

# Stolen Bride



RACHEL KNIGHT

**CHAPTER ONE**

**CHAPTER TWO**

**CHAPTER THREE**

**CHAPTER FOUR**

**CHAPTER FIVE**

**CHAPTER SIX**

**CHAPTER SEVEN**

**CHAPTER EIGHT**

**CHAPTER NINE**

**CHAPTER TEN**

**CHAPTER ELEVEN**

**CHAPTER TWELVE**

**CHAPTER THIRTEEN**

**CHAPTER FOURTEEN**

**CHAPTER FIFTEEN**

**CHAPTER SIXTEEN**

**CHAPTER SEVENTEEN**

**CHAPTER EIGHTEEN**

**CHAPTER NINETEEN**

**CHAPTER TWENTY**

**EPILOGUE**

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## Glossary

**Highbred** — Someone who is bloodborne (and comes from a long line of bloodborne vampires)

**Amina Munda** — The thought to be an extinct vampire clan of purists. They despise humans and feel they are a blight on the earth.

**Union of Blood** — The turning of a vampire.

**Soul-joining** — Ceremony when two vampires are married. The process bonds them for all eternity.

**Blood Born** — A vampire who was born a vampire.

**Vessel** — A human who serves/feeds a vampire.

**Turned** — Someone who was turned.

**The Lust** — A state when a vampire has lost control due to lack of blood/feeding.

Other than sunlight, vampires can only be killed by beheading and/or severe damage to the heart and Hawthorn blossoms (which will poison them) and can bind a vampire to a space they are occupying.

## Chapter One

### Emily

He smiled at me.

His sensuous mouth curled back sinisterly, all fangs bared.

A chill skittered down my spine and my heart skipped a beat as his red glowing eyes pierced mine from across the hall. He was impressively tall, with dark wavy hair and the line of his jaw strong as if to denote his prowess. In another space and time, that might've been a good thing. For a vampire, he was the most handsome man I'd ever seen in my life.

This was bad. This was *so* bad.

I was supposed to get married today. That was supposed to be the plan, anyway. I was standing in the doorway wearing my mother's old wedding dress and my feet frozen to the floor as a wave of cold fear filled my body. A minute ago, I had opened the door because it was time for my mother and me to make our way to the sanctuary for the joining. I hadn't been expecting to see the mysterious dark-

haired vampire and his partner standing at the sanctuary's entrance. Now I was frozen like a statue.

I tore my eyes from his and watched his partner kneel down at the entrance. My eyes widened in fear when the other man, with gloved hands tossed hawthorn blossoms at the threshold of the sanctuary. Behind them were my father and my fiancé Zephrus and all the guests, looking angry and helpless at the invisible barrier keeping them at bay.

“You’ll pay for this Malachi!” Zephrus snarled at the uninvited guests. “When we get out of here, we will find you and rip you apart for disrupting this ceremony!”

“I’d love to see you try.” Malachi, I assumed was the dark-haired vampire, replied cockily without sparing a glance at Zephrus. He was still looking at me and my heart was beating like a drum. *Was this fear?* I couldn’t tell. My body couldn’t either because I couldn’t seem to move.

“Close the door!”

My mother grabbed my arm and pulled me backward. As I stumbled back into the room, she slammed the door closed and locked it. She, then, rushed to the other side of the room and grabbed one end of a dresser, pushing the heavy piece of furniture easily until it was pressed against the door.

“What’s happening? Mistress—?” My dresser, Ms. Louise, who was a dowdy-looking human who’d been in the service of my family since I was a little girl, stood up from her place on the couch. She started to fret, wringing her hands rhythmically as she looked on with large gray eyes. My mother turned to us both.

“The window,” mother said, rushing to the other side of the room and opening the single window wide. She leaned out and looked down the four stories down, her hands shaking.

“Mistress?” Ms. Louise asked desperately. “What’s happened?”

Mother looked around the room for a moment seeming to search for something, then turned to us and said, “We need to get out of here. *Now.*”

She took my hand and pulled me over to the window, Ms. Louise close behind us.

“Who was that man?” I asked her, panicking. “Mother —”

“There’s no time,” Mother cut me off. She lept up to the windowsill and slipped out to the ledge as if she was

floating. Then she reached in for me to take her hand. “Come on.”

I took it without hesitation even though I was confused about what was going on. She lifted me easily out of the window and onto the ledge. She held me with one arm, balancing us both on the ledge as she reached in to get Ms. Louise.

It was at that moment we heard the door splinter and crack. As soon as Ms. Louise grabbed my mother’s hand, the door and the dresser imploded, sending shards of wood everywhere. Malachi came stalking in, his partner close behind him. As soon as he saw my mother trying to help Ms. Louise, he flashed forward, moving faster than my human eyes could see and appeared behind Ms. Louise. I screamed when he grabbed her around the waist and yanked her neck back violently. Ms. Louise screamed hysterically, but it was already too late. With razor-sharp fangs, Malachi bit into her neck. Blood drained out of her face in seconds and spilled down the front of her cream-colored formal dress. I watched in horror as the life left Ms. Louise’s eyes...

“Tuck your head,” My mother’s voice cut through my shock. Her arm was still around my waist and she used it to



yank me back and hurl me off the ledge and into the darkness. I flailed for a moment, a short scream escaping my lungs. Then, as if through instinct, I tucked my head and I was rolling through the air until I landed on a tarp on the adjoining rooftop of the building next door. I bounced up and through the tarp, a loud tear filling my senses as I tumbled to the hard blacktop of the roof.

Groaning in pain, I scrambled to my feet and I barely had a chance to get my bearings before there was a gust of wind around me and the next thing I knew my mother was standing by my side. She'd moved frighteningly fast that it sent her across the rooftops and to my side. "Are you all right?" she asked, touching my back gently.

I nodded. My limbs ached from the fall but I doubted that I broke something. The wind had been knocked out of me a little, but I was fine. She took me by the arm. "We must leave now."

My head whirled. Who were those men? Why did he kill miss Louise? But like a helpless, panicked child, I followed mothers lead. She led me across the roof, towards a door on the other side. We only got a few steps before the air changed around us and another gust of wind swept up. My feet

came to a halt and I grabbed my mother's arm tightly. Malachi was standing on the roof before us, miss Louise's blood staining his mouth and the front of his dress shirt in dark splotches. He glowered at us, his eyes shining in the dark and terror seized me.

My mother pushed me behind her, putting herself between us.

"Get away from her, Malachi," Mother hissed.

Malachi stood silent for a moment, his hands balling up into fists. His eyes darted from my mother to me and back again, then narrowed carefully. It was clear that he was contemplating having to deal with my mother.

"I don't want to fight, Lily," he said in his dark timber voice. "My quarrel isn't with you."

"Yes," she replied frostily. "It's with my husband and yet, I see you're not so foolish as to attack him. If you think I'm weaker just because I'm younger than him, then you've got another thing coming."

"I came for her," Malachi said, looking at me over her shoulder.

“Well,” she spat, “you can’t have her. Not unless you plan on going through me.”

Another gust of wind and his partner appeared next to him. This man was a few inches shorter with amber eyes. He was black like me, but his skin was a lighter brown than mine and with a buzzcut. He almost looked like an anthesis of Malachi’s pale skin, red eyes, and wavy hair.

And I noticed he was still wearing the gloves that he handled the hawthorn with. One touch could be enough to paralyze my mother. If they were going to have a fight, then my mother was going to have to be careful not to be touched.

“He has hawthorn on his gloves,” I whispered to her. “Be careful.”

She nodded slightly to acknowledge that she heard me without taking her eyes off Malachi and his cohort. “This is a fool’s errand,” she said. “My husband will have you flayed and bathed in sunlight for this attack.”

Malachi eyes narrowed sharply, his chiseled face turning to steel. “She will not be hurt as long as he gives back what he has taken,” he snarled.

“I will never give my daughter over freely!” Mother growled back and lunged at Malachi. In a flash, mother grabbed him by the neck, lifting him off from the ground. He broke the hold with a swipe across her face with dagger-like claws. Her head jerked away as she dropped him, her face marred with red claw marks. I staggered back, worry for my mother’s safety washing over me. Malachi’s partner dove for her, swiping at her with gloved hands. She dodged, missing the swings of his hands by inches. Then she crouched low and kicked his knees out from under him, sending him to the ground.

The fight was one between the three of them and all I could do was watch fearfully like a weakling. I had no chance against them, whatsoever. I couldn’t hope to help my mother battle these attackers. I’d probably be a hindrance rather than an added advantage. Still, I looked frantically around for something I could use as a weapon to fight with even if it might be futile.

I saw a piece of wood by the door that we had been running to. I made a run for the wood and maybe I could shout for help and someone would hear me and come help us. The slippery flats of my dress shoes were sliding across the

rooftop, slowing me down, but I scrambled and stayed upright, moving as quickly as I could to get to that door. I dared a look over my shoulder just in time to see Malachi dodging one of my mother's attacks, then disappearing in the darkness.

The next thing I knew, I was in his arms. I screamed and kicked as he grabbed me around my waist, then grabbed a handful of my hair, yanking my head back.

"Enough!" He shouted at my mother, who was still fighting the other man. Mother stopped at the same time as Malachi's partner and turned to us. Her eyes widened the second she saw me trapped in Malachi's embrace.

"No," she cried stepping forward. Malachi yanked my head back even further, causing me to cry out in pain. She halted. Fear crossed her face.

"Tell your husband to return what he has stolen," Malachi said coldly across the rooftop. "Or she will die."

A cold swept over me when his fangs grazed my exposed neck to him, feeling his warm breath on my skin. I wiggled but Malachi held me firm, his arms securing me as a steel bar around my waist.

“Tell him,” Malachi spoke. “Make no move to follow us or to find us, or her life will end tonight. Am I being understood?”

Mother was shaking. She clenched her jaw, then nodded slowly.

“Good,” I could hear the smile in his voice. “We’ll contact you. Don’t call us.”

Malachi then turned his attention to his partner. And the last thing I saw was the darkness as his shadow swallowed us both into the night around us. In what felt like a second, we reappeared on the street beside a black van and everything that happened next went by in a blur. My hands were bound with zip ties and I was pushed into the back of the van. Before I knew it, we were moving, riding away from the temple and my life. In an instant, everything had changed...

## Chapter Two

### **Malachi**

I almost blew the entire thing the moment I saw her.

It was the night of the soul-joining of the “daughter” of Jackson and Lily Orion and Zephrus Steelton. To my understanding, it was supposed to be some kind of alliance between the Orions and the Steeltons. A little more than a business arrangement. There hadn’t even been an announcement about the Orion heir’s pending nuptials.

We’d heard about it, though. And I saw the opportunity staring us right in the face. The chance to finally set straight a wrong that had been done to our family centuries ago. After all these years, I knew about something that Jackson cherished... and I was going to take it from him.

The thing is, I’d never actually seen Emily Orion before. I’d heard about her over the years. Of course, most royal vampire families all had, though. Whoever heard of a vampire adopting a human child, after all? My father had said that sort of thing happened several times before, but it was hardly ever encouraged. Rare and I could imagine why. Being around a

human all the time without ever drinking from them was torture.

We had lain in wait and well-hidden in the temple until it got close to the time for the ceremony to begin. We stayed out of sight for most of the evening and watched as the guests gathered in the sanctuary. Once everyone was there, we set the plan in motion.

That had been the plan and it was a good plan until I noticed Lily wasn't there with her husband while Flip laid out the hawthorn at the threshold of all the doors.

Zephrus, Jackson and a few other guests had charged at us, naturally the second they saw us standing at the door leading into the hallway where the bride was supposed to be. But the smell of the hawthorn hit them first and brought them to a screeching halt. Seeing them noticing the flowers set as a barrier, the fear and anger flashing on their faces had been a pleasant sight.

"The mother's not here," I had said to Flip as the men yelled at us from the other side of the barrier.

"She's probably with the girl," Flip noted. "That's going to be a problem."



“No kidding,” I had said but then spotted a door opening down the hallway we were standing in...and out she stepped.

Wrapped in a white and red lace dress, her dark hair was done up in a tapestry of braids that went well past her smooth, ebony shoulders. Her brown eyes had widened and her plump painted red lips parted the second she saw me.

I was mesmerized. Frozen in that moment long enough to smile at her...and that was too long because a second later, her mother had pulled her back into the room.

I almost blew it. I should have grabbed her as soon as I saw her. She had delivered herself right in my lap and I had let her beauty distract me.

“Earth to Malachi,” Flip said from the passenger’s seat. His voice brought me back into the present, my memories replaying still in my mind. I was lost in trying to figure out which part of this mission I’d gone wrong in. I hadn’t even been aware he’d been talking.

“Sorry,” I apologized. “I was just thinking about what happened.”

“That was a close one,” Flip sighed, pulling off his gloves, still covered with hawthorn dust. He tossed them out

of the window, then pulled down the mirror in the visor to look over the claw marks on his face. “That could have gone very wrong.”

“Tell me about it. I wasn’t prepared to have to fight Lily.”

Flip chuckled. “No shit. She outranks us by about seven hundred years. We’re lucky to have gotten out of there with our heads still attached.”

I nodded. I had a few scratches and bruises as well and all things considered, we were fucking lucky to have gotten away with just that. It was a good thing our scars were superficial. Bigger ones usually took much longer to heal.

“So,” he said. “What’s the plan now?”

I didn’t say anything for a moment. I was still trying to piece together the other parts of this mission in my mind. We’d only been driving the van for a few minutes and we still had an hour to go on our way to my place at the lookout. I wasn’t sure if any of the Orions would know to look for us there or not, but I did know that it wasn’t common knowledge that it was my place. Well...my mother’s place, actually. I rarely even went there anymore.

“Father’s going to meet us there,” I responded finally.  
“From there, we go on to phase two of the plan. You can relax because that’s going to be all me and my father.”

Flip raised an eyebrow. “Negotiations?”

“Yeah.”

Flip paused. “So, by relax, you mean, I’m going to have to guard the girl?”

“Yes,” I responded and glanced at him. “Is that going to be a problem?”

“No sir.” Flip shook his head.

I frowned when I heard a thump in the back. I looked in the rearview. Emily was still back there, tied up and squirming around on the van floor.

“The thing is, I’ve never had to not kill a human hostage,” he went on as he also glanced back. “I don’t see this as the easy part of this job, you know. We sure we want this girl alive?”

“Deal doesn’t happen unless she is.”

Flip cleared his throat. “Okay. What about we make her a vessel in the meantime? Did you notice how good she smells? I’ll bet she tastes even better.”

I did notice. Holding her there on the rooftop, her neck exposed to me, the sound of her heart beating in my ears. The smell that her blood held was something that I'd never encountered before. Something sweet and inviting... something that made my mouth water the second I smelled it.

"Nope," I snarled, surprising myself "She's to remain untouched," and added, "Per father's orders."

He frowned and looked out of the passenger's side window. "I don't see what difference a little taste could make."

I shook my head. "You do realize she was getting married, right? We don't get the honor of breaking the seal on this one. She's not ours to break. She's the Orions. Think of this more like we're holding her for collateral. They give us what we're owed and they get her back in the same condition that she was taken."

"Right, right," Flip muttered.

I sped us along through the night, my eyes drifting to the rearview mirror, just in case one of Orion's men got free somehow and was now coming after us. It would be just our luck to suddenly see headlights speeding up on our tail. I started to look back at the road when I caught movement

behind me. I looked up just in time to see the back door open.

*Shit!*

“Take the wheel,” I told him. I didn’t wait for his response. I was up and out of my seat with vampiric speed. I flashed to the back of the van and caught Emily as she leaned out of the door, about to jump. She must have been out of her mind. We were going at least eighty miles an hour.

I pulled her back inside, pressing her body against mine as she screamed, kicking her feet, and digging her nails uselessly into my arm. I leaned into her and that indescribably sweet smell greeted my senses again. It was starting to do something to me. My heart was starting to quicken a little even. I pushed it away, trying to hold tight to her as she flailed.

“Naughty girl,” I growled into her ear, trying to use my voice to mesmerize her. It made no difference. The sound of my voice did nothing to calm her from yelling and screaming and kicking. So, I just held her until she finally stopped struggling.

“Let me go,” she protested.

“Sorry,” I said. “I can’t do that.”

She tried another burst of struggling, trying uselessly to pry my arms from around her waist.

“Look, you’re not going anywhere, all right? I’m too fast and I’m too strong. You know that don’t you?” I spoke.

Maybe she just needed a reminder because she stopped struggling.

“Good girl,” I said darkly. “Let’s get you bound again, shall we?”

I took hold of her hands and pulled them behind her. Then I brought her down to the van floor with me, kneeling as I held her hands firmly at her back. I looked around the van, only to see the zip ties that we’d used to bind her hands were broken. *Interesting...*

“Flip,” I called up front. “Toss me those bungee cords in the glove compartment?”

“Roger that.”

Flip, now in the driver’s seat, reached over and grabbed the cords, tossing them back to me. I used those to bind her hands tight.

“No more struggling,” I warned her. “You behave and you’ll be returned back to your parents in no time.”

“You’re going to pay for this,” she spat bitterly. “Do you have any idea of the hornet’s nest you just kicked? My parents are going to rip you apart.”

