

Renegade



Erica Stevens

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CHAPTER 1

Aria didn't have to look up to know that Max had arrived. He had been joining her here, at the same time, everyday for the last month. Even if he hadn't settled into that routine, she would have detected his presence by his subtle smell and nearly silent step. He settled onto the ground beside her, remaining silent as he picked up a rock and skipped it leisurely across the lake. Aria handed him the fishing pole beside her, the hook was already baited and ready for him. He took it from her, casting it easily into the center of the lake.

Aria swung her feet slightly back and forth, her toes skimming along the lake. It was early summer now; the cool water was wonderful against her overheated skin. Using the back of her arm, she wiped away the sweat beading along her forehead. They sat for a long time together, wordlessly reeling in fish. They kept the ones that were good to eat, and tossed back the ones that were too small.

Aria had started retreating to this spot soon after her escape from being a blood slave, and her return home. Max had found her here two days later. They rarely spoke, they didn't need too. They had both been inside that place, both been owned and used, and hurt by the vampires that had possessed them. The monsters that had owned them. Though, decidedly, Max's experience had been far worse than hers.

She had been owned, led around by a leash, and used, but the extent of her use was her own fault. She had willingly given the prince her blood, mistakenly thinking that she was falling in love with the deceptive bastard, but that had been before she'd learned that he was engaged. Though she hated the prince now, she could not deny the sharp stab of pain that pierced her at the thought of him marrying another woman. It was an awful thought, horrendous, and it brought tears to her eyes every time it crossed her mind. Which was far more often than she cared to admit.

But, no matter how badly she'd been hurt, no matter how much she'd been betrayed, her experience hadn't been anywhere near as awful as Max's. Though they did not talk about it, she knew what was done to blood slaves. They were used, abused, and discarded when their owners grew tired of them. Even though Max always wore long sleeves, every once in awhile his shirt would ride up and she would catch sight of the scars and burns that marred his fair skin. She would see the haunted look that sometimes filled his bright blue eyes when he didn't think anyone was looking.

She had suffered abuse while within the palace, but it had come from a human servant, and not the vampire prince. He had broken her heart, but he had never intentionally

inflicted bodily harm to her that she not asked for. In fact, he had been unfailingly gentle with her.

Though she hated to acknowledge it, she knew that if the prince had not taken so much of her blood on her last night, leaving her incoherent, she would have given him far more than just her blood then. She also would have given him her body, and her last piece of self respect. It was a fact that she hated herself for, and tried not to think about. Especially since the thought still left her oddly shaken and longing for something that had been unfulfilled, and always would be.

The prince may not have been physically cruel to her, but Max's owner had been just as cruel and brutal as they had always heard the vampire's were to their slaves. Aria's neck was only marred by one bite mark, one that she had wanted so badly that her whole being had ached for it. A bite that had nearly stripped her soul from her, and left her a far different person than the one she'd been before he fed from her. A mark that was fading faster than she wanted it to, and yet nowhere near as fast as she wanted it to. She didn't want to lose the mark, it was her last connection to the prince, and no matter how much she hated him, she could not deny that he would always own a piece of her heart. But it could only be a small piece as he had succeeded in shattering the rest of it.

She wanted the mark gone. Wanted it off of her skin. She hoped that once it was gone she would be able to forget about the prince. That once it was gone, she could move on with her life, and not hurt so much all the time. That she would not ache constantly, that the dreams would stop haunting her, and she could stop just existing, and actually start living again. She wanted to take pleasure again in the woods again, but since her return she had found little joy in the wilderness she'd once loved so dearly.

Max reeled his line in, deftly unhooked a decent sized bass, and added it to their growing catch. Aria pulled her dark pants up more, baring her legs to her knees. She squirmed her way closer to the edge of the lake, dipping her legs up to her shins in the water. She wanted to go swimming soon, wash her hair, and clean herself. One of the few things she missed about the palace, besides the prince, was the wonderfully hot showers and baths she had taken. Diving in the lake was not the same cleansing experience, though she did it far more often now than she had before she was captured and claimed by the prince. Being clean every day while in the palace had left her with the same desire now that she was home.

After about an hour, Max finally spoke. ❖❖You had another bad dream last night."

Aria sat silently, she didn't know how to tell him she didn't have nightmares like he did. She did not relive violent beatings and torture. Her dreams were about the last night she'd had with the prince, the wonder she had felt, the joy and love that had suffused her. His feeding from her had been so breathtaking, and amazing, that she had never wanted to end. It had been painful for Max when his owner had drank from him, but for her, it had been a moment of pure ecstasy that had touched her profoundly. It was the loss of that joy, the loss of him that caused her to cry and moan and awaken at night. For

her, the night was not a reliving of torment like it was with Max, but a reliving of heartache.

