone to love him for the amazing man he was.

Lost in my thoughts, I didn't realize he'd moved until he spoke to me from the doorway, "If you need anything else, just holler." Then he was gone.

I sat back down on the bed, going through a mental list of all I needed to take with me. It seemed that everything had been taken care of, save for a few personal items I still needed to use. I looked to the photograph of Azrael and me that sat on the nightstand. That he was mine never failed to fill me with awe. I was the luckiest guy in the world.

In the bathroom I turned on the shower, waiting till the water was almost scalding and the mirror fogged over from the steam. Once in, I shampooed and scrubbed at every inch of my lanky body. When satisfied I was as clean as could

possibly be, I stepped out and wrapped my lower body with one of the beautiful Egyptian cotton towels that Daniel had insisted we buy.

With a swipe of my hand across the glass, my reflection appeared. My sandy brown hair was longer than I usually wore it, but I thought it complimented the shape of my face. After dragging a comb through it I tucked the shaggy tendrils behind my ears. I then rubbed moisturizer all over my naked flesh, until my skin was as soft as a baby's bottom and I smelled like the Caribbean. Once shaved and with teeth brushed, I liberally applied a cologne I knew Azrael liked me to wear.

Walking into the bedroom I dropped the towel to the already clothing-littered floor, and stood before a full-length mirror to give myself a full body appraisal. I knew I was an attractive man, but I felt a strange self-consciousness, not unlike the time I'd been seen naked during my first sexual encounter as a teenager. I stood not quite six feet tall, with a lean but well-defined body. A light sprinkling of hair covered my chest. Eyes as clear and blue as a spring sky looked back at me, mocking the intensity with which I scrutinized my form. A small crease formed between my arched brows as I reviewed every inch of my naked body.

"Like what you see? I sure do," a deep, seductive voice said from the area of the bed.

I whirled about, surprised and slightly embarrassed. "You're early."

Azrael stood, smiling brightly. "Are you complaining?"

I shook my head. With a crook of my finger I motioned for Azrael to come to me, and as he did I noticed that he was not dressed in his traditional tunic, this having been replaced by dark pants and a form-fitting shirt. His wings were nowhere to be seen, a trick Azrael had acquired from the massive infusion of power he'd taken from the element we'd collectively come to refer to as Everlast. To the uninformed, he simply looked like a human man, albeit a very large, muscular and startlingly attractive one. His dark, curly hair hung in a beautiful, tangled mess, just the way I liked it. How I wanted to touch the silky strands.

His eyes gleamed, drinking in my naked body. When Azrael's warm fingertips pressed against the much cooler skin on my chest, I became oblivious to everything else. Azrael pressed his lips to my collarbone, sliding up my throat to nibble teasingly at my ear. When at last our lips met, it was everything I remembered and more. We both met the union unabashedly eager and needy; fire ran through my blood, awakening every cell in my body with lustful joy. Azrael's hands caressed my shoulders, my back, sliding downward to cup my tight buttocks.

"You still have your clothes on" I said. My passion for Azrael ached inside me.

With a series of quick, precise movements the situation was rectified. Azrael stood before me in all his naked, masculine glory. Swooping in, I caught one nipple with a quick flick of my tongue, then pressed my fangs into the warm, inviting flesh. Blood, as sweet and powerful as any I had tasted, flowed into my mouth. Another trick Azrael had

learned was that by sharing his blood he could also share his supernatural energy, feeding my physiological needs and amplifying my strength at the same time. Azrael sighed from the combination of pleasure and pain.

I let my mouth trail down his taut torso, taking several small bites along the way. I lowered to his knees, and Azrael braced himself against the closet door, one hand with a firm grip on my hair. I began to stroke Azrael's already hardening penis, moving from base to tip with deliberately slow, teasing movements. This drew a shudder of pleasure from the angel, which I experienced in kind. Our sexual pleasure had increased with the influence of the Everlast, making us both much more physically sensitive and providing such an acute mental awareness of the other's feelings that the connection verged on a psychotic level of ecstasy.

My hungry mouth slipped over the tip of Azrael's shaft, now hard and ready. I tasted the distinctive fluid of male excitement, which added lubrication to the blood-tinged saliva on my tongue. Azrael moaned. To stop himself from releasing too soon, he pushed me to the ground and began to mimic my actions. I clawed at the floor as waves of pleasure overtook me, hands raking across the damp towel I had dropped earlier and various discarded items of clothing. Something sharp pressed into my lower back, but I was too aroused to care. Even if it had punctured me I wouldn't have moved from the position we were in.