“So, I’ve heard,” I said nonchalantly. “They gotta find us first, buttercup.”

She was shivering against me and something warm bloomed in my chest as her scent encircled me. I tightened her bonds and she flinched. “Ouch. That’s too tight, asshole.”

“I’ll loosen them when we’ve gotten where we’re going,” I said. “In the meantime, sit still and enjoy the ride. We’ll be there soon enough.”

She looked back at me in the dark, those pouty lips and those gorgeous brown eyes...

*Focus*, I sharply reminded myself. I turned away from her and moved to the front seat.

## Chapter Three

### Emily

When you're the adopted daughter of a powerful vampire family, you learn a few things about survival. I was taught from the very beginning to be prepared. My parents knew as soon as other vampires became aware of who I was, that it could only mean one thing. Other vampires would want me, some for good and some for evil, but either way, I was going to be a target for someone's agenda.

That was part of the reason for the arranged marriage to Zephrus. They wanted an alliance with the Steeltons and in that way, I could be used as a tool for good. Our family would become stronger with the Steeltons in our ranks.

So. If there was one thing that I've always known about myself, it's that I was valuable to my family. To that end, I've never really been alone anywhere. There's always been someone nearby to protect me wherever I went. And my parents did their best to prepare me for the day that someone might try and take me from them by force.



While I lay in the back of the van, lulled into a sort of meditative state by the rhythmic hum of the engine, I thought about my parents' choice of choosing a human woman - a former vessel - to watch over me. Ms. Louise had been a little more than just the dresser for my wedding. As a child, she'd been my nanny and my one human confidant. Mother told me that they'd insisted on having me around at least one human, so I understood what I was in comparison to them.

I missed Ms. Louise already. She'd cared for me my entire life and now she was gone forever...

Tears pressed against my eyes and I tried not to think of the last moments I saw her. Her face going deathly pale in seconds after Malachi bit her and her body going limp. A whole life disappeared in just seconds. I wished Mother had grabbed her first even though I understood why she didn't. But I hated that she had to die just for a chance for me to escape.

An escape that didn't even work out. *Why am I here right now? What could they possibly be looking for?* I pensively wondered.

*Tell Jackson to give back what he took...* What could that possibly have been? It had to be a mistake. My father was

a lot of things, but a thief wasn't one of them. This had to be some grand accusation.

I was going to have to figure out a way to get out of this. I didn't know how I was going to do it, but I was going to need to get back home before these vampires decided to take my life as well. I wasn't going to die when they wouldn't get whatever it is that they thought was stolen from them.

Malachi. Tall and muscular with piercing smoldering eyes...and that smile. That annoying gorgeous smile like he knew everything. I wondered how old he was. He had to be younger than Mother. He seemed hesitant to fight her on the rooftop... but who was he?

I stilled when the van jerked to a stop. I thought of trying to make a run for it as soon as they opened the door. That thought dissipated when I remembered they could move faster than the blink of an eye. I'd be caught before I took more than a couple of steps.

My breath stuck in my lungs when the door rattled then opened. I stayed still when the other guy, Flip as Malachi had called him, reached in, and pulled me out. I looked around frantically at our surroundings in hopes that I'd know the place or street. Nothing. We were standing at the gates of an old

two-story house with vines and moss growing on the brick. There were overgrown hedges in front of the house and an old tree that had lost all its leaves. The lawn was littered with red and orange everywhere.

The house itself didn't look like it was in disrepair, but the overgrown foliage all around it made it look abandoned. I glanced around the property, looking at the dark shadows of a forest at every angle. We really were in the middle of nowhere with only the moon above us.

“Welcome home, such as it is,” Malachi said as though speaking to friend an expected guest. “I expect we won't have any more trouble out of you from this point on?”

I glared at him as he stared coldly down at me.

“No,” I replied in a small voice.

He looked over at Flip. “I'm taking her in. Take the van around back and meet me in the study.”

Flip nodded.

Malachi grabbed my arm and led me through the creaky iron gates and up the stone walkway to the house.

Inside, the house looked more lived in. Reasonably clean wooden floors, faded, but cobweb-free wallpaper. As I

stood in the foyer, he closed and locked the door behind us, then pointed me to the staircase. “Keep moving.”

I was directed to a bedroom on the second floor. I took it in for a moment. An ancient four-post bed with a heavy fabric canopy on top and embroidered pillows with a matching comforter. An armoire and matching nightstands that looked like they were carved directly from the same large oak. A chandelier overhead that glowed amber over the entire, gothic display. It was all looked like something out of an old Hammer movie.

“You should get out of that dress,” he said. “I’ve prepared a change of clothing for you.”

He nodded over to the folded clothes on the bed and I glanced over at him, my arms aching from being bound by the bungee cord. “How am I supposed to do that?”

“I’ll untie you,” he walked over and untied my bonds. I sighed with relief and rubbed my sore arms. I then looked at the clothes. Neatly folded gray t-shirt and sweatpants, no underwear. Good thing I happened to be wearing underwear.

“Get dressed,” he commanded. I looked back at him. He was standing by the door, his arms crossed. He had the

stance of a man who was used to being in control of himself and of any situation.

“A little privacy would be nice,” I glared at him.

“Not after that stunt you pulled in the van.” He raised his eyebrow and his lips tipped upward. “I’m not leaving you alone and unbound.”

“So...you’re just going to stand there and watch me.”

“Yes.” His heated gaze roamed my body and a shiver coursed through me.

It occurred to me that maybe I could use this to my advantage.

I started by undoing the gold clasps at my hips. The wrap-around part of my dress fell, slightly revealing just the curves of my bare breasts underneath. I watched his eyes as he followed my hands as I undid the inner clasps of the dress, letting the other half of the dress fall loose. I stood there with the fabric draped over my shoulders and just barely covering my body, giving him just a peek at what was underneath.

The air turned heavy and charged. I slid the dress off my shoulders, letting it fall to the floor. As I kicked off my shoes, I watched the blood rush to his cheeks, giving his pale

skin some color. Standing there in front of him in just my panties, I could tell that even he was like any other man - vampire or not. His eyes roamed over my body, hovering over my breasts and my hips as he visually devoured me.

When I felt like he'd seen enough of me, I walked over to the clothing and put on the t-shirt and sweatpants. Once they were on, Malachi stalked toward me and took my wrists, this time tying them up in front of me.

"I have better ropes to bind you with," he said in a husky voice, not looking at my face as he worked on my bindings. "I'll bring them when I come to you tomorrow night."

My heart drummed in my ears at his closeness. I felt the heat of his breath against my face. It sounded a little shaky. I tried not to smile with a little bit of triumph. Maybe I could make him bend just enough to let me go...

With my hands bound, he stepped away from me and to the door. "Sleep well," was all he said before he left.

I sat down on the bed and smiled to myself. A captor who wanted to sleep with me was a captor I could take advantage of and get out of there. I had never really been a femme fatale type. My life left for little opportunity for

anything other than a little flirting here and there with the few men that ever entered my life. But I knew when a man was interested in me and I'd learned from my mother how to use that to get them to do whatever I wanted them to do.

Sometimes it worked. Sometimes not. But this time, I could see that Malachi wanted my body. I could use that and maybe I could actually get out of here.

I didn't want to be here any longer than I had to so, I started cooking up a plan of action. My door wasn't locked. Maybe I could find out where he was sleeping and give him a little surprise oral. Maybe if I got my hands on some hawthorn blossoms I could bind him and then maybe torture him a little until he gladly lets me walk away from him and this place.

There were many angles that I could use in appealing to my captor's carnal nature. My only hope was that it wouldn't get me into trouble. He was stronger and faster than I was. If I angered him, I could end up in a worst position than just being tied up. The last thing I wanted was a vampire losing control on me.

But maybe that wouldn't be a problem with this one. Malachi seemed to like being in charge. I can use that against him to get free, I thought. I just know I can.

## Chapter Four

### **Malachi**

My father called a little after I'd gotten Emily settled and he informed me that he would be by the next evening. I thought about going back to my own home to rest, but then I thought about how crafty the girl had been in the van and I decided the better of it. It was best that I stayed on the grounds for now.

Flip stayed as well. The logic being that two of us on the premises was better than just one. I didn't object to that logic, so I took the bedroom on the first floor and he took the bedroom next to hers.

That had been on my insistence. After seeing her undress in front of me, I started to question the wisdom of my sleeping too close to her room. The way her body looked under the amber light, the shimmer that came off her brown skin. The firmness of her breasts and the curved shape of her hips...



That and her scent were enough to fill my mind with all kinds of carnal thoughts. After getting off the phone with my mother, I retired to the room downstairs and took a shower in the adjoining bathroom.

I wasn't planning on jerking off. Really, I just wanted to get the blood off me and get into bed. But standing under the warm water, the feel of it like warm fingers along my skin made me think of Emily's body. Smooth brown skin, soft rounded hips...

I imagined her kneeling before me and groaned at the vision of her lips wrapping around my cock and her taking in every inch until her lips were touching the base. Before I knew it, my hand was around my cock and I was stroking, slowly, then fast. With a groan, I closed my eyes and fantasized thrusting down her throat.

When I came, it was like a volcano. I exploded, my body shaking like a leaf as I leaned against the bathroom wall, my knees getting weak. I moaned softly into the warm water.

It was all so strange. Damn it! How could a measly human girl affect me so! I finished showering and stepped out. Attraction to human women wasn't unusual for me. Vessels often expected sex when I drank from them. There had been

many nights when I started to drink from a woman, only to find she was rubbing my cock through my pants in response. But I'd never been drawn to a human like I was to Emily. Burying the thoughts of my hostage, I dressed up and went to the living room to wait for my father's arrival.

Father arrived an hour or so after sunset. My father was Maximillian Von Alton. A powerful vampire in our circles. He was also a man with a fractured family. My mother was long gone and with me being his only heir, he didn't have the numbers the way that the Orions did. That didn't mean he wasn't a force to be reckoned with.

As he walked past me and into the foyer, he took a moment to look around the old house. "It's been years since I've been in this house." father finally said solemnly, taking in a deep breath. "It even smells the same. Remarkable. I should have considered coming back here years ago."

Flip and I stood next to him like obedient dogs while he took off his coat and hung it on the coat rack. "Do you have a Vessel around?" he asked casually. "I haven't had a proper breakfast yet."

"Fuck! I mean no, father," I responded and internally cursed myself for swearing. He'd caught me off guard with

that request. “I thought it best to rely on prepared stores while we’re staying here for privacy’s sake. I could get you something from that—”

He waved me off and started walking towards the parlor. “Let’s just get on with this, then.”

In the parlor, we all sat down on the couches in front of the fireplace. Father on one side and Flip and I on the other. His brows pulled into a frown as he said, “So, you want to tell me what happened last night?”

. “We procured the Orions’ daughter as planned.” I replied.

“Untouched,” Flip added.

Father looked at us both, his face a cold mask. Not look of congratulations in his eye. “Yes,” he said. “And when I was giving you your orders, did I request for you two to spill innocent blood?”

*Shit.* I tensed. *How did he know??* It had only been a day and he knew about the human I killed. I sighed and said, “Father, I know what you said, but you have to understand, it was necessary—”

“Don’t give me that nonsense about it being a necessary evil,” he snapped. “The plan was simple. You were to trap the family in the sanctuary and take the girl. In and out, preferably without being seen and absolutely no one was supposed to get hurt. We are not trying to start a war.”

I clenched my teeth in silence.

“Sir,” Flip said hesitantly, “the human was hardly enough to start a war. No one from the bloodlines was killed. What happened was that they were escaping and Malachi was just trying to make it clear that he meant business. The woman was just a human. Hardly irreplaceable. They would never have allowed him to kill her if she held any real worth.”

My father turned his dark eyes to Flip and in a cold voice, he said, “I said *no one*, Phillip. You have no idea who that woman was to the Orions. She could have been very valuable to them. Just not as valuable to them as the girl is. Few people, human or vampire are as valuable as her right now. That doesn’t mean that the human you killed was entirely worthless.”

And now Flip was rendered quiet. Father went on.

“It’s things like this that can alter negotiations. It’ll be hard enough to convince them to hand over the blade without

having to account for the human that you killed. You were not supposed to leave me with a mess to clean up.”

“Father,” I said, then I paused. I could have tried to defend myself further, but I knew all too well the dangers of pressing my father. “As necessary as it might have been,” I said instead, “I can’t believe that it will affect negotiations to any real degree. Not if they want their daughter back. We needed to prove to them that we’re a force to be reckoned with and I know no other way to do that than with a display of power. For better or worse, they know we mean business now.”

He gave me a wry chuckle, then, “My son. Always ready for war.” He shook his head at me and I felt the deep stab of disappointment. “Sometimes some things do not need an iron fist. I’d have been just as happy if you managed to get it done by just luring the girl out with candy.”

My father has never laid a hand on me, but if he ever did, I imagine it wouldn’t be nearly as painful as the way he seemed to like to cut me down with his words.

“That is why I’ll be taking Flip instead of you with me when the negotiations begin,” he stated.

I gaped at him. He wasn't serious. He couldn't be serious...

"Father, I am your son," I said calmly, quelling the anger simmering inside me. "And your heir. You can't do this without me. I'm supposed to be at your side."

"I can do it and I will," he said. "I don't need you by my side. I negotiated without an heir for more than sixteen hundred before you were born. All I need is someone to watch my back and Flip can do that well enough."

I felt like he'd punched me in the stomach. The air seemed to leave the room entirely and I was having trouble getting any in my lungs for a moment.

"You will stay here with our prize until it is time to trade her," father went on. "Maybe staying in a house with a human you can't touch will teach you some humility."

It was an insult. It was more than an insult. It was demeaning what he was doing. Leaving me, the heir, to do the grunt work while he took Flip to be his second in the negotiations. Well...his bodyguard anyway. Whatever his role, it should be me at his side. Not a subordinate.

"Now," he started, "let's discuss the rest of this plan."

We did. We discussed the meeting place once an agreement was made and also some provisions just in case they decided to double cross us. We didn't expect them to, however. We had their child, after all.

It bothered me why father was angry I killed the old human lady. During the discussion of the plan, father let me know Jackson Orion had contacted him. Jackson had been furious about the wedding disruption and the abduction of his daughter. Somewhere in there, I suspected Jackson mentioned the death of the human woman and my father was angrier that he was put on the spot to explain that more than anything else.

Reputation was crucial in our world. Father needed to appear a certain way to other vampires. Cruel, yet fair.

In any event, Father simply had refused the return of his daughter, then cut off all communications to the family. Every message was rejected and not a single word was said about it. This was a tactic to get them wound up so much that by the time negotiations did begin, they would be off-kilter and possibly willing to do anything to get Emily back. The more off their game they were going into this, the more likely things would work to our favor. It was Negotiation 101.

I was still pissed about his decision. When the discussion was over, father got up to leave and ordered Flip to follow him. I walked them to the door and father walked out. Flip hung back for a moment, shooting me an apologetic glance.

“I’m sure your father doesn’t mean it as an insult,” he said, trying to soften my father’s punishment. I laughed bitterly.

“He does,” I responded in a matter of fact tone. “Don’t worry about it, though. Just do your part and make sure he’s protected. We can’t trust the Orions. If they see any weakness, they will take it.”

“Of course,” Flip nodded. Once they were gone, I pushed aside my anger. There was nothing that could be done about it. Father had delegated me to be a glorified babysitter and so that’s what I was going to have to be until he felt I’d learned my lesson.

I glanced at the clock on the wall. It was almost eight. I figured the girl would be up and I had promised her better ropes to bind her. I went into the basement and found a short reel of rope that I could use to keep her bound for the time being. Then I went up to her room to check in on her.



She was lying on top of the covers in her t-shirt...and her panties. Nothing else. She lay on her side, hands still bound in front of her, head on the pillow, her braids flayed out on the pillow while her serene profile lay in blissful sleep. The overhead lights were off, but she kept one light on by her nightstand and the low, cool lighting cast shadows over her curvaceous hips and thighs.

I turned the light on and she stirred as I walked around to the side of bed. Her eyes fluttered open. She looked at me drowsily, then turned away rolling over on her back, reaching up and rubbing her eyes with her bound hands.

“What time is it,” she grumbled.

“It’s eight,” I answered quickly. “What happened to your pants?”

She looked over at me and grimaced a little as if she didn’t understand me. “What?”

“Your pants? You’re not wearing them. Why aren’t you wearing them?”

She turned away from me again and stretched, bringing her bound arms up and over her head elongating her body on

the bed for a moment. “It was hot so I took them off,” she mumbled. “Is that a problem?”

“If you were hot, you should have told me. I could have gotten you something else to wear.”

I watched as she rolled back onto her side and stared back at me, her eyelids still heavy with sleep. “It’s not a problem for me. Is it a problem for you?”

Her thigh was coyly covering the triangle of her pink panties and I smiled. Looking at her lying seductively in front of me, it was as clear as day what was happening. She was trying to seduce me.

I can’t lie. It was a clever ploy. I was definitely aroused.

“You are quite the clever girl,” I smirked. “You think I’ll see you in your little pink panties and t-shirt and then just let you go.”

“Is it working?” she asked me, returning my smile.

Clever, clever girl... But not clever enough. *All right*, I thought. *If that’s your game, let’s play.*

I approached her and sat down on the bed next to her. I then grabbed the bungee cord around her wrists and untied her

and took the one that I brought and started retying her bonds. She rolled her eyes.

“You’re really all about business — Oh!” She winced.

The bonds tied, I pulled her arms over her head and hooked the slack to the decorative part of the headboard that jutted out like a hooked knob.

“It’s a nice idea,” I said as I gave the rope a little pull to make sure it was secure. “The problem is that I’m still in control, here. In your zeal to seduce me, you’ve forgotten that I already have you. And that means, I can have you however I like.”

Something in her face changed. Her eyes widened slightly and her lips quivered. Was this fear? No. Not quite. I know fear and this wasn’t that. She hadn’t been expecting me to respond this way and now she didn’t know what to do about it.

My gaze swept her body, bound and helpless before me in nothing but a t-shirt and panties, her sweet smell like a cloud over my head. I ran my hands over her smooth hips and up her t-shirt, pulling it up, and exposing her breasts to me.

I heard her sharp intake of breath. Emily trapped her lip between her teeth as I ran a single finger down the center of her warm chest. “Do you want me to stop?” I whispered.

“Will that matter to you?” she asked defiantly even as she panted.

“Yes,” I replied. She trembled, her nipples getting hard as I ran my hands over her breasts, squeezing them gently.

“Tell me to stop,” I told her, “If you want. This is your seduction, isn’t it? You’re the one in control of this moment, right?”

I took her nipples between my fingers, twisting them gently. She uttered a soft, wanton moan. “You’re teasing me,” she said in a shaky voice.

“Isn’t that the other way around?” I leaned in and kissed her ribcage, my tongue trailing upward to the center of her chest. I heard her pulse through her skin, the scent of her sweet blood so loud in my nostrils. I wrapped my mouth around her nipples, swirling my tongue around and flicking her taut skin.

Her moans were soft and restrained as if she was trying to keep her pleasure from me. My mind was suddenly filled

with all the ways that I could have her as I moved from one nipple to the other.

*Stay in control* I reminded myself. She was to remain untouched by our standards, but that didn't mean that I couldn't have some fun with her. I moved down to her stomach, kissing her gently as I reached down and started pulling her panties down.

“Wh-what are you doing?” she asked breathlessly.

I tossed her panties across the room and kissed her thighs, moving my hands between her legs. I slid my finger between her slick folds, finding her clit. I rolled my finger over it rhythmically. She gasped and moaned, burying her head in her arm to try and stifle herself. She moved her hips with my fingers, her eyes closed as she moaned gently. Even her soft moans sounded like music to my ears.

I kissed her thigh, moving down until my tongue was caressing her inner folds. She was so sweet against my tongue that I couldn't get enough of her. I wrapped my arms around her thighs to hold her firm to me and pleased with my tongue.

She could no longer contain herself. Emily moaned loudly as she moved her hips to keep up with the movement of

my tongue. “Don’t stop,” she gasped. “Oh...god...don’t stop...”

I drank her in, my heart starting to pound in my ears as her body started to shake against me. I could feel myself getting hard...and something else, some fire awakening inside me. My fangs threatened to come out and sink into her tender skin. Her moans increased as she threw her head back, her moans hitting the ceiling.

She climaxed in my arms, her body shaking against my tongue. I held her fast and kept going, feeling her body igniting over and over against me.

I could have lived there. I could see myself ripping the rest of her clothes off, pulling down my pants and fucking her hard. I imagined feeling her nails in my back, my fangs buried in her shoulder as I tasted her sweet blood. How I wanted to hear her screaming my name...

Against, or more accurately in favor of my better judgement, I pulled back. I let her go and pulled away from her. She looked at me, her chest heaving up and down.

I kept my word. I didn’t drink from her. Nor did I penetrate her...but I wanted to. Fuck! How I wanted to.

I slid her underwear back on and pulled down her shirt. Her body was still shivering as I leaned into her, my mouth so close to hers that we were breathing the same air. “You’ll know better than to try that again, won’t you?” I whispered. Then I turned and left her, bound to the bed.

## Chapter Five

### Emily

What just happened?

I was laying there on the bed, my arms bound over my head, my thighs slick with sweat and my own juices, and my body still buzzing from the mind-blowing orgasm. I was going to be dreaming of that intimate kiss for days after. How dare he be that good at getting me to climax!

My attempt at seduction wasn't for naught, however. For all his talk of maintaining control, he was so busy lusting after me that he didn't notice that I was holding my wrists a few inches apart as he tied the rope around them - a trick my mother taught me as a child just for these kinds of emergencies. It was how I got out of my zip tie bonds in the van and it was how I was going to get out of this situation as well.

I wiggled my arms until they slid out of the ropes, then I found the sweatpants and opened the door slightly to look out.

No one was in the hallway. I only had a brief look around when I came in, so I didn't know anything about the



layout of the house. I was sure I couldn't just walk out of the front door and a house this big had to have a back or a side door, right? I crept out of the room, tiptoeing along the second floor until I got to the stairs and started making my way down. Here I was the most vulnerable. All it would take was someone coming out of a room and seeing me to ruin the entire escape.

But I got to the ground floor without incident. I stood there for half a second, looking at the front door with my heart racing with adrenaline and worry. Everything in me was telling me that it would be a mistake to try and leave that way...so I turned around and started moving through the halls in the hopes of finding another way out.

I got to a room where the door was left open slightly and I could hear talking. I paused, listening to see who it was. It was Malachi and what sounded like Flip over the phone. I should have kept moving towards the back of the house to find a way out, but something made me stop and listen. Maybe I thought that I could glean some knowledge that might be useful later, should I fail in my escape. Maybe I could get some clue as to why I was being held for ransom in the first place.

“So, nothing yet?” Malachi was saying.

“No. I guess they’re still debating what to do,” Flip responded. “If you ask me, they’re probably trying to think of a way to find where you are and take her by force.”

“We should give them tighter time frames so they don’t have time to pull anything like that.”

“Your dad knows. He’s given them until midnight to respond.” There was a pause, then his partner said, “he would rather have you here with him, you know.”

“Are you telling me that to comfort me? Because I don’t need it. I know who my father is and I know that this little assignment I have is his way of humbling me.”

“Still. It’s a good thing to know that he cares, don’t you think?”

I heard him rustling paper. This room must be a study or an office. I imagined him sitting at a desk, looking over some arcane paper about whatever was stolen from them. “I suppose.”

His lackey sighed loudly over the line, then, “Anyway, how’s the girl?”

Malachi didn't say anything for a long moment. When he finally did speak, his voice sound a little labored. "I believe we might have a problem."

"Oh?"

He paused again. "You have to swear not to speak of this. To *anyone*."

"Oh, no," he said. "What have you done?"

"I haven't broken any rules. I mean, she's still technically untouched," said Malachi. His voice sounded a little annoyed at having to say that.

"Technically?"

I heard him sigh heavily. "She was trying to seduce me to get me to release her," he confessed. "I thought that was amusing. So, I...gave her a taste of her own medicine, so to speak."

"Malachi..."

"Before you start, may I reiterate that I did not drink her blood nor did I penetrate her. I just serviced her until she climaxed."

His partner suddenly burst into laughter. I could picture Malachi's face scowling at him. "What exactly is so funny?"

“You. You’re acting like you’ve committed some crime. So, you had a little fling with her. I might’ve done the same in your position. She is very beautiful.”

“You would *not* have done the same thing because it’s hardly professional. We’re not animals, Flip. I would think that we could keep it in our pants long enough to carry out a hostage situation.”

“One of us can, anyway,” he said with a laugh. “Okay, so what? You feel guilty about it.”

“Yes,” he replied. “But, not because of what I did. The way I felt while it was happening is the problem...it was...I don’t know. I haven’t been with anyone that made me feel like that since...”

There was a pause, then Flip uttered a soft sound that almost sounded like a groan. “Oh. She reminds you of Eloise.”

My ears perked up. *Eloise? Who was Eloise?* I was suddenly very interested in hearing who this woman was. Mostly because I couldn’t really imagine that a man like Malachi could have ever been in a romantic relationship with anyone...but also...well, I couldn’t have articulated the second part of that just yet.

“Yes,” Malachi replied,. “She doesn’t look like her, of course. And maybe if I hadn’t done what I did, I never would have realized it. But there’s something about her that reminds me of Eloise. Maybe it was the way she responded to me in the moment. I don’t know. What I do know is that it’s a fucking problem. I don’t know if I can be objective—”

In all my zeal to hear him go on, I leaned against the door and it creaked loudly. *Shit*. I looked around frantically and spotted a door by the staircase as I heard him pause and say, “Let me call you back, Flip.”

I lept across the hall and opened it, slipping inside quickly and quietly.

From behind the door, I heard the door creak open, then footsteps. I shut my eyes tightly, praying he wouldn’t find me hidden behind the door of this broom closet. The footsteps walked quickly in another direction, towards the stairs. It hit me that he was probably going to see if I was still in the bedroom.

I left the closet and started moving towards the back of the house, praying that I found the way out before he noticed I was gone. I got as far as the kitchen and breathed a sigh of relief as I saw the back door with a window, looking out into

the dim night of the woods behind the house. I didn't know how far I was going to get in those woods, but I was going to try.

I jogged across the kitchen to the door and grabbed the doorknob. *Freedom!* I thought as I started to pull the door open.

The back of my hair stood on end when I suddenly felt his presence behind me. Malachi pulled away and back across the kitchen. I was pushed back through the kitchen door and into the hallway. When I turned around, Malachi was standing there, his eyes glowing red and that damnable grin on his face.

“Nice try,” he said.

## Chapter Six

### Malachi

“Didn’t I tell you that it was useless to try and escape?”

Emily looked at me defiantly, her chin jutted out and her fists balled up at her sides. Seeing her fired up was getting me excited. I took a step towards her and she took one back. As if she could run from me...

“You being a vampire just means you’re faster and stronger than I am,” she said, “not necessarily smarter.”

I cocked my head. “You think you can outwit me? I look forward to seeing you try.”

I took another step and she stepped back again. I laughed. “You cannot get away from me.”

“What do you want with me anyway?” she retorted. “You’re holding me for some kind of ransom. What do you hope to gain from this?”

That was an interesting question. I hadn’t considered that she might be privy to some knowledge of the Silver

Blade. Human or not, she was Jackson Orion's daughter.

Maybe she'd seen it in passing.

“Something that your father took from us,” I replied, watching her face for some kind of recognition. “Perhaps you've seen it. Long, curved blade made from pure silver with an ebony handle. Maybe your father had it around the house somewhere?”

She snickered. “Even if I knew what you were talking about, I wouldn't tell you.”

“You should,” I narrowed my eyes at her. “If you tell me where it is, it might get you out of here sooner.”

She didn't respond. She stood there in all her defiance. *All right, I thought. Have it your way.*

I winked up to the bedroom and was back again before she could move, the rope in my hands. I didn't know how she got out again, but I wasn't going to make the mistake of binding her comfortably this time.

I took her arms, pulling her close to me. Emily looked up at me wearily, the defiance in her eyes softening. “You don't know what kind of shitstorm you've started,” she said to



me. “When my father finds me, he’ll have an army to rip you and your father to shreds.”

“Right,” I said. I noticed her holding her wrists slightly apart. I wrapped the rope around her wrists and pulled the rope tight until her wrists clasped together.

“Ouch,” she griped angrily. “Watch it.”

“I told you to behave,” I reminded her. “Don’t you want to get back to your family and wedding to your fiancé?”

Emily gave me the strangest look. The anger in her eyes lifted and she smiled at me before laughing dryly. “Shows how little you know. Zephrus isn’t my ‘fiancé’. That doesn’t mean he won’t come for me though. He knows how important this marriage is to our families. He’ll do anything to keep our alliance strong.”

That’s interesting, I thought. I knew her pending nuptials were a business arrangement, but I assumed that she was the only one who wasn’t privy to that information. How stupid was I not to assume she’d have a full understanding of her arranged marriage?

“You know,” she said as I finished tying her wrists. “You could make the extra effort to make me comfortable.”

“Really? Well, what does her majesty request?” I said sarcastically.

“How about food? I haven’t eaten since last night, you know.”

I paused, a little amazed at myself for forgetting the basic reality that she was human and therefore required food to live. “You’ll get food,” I grabbed hold of the ropes and pulled her along. “Come on.”

Emily dug her heels in, resisting me. I could have yanked her forward with little effort. Made her walk back to her room. It occurred to me that her insolence required a little bit of punishment.

I turned back to her and lifted her off her feet and over my shoulder. She squealed and started to kick her legs. I held them down with my arms, firmly at the knees, pressing them against my chest. As she started to yell, I swatted her in the backside. Once, twice, three times.

“Stop!” Emily yelled, punching my back. “And put me down!”

I carried her up the stairs with her yelling the whole way. When we got to the room, I dumped her back down on the

bed, then I leaned into her face, letting her see the fire in my eyes. “Enough,” I growled. “Now, I’m going to tie you to the bed and I’m going to go out for food. Before you try to escape again, remember how fast I can move. You will not get far if you try it again.”

She looked at me with large brown eyes, tears welling in them as her bottom lip quivered. *Finally*. A little submission was all I needed. I took the rope and tied her to one of the posts. “If you want to eat,” I said as I walked away, “then stay put.”

I vanished out of her sight and to the nearest fast food place in the area, which was about a mile away in a little shopping area. I could have driven, I suppose, but I can move faster than any car. The trip there and back wasn’t without its drawbacks, though. For all intents and purposes, I was running. Even at lightspeed, those five or ten minutes I was a little worn out.

When I got back, she was still tied up, but it was clear that she’d been trying to get herself out again. The skin around her wrists looked red, the mark of the rope imprinted on her skin.

Her eyes were rimmed red as she looked up at me. Wet cheeks and an angry glare. I ignored her tears, setting the food down and turning to the rope instead. As I worked to free her, she sniffled. “You didn’t have to tie it so tight.”

“Didn’t I?” I posed the question. “Maybe if you didn’t keep trying to escape, I’d be more lenient.”

I got the rope off her wrists and gave her the bag of food to eat. She took it, pulling herself up on the bed and crossing her legs as she dug into the bag and pulled out the wrapped food one item at a time.

It wasn’t much. A burger and fries with a soft drink. She unwrapped the paper and took a giant bite out of the burger, eating ravenously. She was mid-chew when she noticed me standing there, watching her.

“If you’re going to just stand there and watch me eat,” she muffled, “you might as well pull up a chair and talk to me.”

I blinked. That was an odd request. Was she serious? “What would we even talk about?”

Emily shrugged and continued to look at me, those brown eyes full of expectations. I grabbed a chair and pulled it

up to the bed. “I don’t know what we would have to say to one another.”

She shrugged again. “It’s weird with you standing there staring at me, though. So if you’re not going to leave, then we have to talk.”

She had a point. “Okay. What would you like to talk about?”

She thought for a moment while she ate her fries. “How old are you?”

I smiled at her. “How old do I look?”

“That is not a fair question,” she said. “You’re a vampire. You all look around twenty-five.”

“All right,” I responded. “I’m thirty.”

She gaped at me, chewing absently. “Thirty thousand?”

“No,” I chuckled. “Just thirty.”

She nodded, then took another bite from her burger.

“How old are you?” I asked her.

Her brows wrinkled slightly. “You can’t ask that.”

“Why not?”

“It’s rude.”

“Rude? You just asked me my age.”

She sighed. “You’re a vampire. I’m human. A human female at that. It’s rude to ask me my age.”

“That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard,” I responded. “Especially since you’re clearly under thirty years old. Are you that concerned about appearing old?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Clearly, huh? Wanna take a guess?”

I didn’t know if I liked this game. But she had me. Now I wanted to know how old she was. “I don’t know. Twenty?”

She scowled at him, her cheeks full of food. “Seriously?”

“Finish chewing, please,” I said and she narrowed her eyes at me annoyedly. She chewed and swallowed, then said, “Try again.”

“Nineteen.”

She half-scoffed and half-laughed. “Now you’re just trying to insult me. I’m twenty-three. Thank you very much.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Could have fooled me.”

“Har-har,” she scoffed. She was about halfway through the burger. She set it down on the open paper on the bed, and picked up the soft drink and took a long sip from the straw. This was an inane bit of conversation...but since we were having it...

“So, you’re not in love with Zephrus Steelton?” I asked, my curiosity getting the better of me.

Emily looked at me from over her straw, then stopped drinking and set her cup back down on the nightstand. “Nope.”

“Why join with him? It can’t just be for your family.”

“Why can’t it be?” she retorted. “Can’t I just want to do the right thing by my family?”

I leaned back in the chair and crossed my legs, trying to evaluate her. “Humans don’t really do things because it’s the right thing. There’s always something in it for them.”

“Who told you that nonsense?”

“It’s just been my experience,” I replied.

“You’ve been hanging out with the wrong humans then.”

Well, that was a puzzling response, I thought. Surely she was lying, but then why would she bother lying to me? She freely admitted to not loving Zephrus.

“So, you’re really marrying him for the benefit of your family.”

“Correct.”

“You’re not looking to be turned or anything? I mean, if that’s the case, there are easier ways—”

“I don’t want to be turned,” she said, her smile vanishing and her eyes diverting down to her food. “That was part of the deal. He could marry me, but he could never turn me.”