When we both finally climaxed, I was certain the whole house shook. I collapsed against Azrael's side, enjoying the heavy rise and fall of his chest as his breathing returned to

normal levels. The scent of sex saturated the air, the taste of blood lingering on my lips. I let my fingers stroke the soft covering of hair on Azrael's stomach while he revelled in post-coital bliss.

"So you missed me then?" Azrael teased. The warmth of his breath whispered over my cheek, before warm lips followed the sensation.

"Every minute of every day," I answered with honesty.

Turning to prop myself up on one elbow, I took several minutes to peruse the face of the man I loved beyond all rational sense, and had been separated from for so long. The same strong features and piercing indigo eyes, the same full lips that had tasted every inch of my body. I took one of Azrael's hands, kissing each finger in turn, then pressed it to my cheek. Azrael's was a rugged, extremely masculine beauty, a face that elicited strong reactions and many longing stares. I myself was guilty of that.

"You did miss me, didn't you?" Azrael pulled himself up, placing a tender kiss to my lips. "You're looking at me so strangely."

"I know that we agreed to this arrangement, but it's been so hard not to have you here with me."

"I feel the same way, Kieran. I just try and focus on the purpose for our separation, and not the separation itself. We both know that this is for the good of many more than just us."

"But I'm a selfish creature, you know that. I don't want to share you." I scowled, but couldn't hold the expression when Azrael gave me his best come-hither look.

"You have the best part of me, the part that no one else ever sees."

I rolled onto my back, too happy and satisfied to argue. "I know that. I consented to this, just as you did. One month for us, the rest of the year for you to fulfil your mission."

"Raphael was very much looking forward to filling in for me."

"So he and Noah have settled their differences?"

"Noah," he chuckled. "Yes they have come to an agreement. Though the Su—ah Noah retains the appearance of total authority, they are more as partners now. They confer, discuss, even disagree. And best of all they leave me out of all of it."

"No, the best is now we have our time." I jumped up and went to the bed to retrieve the clothing I'd laid out before Azrael's arrival. I slipped on a pair of light grey boxer briefs, which highlighted my toned body.

"You're ready for our adventure?" Azrael asked as he re-dressed. He came to me and buttoned up the shirt I had pulled on.

"Yes, I want to show you Peru, where I had another adventure once. I want to share my history with you." I tried to concentrate on the victory of that particular passage of time, and not the many losses that I'd incurred.

"Maybe one day I'll be able to take you back through mine." Azrael's words were cautious.

"Still not sure if I can pass through to other dimensions and times like you?" I knew this was something Azrael had planned to investigate during our time apart.

The Embrace of Life and Death
by Liz Strange

"It is an unpredictable process. Noah and I have discussed it at length. He has explained that sometimes when he has attempted to bring other life forms with him, as we have moved on to other worlds, that they have not always made it. Same with when he has tried to share the Everlast with them, some take the effects without trouble, for others it's too much and they are damaged or perish."

"But Charles and Daniel made it to wherever it is you live without any problems. Isn't that the same thing?"

"Yes and no. Where the others like me are now is essentially an extension of earth and this time, it's just an area that to humans is unnoticeable, therefore unreachable. And it's more than the external effects of the travel we do, its building up sufficient internal energy to make the effort." He sighed. "Why are we worrying about this now? We have many years together, and when I have the answers I need, then we will make a decision. Let us not waste another minute of our time together."

"Okay," I agreed. He was right, and time was something we both had an abundance of. I pulled the zipper closed on the suitcase.

"So Peru? You going to show me where the big showdown happened?"

"Yes. I thought it might interest you, plus it's a beautiful area of the world."

"I love you Kieran," he said suddenly, the fierceness of his tone catching me off guard. He threw his arms about me, lifting me from the floor.

"Same," I answered against his strong shoulder.

The Embrace of Life and Death
by Liz Strange

We left for the month we would spend together that year, worries of moral conflicts, alternate dimensions, and plain old right and wrong far behind us.

He slipped his hand into mine, and the only thing that mattered was that we had won the good fight, and nothing stood in the way of us being together.

The night welcomed us with open arms.

* * * *

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About the Author

Liz was born and raised in Kingston, Ontario, where she still resides. She is a massive horror fan, vampire enthusiast and self-confessed sci-fi nerd. Some of her favourite things include spicy food, soccer, rainy days, books, movies, and musical theatre. Mythology and historical mysteries have long enthralled her, and you will often find them touched upon in her works.