“That must be very frustrating for him,” I said. “But if he’s agreed to it...”

“The lengths we go through to impress our fathers, I guess,” she said, a little bit of sadness in her tone.

“I can relate to that,” I responded. “My father is probably the one man who is in any position to tell me what to do and how to do it. He has my respect. The challenge is earning his trust, I suppose.”

Emily smiled a little. “I wonder sometimes if my father would be more impressed if I was turned. At least you and your father are the same.”

“You could change that.”



“I don’t want to,” Emily replied shortly.

A silence fell between us. I didn’t know whether to change the subject or dig further into that. It was interesting though. I’d never known any human that didn’t desire to be one of us. In fact, every Vessel that I ever came across seemed to be eager for the chance to be turned.

“I’ve lived with vampires my whole life,” she went on. “I don’t see the benefits of living forever. Especially everyone ends up alone eventually anyway.”

“That’s a pretty cynical thing to say,” I remarked.

“My father just had his sixteen hundred and thirty-fifth birthday last month. He’s been married three times. My mother is his third wife. All of his wives were Highbred. In fact, one of them came from pure blood vampires as far back as the medieval times and all but my mother were killed by rival vampires. This is a dangerous life we live, Malachi. Being soul-joined with another vampire doesn’t guarantee anything.”

She took a bite from a fry, chewing on it thoughtfully.

“Everyone *says* they want to live forever. No one realizes that could mean living alone forever.”

I wondered how long she'd felt this way. She was only twenty-three. Had she felt like this her entire life? Certainly, she was sheltered, thanks to her parents...but had she ever been committed to anyone?

"How many men have you been with?" I asked her and she rolled her eyes.

"How many women have you been with?" she shot back.

"I asked you first."

"And I asked second," Emily shot back, "If we're going to be comparing body counts, I might as well know yours if you want to know mine so badly."

I nodded. "All right. We can let that one go then."

She regarded me for a moment, twisting one fry around in her hand. "Have you been with many human women?"

"Only Vessels," I responded. "And only if they ask for it."

"No other humans?"

"No."

"What about Eloise?"

I felt a flash of anger. What did she know about that? She'd been eavesdropping? "That's none of your business," I said sternly.

"You asked me about Zephrus—"

"I said, that's none of your business." I cut her off and she winced.

"Okay, okay. Sorry. Clearly, that's a sore subject." She ate the rest of her burger, then said, "Speaking of sore subjects, maybe we can pass on the rope tonight?"

I shook my head. "Absolutely not."

She sighed, then pushed her wrists out to me. "You can't tie me up that tight," she said. Even on her dark skin, I could see a thin red band imprinted on her wrists. "Humans are delicate. You can't just tie us up indefinitely. It damages our bodies."

I sighed wearily, rubbing my temples. "I'm not interested in spending my evenings chasing you around."

Emily looked at her wrists for a moment. "Okay," she said. "Maybe we can make a deal, then. I'll agree to stay willingly as long as you promise to return me home. No matter what happens with your negotiation."

I narrowed my eyes at her. “That’s not how this works. Your parents have to negotiate for your release.”

“As far as they know, yes. But I’m not asking you as my captor. I’m just asking you to be decent. That’s all. Return me home when all this is over and you won’t have to worry about me trying to leave. That way we both get what we want. You get to keep me here and I get to go home when this is all over.”

I didn’t believe her. How could I believe her? There was no guarantee that she wouldn’t leave as soon as I went to rest or had to leave for some reason or another. “That sounds like a fool’s deal,” I replied. “You’ll leave the first chance you get.”

“I won’t,” she insisted. “I’ll stay. Willingly. Just promise me that when this is over, I can go back home.”

“How can I be sure?”

She rolled her eyes. “I guess you can’t be sure any more than I can be sure that you’ll keep your word. Right? I’m asking you to trust me and I’ll trust you back.”

I crossed my arms and thought about it. She was a very interesting human. I thought maybe she ought to bargain for her own freedom.

“We’ll try it tonight,” I said, finally. “If I have to catch you again tomorrow evening, then you’ll stay in binds until this is done.”

“That is the understandable,” she nodded. She put her hand out to me. “Shake on it?”

I shook her hand and she smiled brightly at me. “Don’t make me regret this,” I warned her.

I hoped those weren’t going to be famous last words.

## Chapter Seven

### Emily

*Barefoot I walked through a field of fog. The smell of fresh rain was all around me as I strode through knee-length wet grass. The skyline had disappeared replaced by the thick cloud of white all around me. There was no wind and the air was cool against my skin. I glanced down and noticed the yellow flowers on the tips of some of the blades of grass. The green of the grass and the bright yellow of the flowers were the only colors around me. All else was white...*

*I was wearing my wedding dress. I held it up so the hem didn't get wet from the dewy grass.*

*"Emily!"*

*I faintly heard someone calling my name in the distance. It was so far away, but a voice was carried through the air over to me in the wind. Someone was looking for me, but the voice is so faint. I can almost hear them. They sound so familiar...*

*Who's looking for me in this fog? How can I find them so that they can find me?*

*Suddenly, the voice broke through and I heard it loud and clear, echoing against the cloud around me, making it sound like my name was being yelled out under high cathedral walls and ceilings.*

*“Emily!!” I turned towards the sound of my name, hoping that whoever was searching for me would see me.*

*“I’m here!” I shouted back and waved my hand. “I’m heeere!”*

*There was no response. I halted as I fearfully listened and waited. Please speak again. Please call out for me again...*

*Then another call for me. This time the voice sounded a little closer. I recognized the voice now. It’s Zephrus. Zephrus has come for me. Just like I knew he would. I started running towards the sound of him calling for me. “I’m here! Zephrus! I’m here!”*

*I saw his shape in the mist. H was walking slowly in my direction. His face was still shrouded in the mist but I could make out the details of his suit that he wore the night of our soul joining. Dark, double-breasted suit with his family crest embroidered on the chest. He walked purposefully, every step*

*he took toward me surefooted. I saw the shape of his blondish white hair and the motion of his head as he increased his pace.*

*“Zephrus!” I called. I raced toward the shadow. As I ran, I realized that I wasn’t getting any closer to him. My legs began to ache and my feet started to slip on the wet grass. Still, I kept running. I needed to get to him. He had to see me so that I could escape.*

*Wait...he was fading. Panic washed over me. He’s leaving me...*

*“No!” I yelled. “Zephrus! I’m here! I’m right here! Wait!”*

*His figure got smaller and smaller farther away from me. “No! Come back! Come back! Zephrus!”*

I woke up with a loud gasp, covered in a cold sweat. For a second, I thought that I was back in bed at my home, then I noticed the thick and embroidered canopy of the bed and the dark wood of the posts and I remembered where I was. I sat up and realized that my hands were not bound to the bed this time. I looked at my sore wrists and I felt a little bit of



relief. He kept his word to keep me unbound. *I guess I'd better keep mine now and stay put.*

*Well...maybe not entirely.*

More clothes were left for me on the chair. I rose out of bed and went to shower. All the time in the shower, I thought about the dream. When I was done, I toweled and get dressed. It was a few hours after sundown and I was hungry. I started thinking that maybe I could get him to go to a grocery store or something. I didn't know if I could survive off hamburgers every night.

I left my room and made my way downstairs, looking for him. I strolled through the countless halls on the west wing of the house and before long, I heard what sounded like grunting in one of the rooms. I could smell the vague smell of sweat and it occurred to me that there must have been a workout room of some sort in this place. Why not? It was big enough to have an entire gym somewhere in it, I'm sure.

I got to the door and opened it, looking in curiously. The room was smaller than I expected, but it was, indeed, a gym. There was an exercise machine on one end of the room and a bench press with weights on the side of it. And on the other end was a treadmill, where Malachi was working out.

He looked magnificent. Running without a shirt on in loose sweatpants, his muscles covered in sweat. They shone under the fluorescent light like he was a marble statue. A work of art that was living and moving before me. His dark hair was soaked and stuck to parts of his face.

And there was a glow in his grey eyes. One that I was familiar with.

Vampires who hadn't eaten in a while go into lust. It was a dangerous thing to catch one in a state of lust. Full blown, there would be no guarantee of any human's safety that they encounter. There were several ways to know if a vampire was in lust, but the most common was the way their eyes glowed. At the early stages, the glow hovered in the center of the eye, glowing red making his eyes look like backlit garnets. The glow was different from when he was angry.

There was no mistaking it. Malachi was in lust. At least the beginning stages of it. I needed to leave. Right away.

But my feet remained glued to the floor.

I was hypnotized by his body. The flex of his muscular arms, the heaving of his chest and the sound of his breath. I was drawn to him at the worst possible time.

Malachi turned his head and saw me, his eyes widening slightly. I imagined that when he looked at me, his lust ramped up a little. He averted his gaze and stopped the treadmill.

“Leave,” he growled as he reached for his towel.

He was one hundred percent correct to tell me to leave. I should have done so for my own safety. Yet I still stood there, my feet completely frozen.

He wiped the sweat from his beautiful face, the glow in his eyes seeking me out. I could see his fangs peeking out from behind his lips.

“Emily,” he rasped. The sound of my name on his lips was warm and vibrating. I wanted him to say it again. “I need you to leave.”

I couldn't. I didn't want to. Was this how I was going to die? Ripped apart by a vampire in lust...because of my own lust for his body?

He took a deep breath and stalked towards me. “I said leave.”

“I know,” I whispered. My voice was soft, breathless. He wasn't even near me yet and I wanted him to touch me. He

took a step back from me. “I’m going to shower.”

I watched him go through a door leading off to an adjoining shower and for a moment, I thought the danger was over. I could leave now. His beautiful, glistening body was no longer tempting me...

But now my feet were moving and I wasn’t going towards the door to leave. I was following him.

The bathroom was small and unlike the rest of the rooms in the house, it looked like more of an afterthought than anything that measured any kind of design. There was a tile floor and tiled walls, all the shade of blue that the bottom of a pool looks like. There was a sink, with a mirror that had a light over it and a shower in the corner with the water on and plumes of steam coming from the top.

I had the familiar sensation that was reminiscent of the dream I’d just had as the steam filled the room. He didn’t turn to acknowledge my presence so I could still leave. There was nothing keeping me there.

“Malachi,” I said and I saw his silhouette look up. I heard him sigh.

“You shouldn’t be near me right now,” he warned, his voice was low and rough. “I’m...it’s dangerous.”

I bit my lip. He was right. I should leave. There was no reason for me to be there.

But then I recalled how his hands had felt on my body when he had his way with me. The way his fingers touched me, the way his tongue licked me... He was so controlled all the time...

I took off my shirt, then my pants and underwear, and I opened the shower door. He stared at me with wide, glowing eyes. “Emily,” he whispered. “Don’t...”

I kissed him. He stiffened in surprise, then melted against me, his arms wrapping themselves around my waist and pulling my body to his. Somewhere in the back of my mind I wondered what I was doing and why. It was like my desire had taken over and my mind was just on vacation.

Malachi kissed me hungrily. His tongue explored mine, his fangs gently caressed my lips, teasing me with the slight pressure inviting a bite from him. As his hands moved down to my ass, I started kissing his neck and chest. I took his arms and gently pulled them off my body, then I knelt down in front of him.

He was standing with his back to the water, shielding me from the warm splashes as I ran my tongue up the shaft of his impressive cock, my lips caressing the head. I glanced up and saw the glow in his eyes start to flicker. I was playing with fire...

I took him in my mouth, letting him slide down my throat. He moaned softly as he started moving his hips to match the rhythm of my sucking. I reached up and touched the hills of his abs, wet from the water rolling down over his shoulders and down his chest to greet my fingers.

He took one of my hands in his, pressing it against his chest as he leaned into me, grunting in pleasure as he thrust himself into my mouth. "Yeah," he growled, "Suck me with your beautiful lips..."

I looked up to see him leaning against the wall and looking down into my eyes. The glow in his eyes growing more and more brilliant by the second. He took my hand and slipped my fingers into his mouth. The warm feeling of his mouth on my fingers was exciting. I shivered in excitement.

I've never wanted anyone the way I wanted him right then. It was crazy and possibly far more meaningless than I

ever imagined this moment to be, but I wanted this to happen. I wanted him to have me.

His body was starting to tremble as he leaned into my hand, pressing it against his cheek. He started to thrust a little harder and I accommodated, letting him slide down my throat as I kept pace with him.

“I’m...I’m almost there,” he whispered. “Oh...shit...”

He exploded in my mouth, his body jerking above me. He held onto one of my hands and pressed my wrist to his mouth. The next thing I felt was a sweet sting of pain as his fangs tore into my flesh. I stopped sucking him off and gasped, the pain mixing with my arousal strangely.

I watched in the seconds that he drank my blood, amazed that I’d allowed it to go to this far. Then, just as quickly as it began, he let go of my hand, blood dripping from his mouth.

He stepped back from me as far as he could in the small space of the shower. The glow in his eyes dimmed considerably, but the lust was still there buried deep within them.

I stayed on the floor of the shower, holding my bloody wrist to my chest as he covered his mouth for a moment.

“You’re a virgin,” he whispered.

I felt my face flush. *What the hell was I thinking?*

“Malachi—”

“Get up and get dressed,” he ordered without looking at me. “I’ll get a towel to stop the bleeding.”

He turned off the shower and got out. He grabbed two towels, covering himself up with one and tossing me the other. I wrapped the towel around myself and followed him out as he took a hand towel and wrapped it around my wrist carefully.

“Never again,” he said. His eyes were on my wrist. “Do you understand, Emily? I could have hurt you tonight. This cannot *ever* happen again.”

If I didn’t know better, I’d have thought that he was saying it because he cared. But I knew that he was only saying this to me because I needed to be returned to my family untouched for them to get what they wanted.

Just the same, I wanted to pretend that he was saying it because he cared about hurting me.



We got dressed and went to the kitchen where there was a first aid kit waiting for me. He bandaged my wrist in silence. He had nothing to say and neither did I. I don't know why I wanted to be with him. Maybe the sensations from him pleasuring me with his mouth the other night were still with me.

But he was right. What just happened was a mistake. And it could never happen again.

When he was done bandaging me up, Malachi said, "I'm going out to get food for you. Is there anything you want in particular?"

That was a strange request. Since when did he care what I wanted? I wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth, though.

"Could I make you a list?" I asked. "I'd like to cook for myself."

He looked up at me for a moment, seeming to think about it, then he nodded. "All right."

## Chapter Eight

### **Malachi**

As I sat in the study with my father, I couldn't seem to focus on what he was saying.

I was thinking of Emily. More accurately, I was thinking of the taste of her blood.

A virgin's blood was like one of the most intoxicating elixir to a vampire. It was addictive, some of the vampires with lack of control of their cravings have even gone mad and spent the rest of their days seeking only virgins to get their fix.

I could never say whether or not Emily's blood could do that to me, but, oh, how I wanted to find out.

“Are you listening to me?”

My father's voice cut through my reveries. He was looking at me with a scowl on his face when I turned my attention to him.

“Sorry,” I said. “I was in my own thoughts.”

“Clearly,” he said. “When was the last time you fed?”

It has been days since I fed thanks to the whole venture of planning and kidnapping Emily, I lost track of time. Father noticed my hesitation and shook his head sorely.

“You look terrible,” he regarded me. “And you’re lacking concentration. I need you sharp more than ever for these negotiations.”

“I’m sorry, Father,” was all I could say. He huffed, standing up and walking over to the window, looking out of it listlessly.

“I’m arranging for us to meet,” he said without looking at me. “I need for you to be alert for this meeting. There’s no telling what they may try if they see their daughter in the flesh. I suggest you arrange a vessel. Tonight.”

“I’m fine, Father,” I said. “I just need a little rest—”

He turned to me, his eyes glowing red with warning. “What happens if you go into Lust before we can negotiate for the blade?”

“I will not go into Lust. I have myself under control.” I insisted, irked at him,

“If the girl is harmed, we will be at war. You do understand that don’t you?”

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. “If it will ease your mind, I will arrange a vessel...but I assure you, Father. I am fine. I will not let you down.”

He studied me for a long moment. “If you show up to these negotiations without your wits about you, I will have you escorted out. Do you understand me?”

I nodded tersely, my jaw clenched. With that, he left and I was left with the task of feeding myself. I had reserves. I’d prepared for the eventuality that I would need to drink blood while I was in isolation with Emily. But Father didn’t suggest I dip into my reserves. He instructed that I arrange a vessel. How bad had I appeared to him that he should insist that I risk revealing my location to a vessel?

I called one of the family’s vessel’s that I’d used before and I knew was discreet.

“I can be there in an hour,” Mary said after I gave her the address.

“Good. And tell no one where you’re going.” I ordered.

“Of course.”

An hour later, the Mary arrived, wearing a little less than a spaghetti-strapped gown under her coat. As I slipped her coat

from her smooth shoulders, my mouth started watering. I was hungrier than I thought I was.

“Where do you want me?” Mary asked, raising her finely shaped eyebrows at me.

“In the parlor,” I directed her. I watched as she walked the halls ahead of me until we reached the parlor. I closed the parlor doors and she turned to me expectantly.

“Would you like me to take a drink before we begin?” she suggested. “To sweeten the taste?”

“Unnecessary,” I replied. She nodded and slid the straps from her shoulders, letting the dress fall to the floor.

And that was when it dawned on me the true reason Father wanted me to get a Vessel. I might’ve been unfocused out of hunger...or another need. He wasn’t wrong in either regard. I took in Mary’s athletic frame and perky breasts for a moment, trying to get myself excited for her. It was starting to work. Something in me started to stir a little.

I walked up to her and took her hair in my hands, pulling her neck back. She bore her neck to me and whimpered softly. *Yes, this will do*, I thought.

I lowered my lips to her neck and pierced the skin with my fangs. Her blood flowed into me, warm and sweet...and...

I couldn't place it. The taste of blood usually filled my hunger and the feel of her soft skin inviting me usually took care of my wantonness...but something wasn't right this time. There was something missing in this experience. As I drank, I closed my eyes, trying to focus on her heartbeat and her scent but it was all wrong somehow.

And then, Emily's face popped into my mind. The feel of her hand intertwined with mine, the scent of her hair...and the taste of her virgin blood...

I released the Vessel, stepping away from her like I had been scorched and wiped my mouth as if it would rid me of her taste. This was wrong. I couldn't have dreamed of any words that might describe it, but it was all wrong and I didn't want any more of her.

Mary stumbled back from me, her hand going to her neck instinctively. She looked at me wide-eyed and shaking.

"Is...is something wrong? Did I do something?"

"No," I said roughly. I couldn't look at her. I didn't want to look at her. Seeing her only made me yearn for Emily, who I

couldn't have. The very thing that I was forbidden against and I wasn't even sure I wanted in the first place.

“Get dressed,” I told her.

She paused as if trying to decide if I was serious. “You’ll still pay me—”

“Of course,” I said. “Get dressed and leave immediately.”

Mary nodded, then grabbed her dress and slipped it back on. I reached into my wallet and pulled out several hundreds and handed it to her. She took it, then left without a word to me.

I sat down in the parlor, still hungry. My body was longing for Emily. I rubbed my forehead and took in a deep breath. I was just going to have to control myself until after we negotiated for the blade.

This should be over soon, I reasoned. After all, what kind of parent wouldn't trade an artifact for their own child?

## Chapter Nine

### Emily

I wasn't snooping. In fact, I just so happened to be coming from the library when I saw her in the hall.

Beautiful, blonde and pale, she rushed down the hall in a shimmering gown, rushing to put on her coat as she moved to the door...and blood on her neck.

She was a Vessel. Young and beautiful humans who made money selling their blood and their bodies to hungry and horny vampires. I shouldn't have been surprised at all to see her. After all, Malachi had to eat. And if he wanted more than that, he certainly had a right to it.

And yet my chest tightened with something bitter. I stood in the doorway of the library, book to my chest as she rushed past me without even seeing me and out into the foyer. She didn't look especially elated the way that Vessels tended to once they had an encounter with a vampire, but it was clear that she'd spent some time with Malachi. I hated to admit it, but I was jealous.



What a strange feeling being jealous of my captor's affairs. I didn't really understand it. Maybe this was all an emotional response to my giving him head in the shower. It was an intimate act...especially since...

I looked down at the bite marks on my wrist. The ache in them reminded me of the sound of his voice as he moaned in pleasure and the twist of sweet pain when his teeth penetrated my skin. My sexual pursuit of him started as a way to gain his trust, now it was turning into something else. Something that maybe I wanted to.

Perhaps I was suffering Stockholm syndrome. I didn't want him to have anyone but me.

After the girl was gone, I took my book and made my way back up to my room. I got as far as the stairs before I saw Malachi coming out of the parlor, his skin looking a little pallid and clammy. Maybe something had gone wrong with the Vessel and now he was ill...

"Are you all right?" I asked. He looked up at me with surprise, as if he didn't realize I was there.

"I'm fine," he replied, looking away from me and continuing forward to the study.

I scoffed as I turned to walk up the stairs. “You should be,” I muttered under my breath.

“I should be what?”

I froze. Damn Vampiric hearing. As many times as muttering under my breath got me in trouble as a child, you’d think I’d have learned by now.

“Nothing,” I responded and continued on my way. I felt his eyes on me as I walked away. I paused when he spoke again.

“If you have something to say to me, say it.”

“What would I have to say? I’m just your hostage. What do I care how you spend your evenings?”

He narrowed his eyes at me, then a smile turned up on one side of his mouth. “Really, Emily? Jealousy is not a flattering look on you.”

I scoffed, “Don’t be ridiculous. I’m not jealous. I’d have to care to be jealous.”

“And yet here you are. Green is a terrible color on you. I’ll tell you what. After this whole thing is over, you can come back to me and remain here as my Vessel. That way you’ll never have to worry about me drinking from anyone else.”

I felt my face start to flush. “You are *so* full of yourself. What is it about you vampires that makes you think you’re God’s gift to women?”

He crossed his arms. “Perhaps it’s because we are. But how would you know? You’ve never known one intimately. Other than me, I suppose.”

Now I was really flushing. How *dare* he? I walked back down the stairs, facing up to him. “You’re a monster. I would *never* give myself to anyone as vile as you.”

“You’d never give yourself, but you’d suck my cock?”  
He cocked his eye brow.

I slapped him. His head snapped back to me, eyes blazing red at me. He grabbed me by the shoulders, pulling me to him, snarling at me. I gasped, fear seizing me for a moment. But then something else fired up inside of me. Heart pounding, I looked him in his eyes and snarled back at him. “Careful. You don’t want to hurt your prize.”

The fire in his eyes dimmed and he let me go with a push. I stumbled back as he walked away from me. “Keep your distance from me,” he growled as he walked away. “Next time I won’t be so gentle with you.”

I watched him walk away to the study, slamming the door behind him. I stood in the hallway with nothing but the sound of my shaky breath...

*What did I just do?* Tears started burning in my eyes as a rush of emotions came over me. I stepped back, then turned and ran to the back of the house, through the kitchen and out the back door.

Outside, there were woods all around the house. I had the maddening thought that I needed to run. Run for my own safety. The crazy thing was that I knew that if I left well enough alone, Malachi would most likely leave me be. If I kept to myself, he might not be tempted to harm me. But that's not what I was doing. I was pushing his limits. Tempting him in the worst ways.

I ran. It started as a jog, then before I knew it I was running full speed into the woods. I ran through the trees until I saw something shiny in the distance. I kept running towards it, running until I was smack dab at a fence around the property.

Of course there was a fence. I was a fool to think that there wouldn't be some kind of enclosure. I stopped at the

fence, grabbing hold of it as I tried to catch my breath. This was insane. All of this was completely insane.

*Emily...Emily, is that you?*

I heard a voice and perked up, looking around. I didn't see anyone in the darkness. "Hello?" I called out.

And then I saw something like a light walking towards me on the other side of the fence. I stood and watched as it got closer.

Walking to me in a white suit, his pale skin and blonde hair nearly glowing in the darkness. It was Zephrus. The second he saw me, he started running towards me.

As he came up to the gate, he smiled, overjoyed to see me. "Thank heaven," he said. "I was so worried about you."

"How did you find me? Oh, Zephrus. You've gotta get me out of here."

"I'm trying. Are you safe?"

"Yes. Well. Relatively, yes." I looked around him. I didn't see anyone else in the darkness with him. "Are you alone? Is Father with you?"

"Listen to me. You must keep yourself pure while you're here. In every way possible. Malachi and his family

mean to steal a great deal more from you than you realize.”

I frowned at him. What did that mean? Did it have something to do with the blade they’d been talking about?

“I...I don’t understand. Zephrus, what’s going on?”

He didn’t look right. Something about this wasn’t right. I went to reach out to him, but suddenly a gust of wind swept around me and I was grabbed from behind.

It was Malachi, pulling me back from the fence. I struggled against him and he set me down, away from the fence. “What do you think you’re doing?”

The deal. Right. I’d told him I wouldn’t try to escape. I looked over his shoulder, only to see darkness. Zephrus was gone.

“I needed some air,” I said.

He scowled. “All the way out here?”

“Please,” I said. “If I’d wanted to escape, I wouldn’t have tried this way. I’d have just walked out the front door.”

His piercing eyes searched my face, looking as if he deciding to believe me or not.

“Come on,” he finally said, taking my hand. “It’ll be dawn soon.”

I let him lead me back to the house, but I couldn't help looking over my shoulder for Zephrus.

## Chapter Ten

### **Malachi**

I received word of the negotiation a few days later. We would be meeting with the Orions on neutral ground, which for us, was at a cemetery in the center of Stonegarde city.

Cemeteries were considered sacred ground for vampires. To battle in a cemetery was to disgrace the ancestors that came before us. After all, all of the original vampire line began as human at one point in time though it was over a thousand years ago.

We met with the Orions at Ashen Oak Catacombs, the oldest cemetery in the city. A graveyard that spanned about several acres and the held the bodies of the founders of the city. It was a smart place to do business as volatile as what we were engaging in.

In the center of the cemetery was a mausoleum and in the center of that was a room where we could meet without interruption. A table was set up within the marble walls and floors, among the dead sleeping in the walls around us. My father and I, Flip and Emily in bindings arrived first.



After her attempt to escape a few nights back, I'd restricted her to her room, but kept the bindings off her. She wasn't too pleased with that arrangement. She'd taken to reading the books from the library. To satiate her, I brought books to her room instead.

Tonight, however, there would be no discussion about the bindings. We needed to show her family that we meant business and to do that, she needed to be bound. With rope tied around her wrists, she walked next to me into the room. Her eyes were as large as saucers as we entered the room.

"They're just dead bodies," I whispered to her. "And not the ones you should be worried about tonight."

"No shit," she muttered. "It doesn't make me feel any better, though."

We took our place at the table and a few minutes later, Emily's parents arrived with the fiancé in tow. As my father greeted her parents, looked over at Zephrus distrustfully. *This* was the man she was planning to marry. I'd like to say he was ugly and deformed but that wasn't the case. He was tall, muscular with pale blonde hair and attractive face.

It's funny. It wasn't like I'd never seen him before. He was there the day that I took Emily from the temple. Yet as I

looked at him across the table, he appeared hideous to me despite his handsome looks. My jealous rose its ugly face at the thought of Emily marrying him or any other man.

“I’ll cut to the quick,” my father said. “You have something we want and we have something you want.”

Emily’s father sighed and shook his head. “Maximilian,” he said, “I cannot believe this is about the Silver Blade. You know I do not possess it.”

“If you’re going to start off with lying,” Father retorted, “Then these negotiations are over. I’m sure you don’t want that.”

Emily’s mother hissed in anger and her father took her hand to soothe her. “This is ridiculous. Holding our daughter for ransom over an item that everyone knows has been lost for centuries—”

“Your family has grown and flourished since the death of your first wife,” Father cut him off. “As has your wealth and opportunity. While my family struggles just to find food to eat. Do you really expect me to believe that you do not have the blade in your possession?”

“I cannot help it that I have handled my affairs more correctly than you.”

“You watch your tongue,” I hissed at him. “Your daughter cannot afford for you to be flippant about this matter.”

“You will give us the blade,” Father interjected angrily. “Or I will send you back your daughter in pieces.”

It’s funny how my father remarked to me about controlling myself. After that comment, the negotiations disintegrated in an instant. The two men were arguing openly across the table. Flip and I tensed, ready for things to escalate into battle. Finally, it was Zephrus that spoke up, his voice calm and steady.

“Gentlemen,” he said. “Let’s not let our emotions run wild and rule the day. We should consider all points carefully if we’re going to negotiate properly.”

At that moment, I felt my heart started to quicken. My sense of smell suddenly heightened, I realized my body was starting to react to my lack of blood intake. The light in the room got brighter and I could hear Emily’s heartbeat...and smell her sweet scent.

It was the moment that my father had feared might happen. I was getting close to going into Lust.

It had never happened to me before. I've never been in a position where I would skip a meal. But as I sat there, I thought about how I'd put off drinking blood for one reason or another. How I'd chased a vessel out of my home...

And now all I could think of was Emily. I stiffened, clenching my fists under the table while Zephrus went on.

"If I can propose a compromise," he suggested. "An investigation by a neutral source. Someone from my family, perhaps."

Father scoffed. "That is hardly neutral. You have as much of a stake in this as they do."

"That is true," Zephrus nodded. "I want Emily's safe return as much as her parents do, but we do not have nor do we desire this trinket you speak of. As a family, we are already established. If we investigate and find the Orion do have the blade, then we will see that it is turned over to you, in exchange for Emily's freedom."

"And if it is not found?" I questioned.

“Then your claims are unfounded,” said Zephrus. “And you are holding dear Emily unjustly. If you continue to keep her, you will start a war between our families.”

I looked to Father, checking to see if he caught the way Zephrus phrased it. *Our* families. Not just the Orions. We would have to contend with the Steeltons as well.

“All right,” my father agreed. “That is acceptable. For now. But if I find that you are deceiving us—”

“I am aware of what will happen if any deception is found,” said Zephrus coolly. He turned his eyes to Emily. “I assure you, I only want what’s best for Emily.”

If my mind wasn’t so addled I’d have scoffed. He appeared to actually care for her.

“It’s settled then. Do your investigation. You have a week to find my blade.”

And that was it and thank the gods. As we exited the mausoleum, Flip sidled up to me once we were outside in the cool air. “Are you all right? You don’t look so good.”

“I’m fine,” I lied. “I just need to rest.”

I said no more about it and he didn’t press me. On the way home, I found himself biting into my own lip to take my

mind off my hunger. Tiny trickles of blood dripped pathetically in my mouth. If I didn't feed properly and soon, there was no telling what would happen to me.

The first thing I did when I got arrived home was separate myself from Emily. I sequestered myself in my room, closing and locking the door in hopes of shutting out her scent. It wasn't working, however. I paced the floor, looking to my bed, knowing it would give me no relief when I lay down. I had to do something and fast.

## Chapter Eleven

### **Emily**

The ‘negotiations’ were over and I was glad for it. Thank goodness for Zephrus, or I think I might’ve been torn apart in front of my parents just to prove a point. Malachi’s father was not playing around with them about that blade.

At some point, Malachi started to look unwell. His skin took on a strange, gray coloring and he started to walk with a little bit of a hunch as if he might fall over any second. When we got back to the house, he went directly to his room and shut the door, leaving me in the foyer, hands still bound.

I had never seen Lust in action, but I knew enough about it to keep a wide berth from a vampire that was in the midst of it. Vampires in Lust had very little control over themselves. In history, there are legends of vampires who had killed off entire families in the midst of blind bloodlust.

I most certainly didn’t want to bother him...but somebody had to take the rope off.

And...and I never would have admitted it then, I was worried about him. For my own sake and for his.

I walked to his bedroom door and paused, debating if I could leave him well enough alone. Finally, I decided that I couldn't and I started to knock. "Go away," I heard from the other side. Of course, he already knew I was there. He could probably smell me through the door.

"Malachi...?" I said meekly. "Are you all right?"

"I said go away." Malachi growled, trying to scare me off. But he didn't sound like that all to me. He sounded desperate. Hungry. I bit my lip and tried again.

"Let me help you," I insisted. "Please."

"You can't help me. Please, Emily. Leave me alone before you get hurt."

I took a deep breath and grounded myself to the floor. "I'm not leaving. So either let me in or deal with my scent right outside this door all night."

Malachi didn't say anything for a long time and I thought I was going to have to come up with something else. Finally, the door opened.

Malachi wasn't looking at me as he stepped aside, letting me in. My heart was pounding in my ears, praying that he didn't completely go off the rails and attack me. He didn't,



though. He stood by the closed door and looked at me, sweat starting to stick his dark hair down to his face.

“You shouldn’t be near me right now,” Malachi muttered.

“I know,” I said, then I lifted my bound wrists to him. “I’m a little tied up, though.”

His eyes slid down to the ropes, “Of course.” He then walked over to me and started untying the rope.

Standing this close to me, I could feel his breath on my face, quickening the longer he stood this close to me. Once the ropes were off, he remained standing in my space, looking at me longingly.

“I haven’t fed,” he rasped. “And I...really need to.”

I swallowed hard. “You...you have reserves, don’t you?”

“It may be too late for the reserves,” he responded. “I only have so much...and I am so hungry.”

“Okay,” I nodded. “Take from me, then.”

His eyes widened slightly, then he turned away from me. He walked across the room, distancing himself from me.

“No,” he shook his head, looking torn. “If I damage you—”

“Just don’t take too much,” I told him hesitantly. “Take what you need without...without going too far.”

His glowing eyes pierced me as he chuckled darkly.

“You have no idea how hard that will be.”

I started unbuttoning my blouse.

“What are you doing?”

“Making it easier for you,” I replied. I took off my shirt and stood there in my bra and skirt. “Take what you need from me.”

“You...you would give yourself over to me so freely?”

“Just what you need,” I repeated. My voice was trembling from both fear and excitement. “No more than that. That way, you won’t break the deal.”

He stalked up to me, his eyes looking over my skin before he reached out and touched my shoulders, his fingers sliding slowly down until he reached my arms.

I backed away from him, sitting on his bed. He looked down at me for a moment as if still trying to decide. After a few seconds, he sat next to me, his eyes darkening with desire as he looked at my neck longingly.