When not reading, writing or spending time with her family Liz hopes to travel the world. She has her sights set on Greece, Mexico and Easter Island.

You can find out more about Liz at www.lizstrange.com.

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THE TREVOR PROJECT

The Trevor Project operates the only nationwide, around-the-clock crisis and suicide prevention helpline for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth. Every day, The Trevor Project saves lives through its free and confidential helpline, its website and its educational services. If you or a friend are feeling lost or alone call The Trevor Helpline. If you or a friend are feeling lost, alone, confused or in crisis, please call The Trevor Helpline. You'll be able to speak confidentially with a trained counselor 24/7.

The Trevor Helpline: 866-488-7386

On the Web: www.thetrevorproject.org/

THE GAY MEN'S DOMESTIC VIOLENCE PROJECT

Founded in 1994, The Gay Men's Domestic Violence Project is a grassroots, non-profit organization founded by a gay male survivor of domestic violence and developed through the strength, contributions and participation of the community. The Gay Men's Domestic Violence Project supports victims and survivors through education, advocacy and direct services. Understanding that the serious public health issue of domestic violence is not gender specific, we serve men in relationships with men, regardless of how they identify, and stand ready to assist them in navigating through abusive relationships.

GMDVP Helpline: 800.832.1901

On the Web: gmdvp.org/

THE GAY & LESBIAN ALLIANCE AGAINST DEFAMATION/GLAAD EN ESPANOL

The Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (glaad) is dedicated to promoting and ensuring fair, accurate and inclusive representation of people and events in the media as a means of eliminating homophobia and discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation.

On the Web: www.glaad.org/

glaad en espanol: www.glaad.org/espanol/bienvenido.php

SERVICEMEMBERS LEGAL DEFENSE NETWORK

Servicemembers Legal Defense Network is a nonpartisan, nonprofit, legal services, watchdog and policy organization dedicated to ending discrimination against and harassment of military personnel affected by "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" (dadt). The sldn provides free, confidential legal services to all those impacted by dadt and related discrimination. Since 1993, its inhouse legal team has responded to more than 9,000 requests for assistance. In Congress, it leads the fight to repeal dadt and replace it with a law that ensures equal treatment for every servicemember, regardless of sexual orientation. In the courts, it works to challenge the constitutionality of dadt.

sldn Call: (202) 328-3244

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THE GLBT NATIONAL HELP CENTER

The Embrace of Life and Death
by Liz Strange

The glbt National Help Center is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization that is dedicated to meeting the needs of the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community and those questioning their sexual orientation and gender identity. It is an outgrowth of the Gay & Lesbian National Hotline, which began in 1996 and now is a primary program of The glbt National Help Center. It offers several different programs including two national hotlines that help members of the glbt community talk about the important issues that they are facing in their lives. It helps end the isolation that many people feel, by providing a safe environment on the phone or via the internet to discuss issues that people can't talk about anywhere else. The glbt National Help Center also helps other organizations build the infrastructure they need to provide strong support to our community at the local level.

National Hotline: 1-888-THE-GLNH (1-888-843-4564)

National Youth Talkline 1-800-246-PRIDE (1-800-246-7743)

On the Web: www.glnh.org/

e-mail: info@glbtnationalhelpcenter.org

* * * *

If you're a GLBT and questioning student heading off to university, should know that there are resources on campus for you. Here's just a sample:

US LOCAL GLBT COLLEGE CAMPUS ORGANIZATIONS

dv-8.com/resources/us/local/campus.html

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GLBT Scholarship Resources tinyurl.com/6fx9v6

Syracuse University lgbt.syr.edu/

Texas A&M lgbt.tamu.edu/

Tulane University www.oma.tulane.edu/LGBT/Default.htm

University of Alaska www.uaf.edu/agla/

University of California, Davis lgbtrc.ucdavis.edu/

University of California, San Francisco lgbt.ucsf.edu/

University of Colorado www.colorado.edu/glbtrc/

University of Florida www.dso.ufl.edu/multicultural/lgbt/

University of Hawai'i, Manoa manoa.hawaii.edu/lgbt/

University of Utah www.sa.utah.edu/lgbt/

University of Virginia

www.virginia.edu/deanofstudents/lgbt/

Vanderbilt University www.vanderbilt.edu/lgbtqi/

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