“I won’t take more than I need,” he whispered to me, though it sounded like he was trying to convince himself. “I will not harm you...”

He moved my hair out of the way, then his hand slid down my back and leaned into me. I took in a sharp breath when I felt his mouth grazed my neck. The feel of his lips against my skin was like electricity flowing through him and into me. My toes curled in my shoes as I braced myself for his bite.

Malachi pulled away.

“What’s wrong?” I looked at him.

“Not here,” he whispered. “If anyone else sees...lie down and lift your skirt.”

I hesitated for a second, but I obeyed him and lay back on the bed, lifting my skirt. Malachi leaned in and kissed my thighs gently, then ran his tongue along the inside, coming dangerously close to my center.

“This should be pleasurable for you,” he breathed. “You should at least have that if you mean to do this for me.”

I licked my lips in anticipation. Malachi slid his hand up my thigh, his fingers pulling the fabric of my panties to one side.

Excitement filled me as his fingers slid between the folds of my sex, caressing me slowly and methodically. I moaned softly as he kissed my inner thigh and at the same time rubbed my clit, moving his fingers with just the right pressure and speed.

As my excitement increased, I started moving my hips with him. Malachi gripped my thigh, his nails digging into my skin. The sweet pain mixed with the pleasure sent bolts of pleasure through my body. I moaned, throwing my head back as his fingers worked magic on me.

“Please,” I whimpered as the sensation heightened and my body wound up with pleasure.

“That’s it darling,” Malachi growled against my sex. My eyes squeezed shut as I moaned his name. And then the moment came and my body’s reaction was like nothing I’d ever experienced. I felt his fangs pierce my skin and I gasped, the sharp pain shooting through me and intensifying my pleasure.

Malachi held tight to me, drinking from my inner thigh, his fingers sliding rapidly against me. My climax came like a volcano, rising up from somewhere I never thought existed. My body shook, but he held me, drinking from me as I exploded from the inside out.

And then he let me go, stumbling away from me on the bed. I lay there, my body still vibrating as he looked down at me, blood on his mouth and fire in his eyes. He'd stopped himself...but he was looking at me in a way I'd never seen before. He wanted more from me and God help me, if he'd come for me then I'd have given myself without hesitation.

Malachi tore his eyes away from me, however, turning to the wall and, with a guttural yell, drove his fist into it, breaking the wood into a shower of splinters.

I jumped and sat up as he stepped back from the wall, holding his bloodied fist in his hand. The glow in his eyes dimmed and his skin turned to its normal shade of pale. He wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "Thank you," he said softly.

## Chapter Twelve

### **Emily**

A few evenings after I gave my blood to Malachi, things seemed to go back to whatever passes for normal in a hostage situation. After Malachi bandaged the wound on my thigh (an act that turned out to be just as intimate as what led to the injury in the first place), he let me be, keeping a wide berth from me for the next few days.

He didn't have to explain why. I was a virgin, which meant my blood was like vampire crack. I admired him for being able to restrain himself during the entire thing. He could have easily killed me with very little effort, but he kept his word and did what he could not only to keep me safe but to make it pleasurable as well.

I could have chalked that up to him trying to keep to the deal he made with his father...but I couldn't help but feel there was something more to it. It just seemed like he genuinely didn't want any harm to come to me.

Left to my own devices, I began to think about Zephrus again and how he'd appeared at the gate around the property,

then disappeared without a trace. The more I thought about it, the more questions I started to ask myself. Like why didn't he try to rescue me then? Or why didn't he tell my parents where I was instead of letting them negotiate with Malachi's father? Was it part of a bigger plan somehow?

I spent some time in Malachi's library, which seemed to have more books than I believe even Malachi could have read. The library itself was a strange place to me. Like, it was obvious this house wasn't his primary residence, yet here was a whole library full of ancient books about vampire lore and mythology, among other things.

I started to think about how Zephrus had just appeared and disappeared and it reminded me of old stories I'd been told as a child about vampires that could wield magic. I always thought they were just vampire fairy tales. Things told to children to keep them in line. But now, I wondered...

It took me about half a day before I found a history book detailing different types of vampire nests through the ages. Royal vampires, underground vampires, bard vampires...

And then I ran across a name that I knew I'd heard before. The page was titled in big, bold letters, *Anima Munda*. Under her name was a drawing of a vampire, tall and thin and

as pale as a ghost. White hair and glowing white eyes. The drawing depicted the vampire holding a ball of light in his hand.

*The Amina Munda were a race of vampires proficient in the ways of magic. During the Relic Wars, they were considered extremely dangerous and were often on the front lines of battle. After the wars, many of the Amina Munda were found to be corrupt, seeking power over the remaining vampire clans and nests looking to rebuild their empires. It was determined that they were too dangerous to survive and vampiric laws were passed to hunt them down and wipe them out. Today, none exist within the vampire world.*

I stopped at the last sentence, frowning. *None exist?* They're...extinct? I chewed on my nail, pondering the possibilities of an extinct clan of magic-wielding vampires and what kind of creatures they might be now. I read on.

*The struggle with the Anima was the pervasive belief that vampires and humans cannot coexist. Many Anima clans believed that humans were only useful as food and slaves to vampires and should not be allowed to exist on an equal plane. This caused strife with many vampire clans who wished to build peaceful relations with the human world...*



“Emily?”

I looked up to see Malachi standing at the door of the library. He was looking at me with a furrowed brow, questioning my presence without saying a word. I sat up as he walked into the room.

“Hey,” I greeted and remarked. “You’re back early.”

Malachi had gone out that evening to meet with his father to discuss what was next should the Steeltons not find the Silver Blade. I had assumed the meeting would last for hours thus I wasn’t expecting him back until near dawn.

“So I am,” was all he said in explanation. “What are you studying?”

“I was just...reading up on some Vampire history,” I replied. He turned his head to look at the page I was looking at.

“You’re reading about the Anima Munda. Interesting.”

“You know about them?”

He shrugged a little and sat down on the corner of the desk I was sitting at. “Only what my father told me. He fought in the Relic Wars. Commanded an army for the Lord of this realm, actually. According to him, the Anima were

instrumental in the battles. Very dangerous and skilled warriors.”

I bit my lip thoughtfully. “It says here they died out.”

“That’s a polite way of characterizing it,” Malachi responded. “It was more of a genocide than anything else. After the wars, they started taking a stance against humanity, which was against the agenda of all the Lords of the Realms. That stance ended up putting targets on their backs and…” He dragged his finger across his neck. “No more Anima.”

I was looking down at the words on the page, wondering. Malachi’s frown deepened. “What is it?”

I paused. It was crazy what I was thinking. Part of me thought that I should let it go. Yet…

“What do you know about other vampire families?” I asked, closing the book. He crossed his arms and took in a deep breath.

“About as much as any other vampire would, I suppose. Why do you ask?”

“Do you know anything about Zephrus’ family?”

He cocked his head at me, a little smile on his face.

“This really is an arranged marriage, isn’t it? You don’t know

anything about your betrothed?”

“Not very much,” she replied. “Since I’ve got the time now, I should find *something* out about them, don’t you think?”

He sighed and said, “I know his family has only been in the city for a few hundred years. They’ve made some big moves to establish themselves.” His eyes examined me, reading my expressions. “You’re still planning on marrying him?”

“It’s important to my family,” I responded, looking back down at my book. “They need the alliance. What better way to get that than for me to marry the heir?”

He nodded. “Valid point.”

I started thinking about my wedding day and how my mother fussed over the dress I’d been wearing. The dress that she wore on her wedding day. All these days, I’d been away from her. I wondered how she was coping with this situation.

“You miss your family,” he said out of the blue, “don’t you?”

“Of course I do. I know my mother must be worried sick about me. She’d been looking forward to my wedding day...”

I trailed off. There was no point in reminiscing. I was stuck there and there wasn't much anyone could do about it.

“I suppose,” he said, “it wouldn't hurt for you to see your mother for an hour or so.”

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I looked up at him in surprise and I noticed a small smile on his face. “A few days ago, I had faced the reality that I should pay more attention to myself...else I might lose control and destroy everything I'm working for. Think of this as my way of thanking you for offering yourself to me. That was very risky. Not many would have dared.”

I smiled at him. It felt more like I should have been thanking him...

## Chapter Thirteen

### **Malachi**

Arranging a meeting between Emily and her mother without my father knowing about it was tricky. The first thing I needed to do was find a place outside of our territory. There was a park at the edge of the city that sat right on neutral land. It was a place that I knew few, if any, vampires ever frequented.

Just the same, I arranged for Flip to accompany us on the day of, just to have extra eyes out. I found a spot that was somewhat secluded on the far corner of the park. A bench where Emily could wait for her mother's arrival. The deal was that Lily Orion was to come alone. If I sensed any other vampires, then we would leave and she would not get another chance to see her daughter.

This was risky. Father would be incensed with it if he knew. As we stood off to the side, watching Emily as she sat down at the bench, Flip voiced the obvious. "I can't believe we're doing this. If your father learns of this he—"

"He will only find out if someone tells him," I responded. "And right now, there is no need."

Flip sighed. “What is the purpose of this, anyway? You do not need to gain the girl’s trust.”

“No, but it would certainly help things if I did.”

Flip just shook his head in disapproval but said nothing more about it. He wouldn’t say anything to Father. Mostly because he would be in as much trouble as I would be for going along with this plan.

Emily was only out there for a few minutes before her mother arrived. Upon seeing her, Emily stood and her mother rushed to her, hugging her warmly.

“Thank heavens,” her mother said as she held her. “We have been so worried. Are you all right? Are you being treated well?”

“I’m fine, Mother,” Emily responded. “I’m being treated very well.”

She nodded. They sat down on the bench. “This has been such an ordeal. Your father has been beside himself since you were taken. I’m confident this will all be over soon, though. I’m confident this investigation will turn up nothing and you’ll be freed.”

Emily chuckled. "I can't believe all this is over some ancient knife. Are you sure that Father doesn't have it? Maximillian seems pretty convinced that he possesses it."

"The Silver Blade was lost in the Relic wars," her mother reassured. "It hasn't been seen in centuries. I'm certain it's been long destroyed."

"Why is it so valuable? Do you know?"

She shook her head. "Not really. I know that the clans couldn't decide on who should be its holder. I was always told that it was a very powerful item to any who possessed it and that's why it was destroyed, but that's all I really know. It existed before my time."

Emily seemed to be thinking silently. Her mother leaned in and asked her, "Don't be concerned, my dear. I assure you. There is nothing to find."

She smiled gently and patted her mother on the hand. "It's good to see you, Mother."

I stood in the shadows and listened as the two of them talked. Most of it sounded like they were catching up. Chatting about the affairs of the vampires in their circles. Mild gossip, it sounded like.

Emily then asked about Zephrus' family, just as she'd asked me. Her mother told her a little more than I had. Only that he'd come from a very old family that had been around since before even my father's birth. I thought that was strange. Ancient family lines didn't just blow into town without anyone knowing about it. It was the kind of thing that was big news within Vampire society.

I allowed the meeting for an hour. And when that hour was up, Emily said goodbye to her mother with a long hug and a final reassurance from Lily that she would be coming home soon.

In the car on the way back, Emily was silent, watching the world go by from her place in the back seat. I'd noticed that she had been deep in thought about Zephrus in particular. Did she miss him? It had me questioning once more if their arrangement was truly just for political gain.

"You're quiet," I said and she glanced up at me through the rearview mirror.

"Just thinking."

Flip looked over at me. "Quiet is best in these situations."



I watched as her as she shifted in her seat. “Why does your father want the Silver Blade so badly? For power?”

“He wants it because it was stolen from him in the first place,” I responded. “It’s that simple.”

“But...it holds some kind of power. Mother said—”

“I heard what she said.”

She paused. “So...is it true? Does it hold some kind of power?”

Flip chuckled, which made her scowl. “What’s so funny?”

“Little girl,” he said, “The Silver Blade...how do I explain this? There are vampires who believe that by merely possessing it, that it will bring great power and luck to a family. Maximillian is among the vampires who believe that myth.”

“And...you don’t question him?”

That made me laugh. “Of course not,” I said. “He is the head of my family. Does anyone question your father?”

That silenced her for a moment, the point being valid. “Wait,” she said. “It must have some real power, though. If it was destroyed—”

“It was supposedly destroyed to keep it from the Anima,” I told her. “It was said that the Anima could perform rituals with it that could give them unlimited power. Make them invulnerable to death and give them unlimited strength. That sort of thing.”

She was biting her lip again, a sure sign I was coming to know meant that she was trying to put something together.

“What if the Anima still existed?”

“Be happy that they don’t,” said Flip.

## Chapter Fourteen

### **Emily**

After talking to my mother, I felt like I had pieces to a puzzle...but there was still something major that I was still missing. The worst thing about that was either no one knew anything, or those that knew something just brushed me off.

Like Malachi's friend Flip. He seemed to be entirely put off by the very idea that there was Anima Munda that still existed. Was it really that far-fetched?

When we returned, dawn was still several hours off, but it was close enough for me to start to feel it. Being raised by vampires, I had no sense of walking around in the daylight, even though I could if I so desired. I was exhausted. Maybe more mentally than anything else. So I retired to my room while Malachi and Flip went off to chat about whatever was next in this grand plan.

When I got to my room, I started to drift off as soon as my head hit the pillow. Even with everything still spinning around in my mind, I was too tired to really fight sleep as it started to come.

I didn't know how long I slept before I was awakened by the sound of my name and a hand gently touching my hair. In the in-between of sleep and wakefulness, I believed I was in my own bed and my mother's touch waking me from my slumber the way she did when I was a child.

When I opened my eyes, however, I was duly reminded that I was still in Malachi's house in one of his many bedrooms. And I wasn't alone.

As soon as I saw Zephrus' face close to mine, I jumped, recoiling instinctively. He smiled at me gently, "Whoa, whoa. It's all right. It's just me."

Seeing him there sitting on the bed, looking at me as though everything that had happened was just a dream, was surreal. I rubbed my eyes to make sure I was awake.

"Zephrus," I said. "What...how are you here right now?"

"I needed to see you tonight...so I'm here."

"But Malachi—"

"He cannot sense me right now. What you're seeing is a projection. I'm not really in the room with you."

Still confused, I stammered, "How are you doing this?"

“I’ve learned a few things in my five-hundred years,” he replied. “You didn’t really think that a fledgling like Malachi could ever hide you from me, did you?”

It was magic. He’d performed magic. Before I could question him further, he said, “I’m going to get you out of here tomorrow evening.”

I stiffened. “You are? So...so, the Silver Blade—?”

“It exists...and your father possesses it.”

My heart sank slightly. I’d hoped that it wasn’t true. That somehow all this was a misunderstanding and my father hadn’t been hiding the one thing that could have easily set me free a long time ago. I turned away from him, feeling nauseous all of a sudden.

“Why didn’t he just give it to Malachi’s father? I...I don’t understand.”

“He does not trust Malachi’s family,” said Zephrus. “He believes that you will be killed as soon as Maximillian receives the blade.”

My heart sank further. I couldn’t believe that Malachi’s father could be so cruel...all over a stupid knife. “I...I can talk

to Malachi,” I said. “I mean, since I’ve been here, he’s treated me well. I’m sure I could persuade him—”

“No, that won’t be necessary,” Zephrus refused. “A plan is already in motion to bring you home. I only need you to do one thing. When you rise, make sure you are alone in the house. If your relationship is good with Malachi, ask him to leave you alone. It will make our approach simpler.”

Home. I was going home. Still, I couldn’t help wondering about the blade. Why my father has it? Wouldn’t I always be in danger?

“What about the blade?” I asked Zephrus. “Father...he’s keeping it?”

“No,” Zephrus reassured. “Looking at all the havoc it’s caused, he’s decided to have it destroyed. I convinced him to let it go once and for all. Once you are returned, he will make a public spectacle of its destruction...for your safety. This will never happen again.”

Zephrus reached out to touch me, then drew back, a slight sadness coming over his face. “I wish I could touch you again. Hopefully, I will be able to soon.”

I smiled weakly. For everything that had happened to me while I'd been under Malachi's care, I was glad that by tomorrow night, I'd be resting in my own bed. I didn't know what was going to happen to Malachi or if I'd ever see him again, but things were better this way. I belonged with Zephrus. Whatever feelings I had for Malachi were unimportant.

I wanted to say more to Zephrus, but at that moment, my door opened and he vanished. Malachi stood at the threshold, looking at me with suspicious eyes.

"Yes?" I asked him.

"It sounded like you were talking to someone in here," he stepped inside. "I just came in to check on you."

"I'm fine," I said. "I was just about to go to sleep."

He nodded, then, putting his hands in his pockets, looking sheepishly. "I...was thinking about dinner tomorrow. I know that food has been...well, inadequate since you've been here."

It had been. Since my initial request, Malachi kept the kitchen stocked with food, but since I'd never told him specifics, the food was all random things. Processed and

already prepared foods for the most part. It was fine. I wasn't starving by any stretch, but I missed having fresh fruits and vegetables at my disposal.

“I was thinking that if you'd like to tell me what it was that you wanted, then I could get it for you.”

I could have laughed. This strong, confident vampire was standing at my door with his hands in his pockets like a nervous teenager. It was charming.

“I can give you a list tomorrow evening,” I said.

He nodded. “All right. Sleep well.”

He left and a warm feeling bloomed in my chest. Malachi was definitely something unexpected. That feeling dipped into sadness as soon as I remembered that I was going to be leaving the next night. I wished that I could tell him goodbye.

I went to sleep feeling conflicted but having decided this was going to be for the best.



## Chapter Fifteen

### **Malachi**

Emily was warming up to me and that had me imagining what could happen once we were done with all this. Would I ever see her again?

She'd said that she was still going to marry Zephrus. Once she was married, I doubted that I would ever see her again. Even if relations between our families got better, I couldn't imagine a world where a Zephrus would allow his wife to spend time with her former kidnapper.

I dismissed the forlorn thought. I was going to enjoy the time we still had together. The next evening, I found a list by the stairs. Most of the items were fruits and vegetables. Interesting. It hadn't even occurred to me to get such things...

Flip was still there. We'd gotten back so late that he opted to stay in one of the guest rooms for the night. As I was looking over the list, he came out of his room, stretching and yawning loudly.

"Good evening," I said to him and he chuckled.

"Evening."

“Did you sleep well?”

He shrugged. “As well as I expected. What’s that?”

I folded the list and put it in my pocket. I didn’t feel like talking with Flip about my *kindness* towards Emily. “Nothing important. Are you busy tonight?”

“Not particularly,” he said. “I was thinking about sticking around here tonight.”

I cocked my head at him. “You don’t have to do that. She’s not going anywhere.”

“Maybe,” Flip shrugged. “I don’t know. The whole thing with seeing her mother...it’s got me a little spooked, I guess. I was thinking maybe I ought to be here just in case, you know?”

“That’s fine,” I replied. “You can keep Emily company.”

Flip frowned. “I’ll patrol the grounds.”

“Good enough.”

There was an all-night market near the center of town. I had never been there myself. I had servants that normally did this sort of thing. I walked into a well-lit and colorful market. As I walked through the aisles, I browsed the produce section, looking over mounds of fruits and vegetables. I picked up an

orange, looking over it with fascination. I proceeded to gather about half of what Emily had asked for when my phone rang. It was Flip.

“Yes?” I answered.

His voice didn't sound right. He sounded a little shaky and tense. Not exactly panicked, but somewhere in between.

“We've got trouble. You need to come back now.”

“What's going on?” I stiffened.

There was a crash, then yelling. *Shit*. As the line disconnected, I dropped everything in my arms and ran out of the store at light speed.

I ran home on foot, using vampiric speed. The front door had been kicked in and several of the windows were smashed. Flip was fighting with Zephrus, claws and fangs bared. Flip swung at him and missed. Zephrus grabbed him and tossed him out of the broken door.

I rushed forward and punched Zephrus in the face. Zephrus stumbled, surprised by my attack. His eyes glowed red as he came at me, his claws swiping the air as I dodged him by mere inches. He was fast. Much faster than I was. I leaped away from him, getting some distance between us. He

pulled out a dagger from his jacket, throwing it at me with a speed that defied human vision. I dodged it and plucked it out of the air before it fell and threw it back at him. The blade flew through the air and sliced off his hand at the wrist cleanly.

Zephrus stumbled back, holding his bloodied stump with his other hand. I expected him to retaliate. Instead, he just smiled...and vanished.

I stared at the space where he'd been standing, stunned. What...happened?"

Then it hit me. Emily.

I sprinted up the stairs and to her room. As I burst through the door, Zephrus was grabbing Emily by the arm. "Come on!" he yelled at her.

"Emily—" I called.

They were gone in a blink. Vanished as if they had never been there at all. I looked around, dumbfounded and rageful. I ran out of the room, to the first floor and to the porch. They were nowhere to be seen. I couldn't even sense them...

"Malachi!" Flip had gotten up and was stumbling towards me. "The girl..."

Gone. She was gone.

## Chapter Sixteen

### Emily

It was naïve of me to consider that there wouldn't be violence.

I'd heard the commotion from my room. The sound of windows breaking. The sounds of battle only a few feet from my door...

But before I could go out and investigate, Zephrus appeared in my room, his white suit marred with blood from the stump where his hand used to be. Seeing the blood sent me into a panic.

"Zephrus," I worried. "What's happened?"

"Come on," he had ordered, grabbing my arm. Then the door shattered and Malachi appeared, rage marring his face.

And then everything went black for a moment. I had the sensation of floating through the air...then...

I was in my living room. Zephrus still had me by the arm as my senses started taking in the familiarity of the stone

walls and fireplace and all the furniture that had been given to my mother centuries ago as wedding presents...

“Jackson,” Zephrus called out painfully. He released me, stumbling forward as blood continued to pour out of his wound. Father came rushing into the room and upon seeing us, his eyes widened. He called out for the servants to come to the room quickly.

The rest of the next few minutes went by in a blur of activity. Zephrus was taken away to be cared for as my parents rushed to embrace me. I felt their joy for my safe return.

I was home. Finally. This whole ordeal was over.

The plan after was for me to marry Zephrus as soon as was feasible. His hand needed a few days to regrow, which, as it turned out, was working out fine since everything had to be replanned out. That wasn't a great feat, though. We'd spent so much time planning the wedding the first time around that it was just a matter of putting everything back in its place.

Everything except my other's dress. It was gone, still in the house where I'd been held. My mother was upset about that development, but she did her best not to show it. A new dress was purchased for me right away.

It was all fine until one morning, a few days later. I was lying in my bed, unable to sleep. Actually, I hadn't been able to sleep a wink since I'd been brought home. My mind was too troubled.

I was thinking of Malachi...and how I wasn't going to be able to see him again. My time with him felt like a dream or something that I'd only imagined somehow. And parts of it were like a fantasy. In the wee hours of the morning, I would think of him and remember the way his kisses felt on my skin. That last morning, I recalled of the night he drank from me. The feel of his fangs piercing my skin as my body responded to his touch. The way I came harder than I'd ever come before.

And I grasped that I was never going to know that again. Zephrus would be able to drink from me, but I didn't know if he would be willing to be sexual with me. I knew that he cared about me. I figured that if I'd asked him, he might be willing to engage in sexual activities that didn't involve penetration... but if he didn't.

It was such a petty thing that I hadn't even considered before meeting Malachi. I knew well enough that sex wasn't everything. So why was I thinking of him...?

Because it was more than sex, I thought quietly. It was the way his voice changed when he was talking to me. It got soft and rumbly like a lion's purr. It was the way he watched me when he thought I hadn't noticed him enter a room. It was...

*Oh. Malachi has feelings for me...* How did that even happen? He was my captor. Did I have feelings for him as well?

I set those thoughts aside, preferring not to explore them so close to my wedding night. Not that whatever I had with Malachi mattered anymore. That evening at dinner, our servants made my favorite dish. A pasta primavera. I ate it happily as my parents sipped on their glasses of blood. It felt surreal that things were normal again. This was my life just as I'd left it.

"So," my mother was saying, "we were thinking about events after the wedding. Since we hadn't planned a reception before, as this is just a marriage of convenience, maybe we should have a party."

"We should celebrate your return," Father added. His dark eyes sparkled in the amber candlelight. "I realized that



this marriage isn't happening under the best of circumstances, but we should still have a celebration of it.”

I smiled. It was a good idea. We needed some relief from everything that had happened so far. “That sounds wonderful. And what about the Silver Blade?”

My father's smile disappeared as he looked across the table at my mother, whose expression paled. You would have thought that I'd suddenly grown antlers with the way they were both looking at me.

“What?” I asked. “You are still planning on destroying it? I mean, we could include that into the celebration.”

“Darling,” my father said, his voice low and tentative. “There is no Silver Blade. It was destroyed centuries ago.”

I froze, tilting my head in confusion. “But...but Zephrus told me about the investigation. He said that you did have it all along, but you were planning on destroying it since it caused so much trouble.” Mother was now looking down at her glass shamefully as my father just stared at me with his mouth agape.

“I don't know why Zephrus would tell you that,” he said, “But I can assure you that is not the case.”

I'll admit, I didn't know Zephrus as well as I probably should and in all likelihood, I should have just taken my father's word, but I couldn't. It didn't make sense. There was no reason for Zephrus to lie about something like that.

"Father," I said, "why would he lie about your having the blade? Especially when you not having it meant that I would be freed without bloodshed?"

He went silent. I was half expecting him to explode. To yell at me for digging into something that did not concern me. He didn't, however. He just sighed and said, "He should have just kept that to himself," he said. After another few moments of silence, he went on.

"It's true. I do have the blade. I've had it all along."

I frowned at him. The familiar feeling that some greater piece of this puzzle was missing came back to me. "You could have just freed me," I said to him. "Why didn't you?"

He shook his head. "You wouldn't understand. The Silver Blade...it's what has afforded us this level of safety and comfort for all these centuries. Its power is too great to hand over to Maximillian and his family or to any other vampire. I just could not risk it. All I could do was stall until we could get you out of there ourselves."

I thought about Zephrus' injury and my being taken from everything I'd known. All over some stupid relic. I set down my fork. My appetite was gone. "If you'll excuse me..." I stood up. Father stood up with me.

"Don't leave," he said. "Please. You have to understand. This was a power struggle. We cannot risk handing that much power over to anyone else for any reason. It's irresponsible."

I didn't even have words for him. I left the table and went into my room.

In my room, I started replaying everything in my mind. The kidnapping, the way Malachi kept me bound at first...

But then, I started to think of how he'd warmed up to me and how he was just starting to open up to me. When I thought of him, my heart fluttered and butterflies filled my stomach. I did feel something for him. I wasn't sure what...but I did feel it.

And as much as I might be against it, it wasn't right what Father had done. Good, bad, or indifferent, the Silver Blade had never been my father's to keep. It belonged with its rightful owner.

I started to think about what Malachi must be going through. He'd failed in his mission to hold onto me until his father could get the blade back again. I could only imagine the punishment he was receiving.

And just like that, I decided right then to go to Malachi and try to make things right. Maybe if I told him about the Silver Blade, or maybe if I made it clear that I was leaving of my own volition, I could make it all right for him.

Before I could talk myself out of the plan, I put on my shoes and a jacket. I slipped out of my bedroom window and into the night to see Malachi once more.

## Chapter Seventeen

### **Malachi**

“All you had to do was keep the girl hidden!” my father yelled. “Keep her hidden until the blade could be procured. That’s all I asked of you!”

He’d been yelling at me for the better part of an hour now. When my father’s forces finally came to the house, they tended to Flip’s injuries and started to discuss the clean-up from the broken door and glass windows. My father walked around the foyer, his eyes blazing with rage the entire time.

Now that everyone was gone, he was really letting me have it. I stood there, my arms crossed and my head ringing from his seemingly endless rage. “What would you have had me do?” I yelled back. “Flip and I fought him off as best as we could.”

“You didn’t fight him hard enough.”

“He’s more than four centuries my senior!” I snapped back. “We’re lucky he didn’t take both of our heads off.”

“You should not have let Zephrus leave with her. How was he able to leave with her if you were still standing?”

Answer me that!”

I couldn't. I didn't have an explanation for what I saw. One moment he was there and the next, he was gone. I'd gotten him with a lucky shot that should have slowed him down at least and he disappeared before my eyes. I couldn't tell my father that. He'd never have believed it.

“This is because you got too close to the girl,” Father went on. “You should have had her under lock and key. Bound, even.”

“Binding her only made things more difficult,” I explained.

“So, you just let her roam free in the house?!”

“She didn't try to escape,” I replied. “She was here for days and never tried to escape me. I'd garnered trust with her. She would not have left before the deal had been made. All she wanted was to go back home. She would not have—”

“What are you talking about?” His scowl deepened. “Why are you talking about her like she was your best buddy? She was a hostage, Malachi!”

I stiffened. She didn't feel like a hostage to me. Not in the end. Even with Father yelling at me, I felt the loss of her

like a hole in my heart. It was like something was missing from a part of myself. My father just shook his head when I didn't answer him.

“It's Eloise all over again.”

“Don't,” I warned.

“You pined over that miserable human for the better part of a year after she rejected you. And before that, you fawned over her endlessly. What is it with you and human women?”

Fury burned in my veins. I wanted to punch my father but I turned away from him, trying to push away the rage. “I said, don't.”

Father just glared at me for a long moment. Then shook his head slowly. “Pathetic. All this loss because you're too busy chasing ghosts.”

“This is not about Eloise,” I said, turning back to him. “Eloise rejected me because she didn't want to join this life with me. She left me because she thought I was a monster. Emily is *nothing* like her.”

“That's a touching sentiment,” he sneered. “And if you were saying this about a woman that you were in love with, I

might be somewhat sympathetic. But that's not the case here. Is it?"

I should have said no. I wanted to say no. That was the right answer, after all. I couldn't, though. The word wouldn't come out and I knew it was because it just wasn't true.

I heard a knock, then someone calling out "Hello" somewhere in front of the house. Father looked over at the door, alerted to the strange voice. "I'll take care of it," I told him and walked away, glad to get out from him.

I walked to the front of the house and got as far as the staircase before my feet froze to the floor. Standing in the foyer was Emily. She was wearing a denim jacket over her expensive blouse and slacks. Her dark hair was up in a ponytail and she had the lightest smattering of makeup on.

In her time with me, I saw her at her most natural. Her brown skin devoid of makeup and her brown eyes wonderful in their own light. Now, she seemed to glow.

"Hi," she said softly.

I thought of my father in the study and that spurred my feet to move. I walked up to her. "What are you doing here? You can't be here."



“I know,” she said. “I...I guess I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“I’m fine.” I dared a look over my shoulder, then took her by the hand and pulled her through the broken and half boarded up door.

“Listen,” she said once they were outside. “I know that I’m not supposed to be here right now or...or maybe ever again. But...” She trailed off, closing her mouth and looking away like she was ashamed. I felt my heart ache for her.

“You...you’re supposed to be getting married soon,” I said. “You shouldn’t be here with me right now. You should be with him and your family.”

“I know,” she said softly. “But I can’t stop thinking about you.”

I was struck speechless. I just stared at her as she lowered her eyes humbly.

“I shouldn’t feel like this. I don’t even know why I feel this way. All I know is that...that I had to come here.”

I looked away from her, out onto the dark of the lawn and thought about how she must’ve gotten here in the first

place. A cab, perhaps? This house was on the city's edge. She must have traveled quite a ways just to see me.

But...she was getting married soon to a vampire who was willing to fight both me and Flip to get her back.

“Do you love Zephrus?” I asked her.

“You already know the answer to that. It hasn't changed.”

I wanted to tell her not to go through with it. To stay with me right then and there and we would figure out the rest. Then I thought of my father and what he would think the moment he saw her. He was angry enough to kill us both.

“Then go back to him,” I told her. I took a step back from her and filled my voice with ice. “You don't belong here with me.”

Her big, brown eyes watered and she shook her head. “Don't say that.”

“I do not feel the same way about you as you do me,” I lied. “Whatever it was that brought you here, you are alone in that feeling. I acted in my own best interests, Emily.”

I watched as tears fell from her eyes. God, how I wished I could take it back...

She sniffled and wiped at her face. “All right,” she said. Then she turned and walked off my porch. I watched her walk down the walk and into the darkness until I could see her anymore. Then I hardened my heart and turned around back into the house.

## Chapter Eighteen

### **Malachi**

Emily was out of my life. Officially. For the next few days, my father's anger died down and things started to go back to normal for our family. I did my best not to think of Emily.

The vampires that we hired worked to fix the damage done on the house quickly and thank heavens for that. I wasn't interested in seeing the reminders of my failures over the course of the next week. I started to see the repairs as the closing of a terrible chapter in my life. After everything was repaired, I could forget about Emily completely.

Only, I couldn't. No matter how I wished to. Every day after that last evening of seeing her, I thought of her. It was the worst right before I went to sleep. I would lie awake in the darkness, remembering how she smelled and how she tasted. I'd see her coy smile in my mind's eye and I'd miss her terribly.

Somehow or another, news of her wedding day reached me. It just so happened it was also the last day of repairs on

my mother's house.

I went there to survey what had been done and it was all looking good. Flip was with me and he agreed as we stood there surveying their work.

“Glad all this is over,” he said. “It’s about time things get back to normal around here.”

“Yeah,” I muttered.

He looked over at me, trying to read my expression.

“What? I’m fine.”

He didn’t say anything at first but as the silence wore on he said, “You know what I can’t stop thinking about? How Zephrus was able to get away with the girl. I mean, he’s fast. We’re all fast. He might even be faster than us...but we’d have seen him run away with her.”

I just sighed. I wasn’t interested in this conversation. “I don’t know how he did it. It’s like I said. One minute he was there and the next, he wasn’t. Like magic or someth....”

Something clicked in my mind. Something we’d been talking about a night or two before the attack. The wheels turned in my mind as I remembered Emily in the library,

reading one of my mother's old history books. She'd been reading up on the Amina Munda...

"What's wrong?" Flip asked. I turned to him, the pieces starting to fall together.

"Flip...what happened to you that day? Before I got here?"

Flip frowned at me. "I got attacked by Zephrus. You know that."

"Yeah, but you didn't see him before he attacked? Like, you didn't see his car or anything?"

Flip paused, thinking about it. "I don't remember seeing a car, actually. To be honest, it was literally like he was just there on the porch."

My body went cold. It was impossible. It had to be. But there was no other explanation. "Flip, what would happen if the Amina Munda still existed and they happened to acquire the Silver Blade?"

Flip just stared at me. "What are you getting at?"

"This is going to sound really crazy, but I think Zephrus' family might be Amina Munda.

"What?"

“She was studying about them a few days before everything happened,” I said. “I think she might’ve suspected something was up. Come on.”

I started walking to the car and Flip came running up behind me. “Hey, hold on. Where are you going?”

“We’ve got a wedding to stop,” I said.

## Chapter Nineteen

### Emily

And so, it was finally my wedding night. I stood there looking in the mirror at the dress I was to be married in, my mother right behind me. She sighed, touching the delicate fabric with a forced smile.

“I should have sent your father to that house to get your dress,” she said with a little bitterness in her voice.

“Mom, it doesn’t matter. It’s just a dress.”

“Still...”

There was a knock at the door. “Come in.”

The door opened and my father entered, a big smile on his face. He looked at me in the simple white lace dress and took me by the hands. “You look lovely, my dear.”

He kissed me on the cheek and said, “Zephrus is a lucky man to have you as a bride.”

Funny how he was saying this like it was a real wedding. They were both acting like it was a real wedding, in fact.

“I just want to get this over with.” I mumbled.



“Right, right. I’ll go on ahead into the sanctuary and make sure everything’s all set.”

Father turned around and left. Mother took me by the hand and sighed. “I’d always hoped this day would be different,” she said.

I squeezed her hand. “It’s fine, mother. We’ll all be better for it once the Steeltons join our clan.”

And so, that was all that needed to be said. I went through the motions and left the room when it was time. This time as we walked down the hallway to the sanctuary, there were no hawthorn blossoms holding my family back...and Malachi wasn’t smiling at me from the doorway.

Seeing his face in my mind sent a little sting of pain into my heart. No...Malachi wouldn’t be here to wish me well. That was all over now.

The door was closed and Mother smiled at me excitedly. “Here we go.”

She pushed open the door and we walked into the ceremony. Only...everything was very wrong.

Bodies. Guests were in their seats, their throats slit and stakes through their chests. The flowers that we’d laid in the

aisle were stained and splattered with blood everywhere. At the altar, my father knelt down by the altar, a ring of hawthorn blossoms around his neck...

I heard my mother yell as she grabbed me to run, but one of Zephrus' men, a large vampire with freakishly long teeth, stepped behind us, blocking her path.

I turned back to the altar to see Zephrus standing there, smiling at me, his face taking on a sinister shape. "You can't leave yet," he said. "The ceremony is about to begin."

I was grabbed and pulled towards the front of the room, and my mother dragged behind me. "What is this?" I cried out. "Zephrus, what are you doing?"

I was thrown down to the floor, right before the altar. I looked up and saw my pink flowers replaced with black roses, large dark thorns sticking out of them. I looked up and saw a long, curved blade made of silver with a shiny black handle and a moon carved in the hilt.

*Was...was that the Silver Blade? What was happening?*

Zephrus knelt down next to me. "I'm sorry, my dear but things had to be changed at the last second. I didn't want a repeat of last time, so I figured, why wait?"

“What are you doing?” I cried. I looked over at my father. His face was going gray as the hawthorn drained his power away from him. “Why are you doing this?”

Zephrus picked up the blade. “For power, of course,” and turned the blade around in his hand. “I’ve searched for the Silver Blade for centuries. Dead end after dead end until I came upon the history of the relic wars and how a vampiric general had it taken from him by a rival family.”

My father, of course. It’s why he never told me about it. The Silver Blade was stolen property. He’d never have wanted me to know that shame.

“Once I located it,” Zephrus went on, “all I needed was virgin blood. What luck it was to find both the vital things that I needed in the same place at the same time.”

I couldn’t believe it. Malachi’s friend had said that there was a ritual that the blade could be used for to achieve invulnerability...and that only the Anima knew it.

“You...your family is Anima Munda,” I stammered and Zephrus laughed.

“Of course we are. How else would I have been able to find you and get you back?” He knelt down beside me,

looking at me with cold blue eyes. “I can’t believe Maximillian almost ruined my plans. Well, it’s all water under the bridge now.”

He turned and looked at my mother, who was being held by the large vampire, then my father, who was now leaning over, his head down in a dead faint. He shook his head and tsked. “This is what you vampires get for your kindness towards a human. Maybe if you’d turned her years ago, you could have kept her safe.”

“You’re a monster!” my mother screamed at him. He just laughed.

“Say goodbye to your only child.” He grabbed me by the back of my head and yanked my head back. Then he looked up to the ceiling and started chanting in Latin. Words that I couldn’t understand being repeated over and over.

I closed my eyes as he raised the blade above me. This was how my life was going to end. A sacrifice on the altar of some crazed warlock vampire. I flinched, waiting for the blow...

And then I was released. I fell forward as Zephrus was lifted off his feet and backward into the altar, knocking it over. Malachi was on top of him, his claws at his neck as the knife

went flying out of his hand. Behind me, Flip attacked the larger vampire, jumping on him and tearing into his shoulder with his fangs.

I rushed to my father, removing the hawthorn from around his neck and tossing it across the room. As soon as it was gone, the color started to return to his cheeks. Mother knelt down next to me as the both of us tried to bring him back to life.

A battle was ensuing around us. Zephrus and Malachi rolled around on the floor until Zephrus kicked Malachi off him, sending him into the chairs and the bodies of dead vampire guests. Once free, he went for the knife and Malachi got up and almost beat him to it. As he sped to him, Zephrus brought the knife up and stabbed him in the stomach, stopping him cold.

“No!” I screamed. Malachi staggered back, looking down at the hilt as it stuck out of his shirt. The seconds passed by in slow motion as he gripped the blade and I thought he would fall to the ground.

He didn't. With a pained look on his face, Malachi pulled the blade out of his stomach, splattering blood. Then he leaped at Zephrus, bellowing as he brought the knife down and

into his chest. Zephrus went even whiter than he had been before and the two of them fell down together.

Flip, having dispatched the large vampire that was holding my mother, started walking towards Malachi, who rolled over on his back, gasping for air. I rushed over to Malachi, kneeling next to him.

“Oh, Malachi...” I cried, and he smiled, blood on his teeth.

“It’s just a flesh wound,” he croaked, wincing in pain. Flip came up next to us, concerned for Malachi. He looked over at Zephrus, who was still squirming, the knife sticking out of his chest as his eyes bulged and he clawed at the air uselessly. It only lasted a few seconds before Zephrus’ arms finally fell to the ground and the light in his eyes dulled.

“I never thought I’d have to fight Anima in my lifetime,” he uttered. He looked back at Malachi, who was smiling despite his injuries. “Let’s get you some help.”

## Chapter Twenty

### **Emily**

For my family, the next few days were about mourning and rebuilding.

The guests at my wedding were friends and family members. Respected people in our community. My father paid for each of them to be buried in the customs of clan traditions. The process was intense and by the end of the week, my parents appeared worn from massive tragedy that had just befallen our community.

I spent much of my time with them, arranging the memorials and consoling our surviving family and friends. By the following week, we were all a shell-shocked from the tasks before us.

All the while, I was thinking of Malachi. I had not heard any news of him. As worried as I was, I couldn't leave my parents. Not when there was so much for us to do.

One evening just after sundown, I found my father sitting in his study, holding the Silver Blade in his hands. The

source of all this tragedy. His eyes were far away as if he was somewhere back in time.

“Father?”

He looked up at me, coming back to the present with a soft smile on his face. “Emily,” he said. He got up from his chair and sat the knife down on the end table. “It’s early. What are you doing up?”

I shrugged. “Can’t sleep.”

He nodded. “Understandable. This has been a terrifying week. Even for a vampire.”

His smile faded and he turned from me, picking the blade up again. “I’d like you to do me a favor, Darling.”

“Anything.”

He turned back to me, the blade in hand. “So much has happened in the past few weeks because of this blade. All because of a folly of my youth. I can’t bring back the lives lost because of it, but I can at least make things right once and for all.”

He handed me the blade. “Take this back to Maximillian and offer my apologies.”

I frowned slightly. “Father...I don’t think I should.”



“Well, it will have to be you. I still have a great deal to do what with the memorials starting next week.”

I looked down at the large metal blade. It looked so much bigger in my hands than it had on the altar...or sticking out of Zephrus’ chest.

“Besides,” father went on, “you should also check on Maximillian’s son. I hear he’s still recovering from his injuries.”

“Are you sure you want me to go?”

“It should be you,” he said with a small smile. He turned around and sat back down in his chair. “Let this be our olive branch to them.”

I left the study, holding the knife in my hand, and worry in my heart.

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When I arrived at the Von Alton estate, it felt as though there was a cloud hanging over the building. There was a chill in the air as I walked up to the door and rang the bell. My stomach was in knots with apprehension. This was a stupid thing to come here alone. I should have insisted that my father come with me.

The door opened and I was faced with Malachi's friend, Flip. He looked me over skeptically.

“What are you doing here?”

I laughed nervously. “Is that how you greet all your guests?”

“No,” he said coldly. He stood firm in front of me as if to keep me from entering.

I sighed deeply. “I come with peaceful intentions,” I told him. “And...I'd like to see Malachi. If that's okay with you.”

“You would, huh? Well, some might say that you've seen enough of him—”

“Flip. Let her in,” a deep voice said from behind him. Flip clenched his jaw and stepped aside, allowing me entry. I walked into the foyer and there stood Maximilian Von Alton. In all this time, I'd never actually seen him before that point. Malachi had his eyes. Dark grey and stern, bearing down on me as I walked over the threshold.

“You're either very foolish,” he stated. “Or very brave to come here without an escort.”

I swallowed nervously. “I've come for two purposes. To offer you an olive branch...and to see Malachi.”

“Malachi is quite ill still,” he said. “I don’t think you will be seeing him tonight.”

I nodded. I suppose that was fair. It was my father’s fault all this happened. And it was because of me that Malachi was still recovering. I reached into my bag and pulled out the Silver Blade. Upon seeing it, Maximillian’s face changed. His eyes widened and all the malice for me drained out of his expression. He stared at the blade, disbelief coming over him.

“What is this?”

I walked up to him and handed him the knife, handle first. “An olive branch. My father wants peace between our families.”

He took the blade, holding it in his hands carefully, his eyes scanning it as he turned it around in his hand. I wondered how many centuries it had been since he had last held this dagger...

A slow smile spread across his face, then it disappeared just as quickly as he looked back up at me.

“My son is in one of the upper rooms,” he said, “I think he would enjoy a visit from you.” I smiled as he waved to Flip to escort me up the stairs.

As I entered the room, I was taken aback by the sight of Malachi lying in bed, his face pale the way it had been the day that he almost went into Lust. Flip stood by my side, “His injuries were severe. He hasn’t been taking enough blood to completely heal his wounds. He’s lost much too much blood.”

It was heartbreaking to see him so ill.

“Is he...I mean, he looks like he’s going into Lust.”

“Not yet,” he said, “but it won’t be long before it takes hold of him.”

I thought about how I’d helped him come back from the brink before. But then, he was conscious and talking. There was some hope for him.

“I want to help him.”

Flip chuckled. “You cannot help him. He’s too far gone. In his current state, he would take your life before you could ever save him.”

I looked at him. Sweating and unconscious and clearly near death. He was the way he was because he risked his life for me.

“I want to try,” I insisted.

Flip frowned deeply, shaking his head. “You came here to garner peace between your families. That could all go up in flames if Malachi takes your life.”

I took off my jacket. “Only if you don’t tell my family what happened. Leave us, but don’t go too far away. If I need help, I’ll call for it.”

There was a look on his face that translated to something along the lines that he thought I’d gone completely mad. He must have realized that my mind was made up because he just shook his head and told me, “I’ll be right outside this door. Call out for me if you can’t handle things.”

I nodded and he left the room. Alone in the room with Malachi, I took off my clothes, down to my underwear, then walked over to the bed and slid under the covers with him.

Maybe it was my scent or something in my presence, but his eyes opened as soon as I was next to him. He turned his head to me, his eyes blurry at first, then focusing in on me.

“Emily...?”

I nodded, pushing his clammy hair out of his face.  
“Yeah. I’m here.”

His eyes glowed red and his breath quickened. He closed his eyes and turned away from me. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“I’m here to help. Just like I did before. Let me save you.”

He tried to turn his body from me, but he was too weak. He fell back down onto the bed uselessly. “I’m nearly in Lust,” he said. “Being this close to me is dangerous—”

I took his chin and brought his face to mine. “You risked your life for me. So, I’m returning the favor. But after this, we’re even. Got it?”

He smiled weakly despite the bloodlust in his eyes. “You must be insane.”

“Maybe I am,” I smiled back at him.

Malachi reached up, brushing my hair away from my neck. I lifted my chin, exposing myself to him fully. I felt his arm slide around my waist as he leaned into me, his abnormally warm breath on my skin sending chills up my spine. I felt his lips kiss my skin and I closed my eyes, bracing myself. A second later, I felt the sharp pressure and burn of his fangs as they pierced my skin. I gasped from the pain as he pulled me close, his nails digging into my back.

I held onto him, enduring the sweet pain of his bite. My body trembled slightly as wave of mixed pleasure and pain washed over me. The sensation was intoxicating and my head started to feel light and fuzzy as he kept on drinking from me.

After a few moments, Malachi released me and the color was starting to return to his skin. He lifted his head, eyes closed and blood dripping from his mouth. In bliss, he held me, letting my blood fill his wounded body.

He looked down at me, a maddening glow in his eyes. This wasn't like before. He appeared more dangerous and on the edge of sanity. I was helpless in his arms this time. Only his level of control stood between me and certain death.

“I will not harm you, Emily,” he said, his voice a husky whisper.

I leaned into him and kissed him, tasting my blood on his lips. Malachi responded, kissing me back, his tongue caressing mine with a surprising gentleness. He moved down to the wound on my neck, his tongue tasting more of my blood. He lingered there for a moment, then down to the center of my chest, his tongue moving between my breasts. His hand moved up my back and unhooked my bra, taking it off me as his tongue found my nipples flicking them gently. I shuddered

as he sucked on them, my hands running through his thick black hair.

Malachi grabbed my panties, ripping them off my hips. He settled between my open thighs and looked at me. I felt his hardness pressing against my soft and wet center, rubbing slowly between the folds of my flower.

I lifted my legs, encouraging him as he kissed me, taking my head in his hands.

He stopped suddenly, leaning his forehead against mine. “Emily,” he said softly. “You don’t have to do this. Giving yourself to me...I don’t have to be the one.”

“Malachi,” I whispered, “I want it to be you.”

His gaze found my eyes again. I moved my hips against him, encouraging him a little more. “I love you, Malachi,” I said.

He grinned, “I love you, Emily.”

He moved down to the wound on my neck, pulling my legs up and around his waist. He bit into me again, drinking from me as he entered me at the same time. I moaned loudly, digging my nails into his back as he thrust himself into me. An intense, soul shattering euphoric sensation swirled inside of



me as he drank from me and made love to me at the same time.

Malachi lifted his head from my neck and moaned in my ear, his tongue licking away the blood on my neck and healing the puncture. My legs started to shake as he thrust a little harder into me, sending my body into overdrive.

“Oh, yes,” I moaned. “Oh, Malachi... Yes, yes... ooh...”

He wrapped his around me and rolled over, putting me on top. I straddled him, the feel of his hardness driving deeper inside me. He held my hips as I rode him, the warm feeling of blood running down the center of my chest. He sat up and licked the blood away, kissing and licking every inch of my skin.

I wrapped my arms around him as my climax came closer and closer to the surface. I’ve never felt anything like this in my life. It was a splendid feeling of him as he thrust himself hard against me, his arms around me, holding me close against him.

He was healed and I was saved. We were each other’s savior in that moment.

When I finally came, he came with me. We crashed into each other. He rolled me over and held me in his arms, kissing me gently.

“I love you,” I whispered. “Oh, Malachi...I love you...”

## Epilogue

### **Malachi**

It had been a year. A year since the last time I stood in this sanctuary.

The last time, I was there for the expressed purpose of my father's will. This time, my father stood next to me, waiting for my bride.

Flip was standing on the other side of me, waiting silently. "So," he whispered. "She wants to remain a human?"

"Yes," I said.

"Is she sure? It might make life easier for the both of you."

I rolled my eyes. "Who said life had to be easy?"

At that moment, the door opened and there she was. In a white and gold wedding dress. The dress, in contrast with her dark skin, made her look ethereal as she walked slowly down the aisle with her mother and father on each arm. Somehow, she looked better than she had the first time I'd seen her.

“Wow,” I heard Flip say. He wasn’t kidding. She was a vision.

When they reached us, her parents handed both her hands to me, a ceremonial blessing to our joining. She looked up at me, her dark eyes looking up into mine.

“You are so beautiful,” I said to her.

“Thank you,” she said. “You’re not so bad yourself.”

“Soul-joining’s serious business,” I said. “Are you sure you’re ready to be with me for the rest of your days?”

She smiled up at me, and even though we were only bathed in moonlight, I could feel the sun on my face from her smile. “Yes, I am. I’m ready to be with you for life.”

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