She had never deluded herself into thinking that anything between herself and the prince could last. She would have had to die eventually, the rest of the royal family, his wife, would have seen to her death eventually. She had deluded herself into thinking that he might actually care for her too though. But that was before she had learned that he was already engaged to someone else. The thought still caused a bolt of fury, betrayal, and pain to jolt through her.

Max wrapped his hands lightly around hers, trying to steady them as they shook on the pole. "The fish will know you're here."

She managed to return his wan smile as she struggled to breathe, struggled to regain control of her wounded pride and broken heart. "I don't think my nightmares are as bad as yours," she said softly.

He squeezed her hand gently before slowly releasing her. They had never spoken about their experiences, though it was obvious that they had both been changed forever. But Aria had gained weight while in captivity, Max had grown even thinner, his bones were still sharp against his pale, drained skin. He exhibited far more bruises, scars, and bite marks than she did, though her scars were mainly inside. His experience had been far more physically taxing, and just as mentally abusive, and toxic, as hers had.

"That's a good thing," he murmured.

She tilted her head, offering him a small half smile. His clear blue eyes were soft, tender. His sandy blond hair hung about his handsome face and stark features. It was her fault that Max had even been placed in that whole awful situation. He had allowed himself to be captured after she was taken with the hope that he would be able to get them both free. Unfortunately, he had not anticipated just how much of a lockdown blood slaves were placed on. Though, she had been afforded far more freedom than he had.

She glanced down at her wrist, the one that had been scarred by the leash she had tried to rip from her. Unfortunately, once placed on, the golden leashes could only be removed by the vampire that had placed them there. In a moment of panic, frustration, and fear for Max's life, she had tried to rip it off of her. All she had gotten for her efforts was a bloody wrist, bloody fingers, and a pissed off prince who had been so unbelievably tender afterwards.

She forcefully shut the thought down. Recalling the prince as tender and loving only reopened the raw and jagged wounds still festering upon her heart. "You never should have been there Max, I'm sorry."

It was the first time she had apologized to him for her role in his capture; she hadn't been able to get the words out before. She had wanted to apologize many many times, but neither of them wanted to be reminded of their time there. They both wanted to keep it

to themselves, wanted to deny that it had even happened. And they were both failing miserably at it. It was obvious to anyone that knew them that they weren't the same; that they never would be. No matter how much they wanted to pretend that their captivity hadn't happened, they couldn't succeed at it.

He was silent for a moment, his gaze distant as he stared across the lake. He turned slowly toward her, his eyes haunted, but there was something else in them, something more. Something she had never seen before. Or perhaps she had seen it, but she hadn't wanted to acknowledge it before. She couldn't deny it now.

She couldn't deny it, but she also didn't want it. There had only been one other man that had ever looked at her like that, and in the end he had made her like this. He had left her shattered and broken, and barely able to breathe through the pain that continuously clawed at her insides. He had ruined her, and Max did not fully understand that yet. She hoped that one day he would. The last thing she wanted was to have Max hurt because of her again, but with the way that he was looking at her she felt it was inevitable.

"I made the choice to go after you Aria, it was my fault that I was caught, not yours. Even knowing what I do now, I wouldn't change anything. I would never leave you alone Aria, never."

She stared back at him, searching his face. She had always found him handsome, and she still did, but it was not the dark, dangerous ruggedness that the prince had possessed. Instead, Max was blond, with clear blue eyes, and an open sweet face that made many girls swoon. At one time he had even made her swoon. So much so that Max had been her first and only kiss, before she had met the prince. And then, she had known that no matter what feelings she had once possessed for Max, they had been nothing compared to what she felt for the prince.

And now the prince was gone, lost to her forever, and Max was looking at her with the same longing expression that the prince had stared at her with. She swallowed the lump in her throat, fighting against the tears that wanted to fall. Unlike the prince though, Max would never leave her alone, never betray her, never use her like the prince had. He would never destroy her as the prince had. Max would do everything in his power to keep her safe, to build her up again, and would sacrifice himself over and over for her. Even if the prince could have located her, even if he had wanted to, he never would have come for her. He had a fiancée he had to take care of now. A vampire to build a life with, and to have children with. She was nothing but a pitiful, human, toy to him.

Why did she still love the murdering bastard then? Why on earth couldn't she love someone as wonderful, caring, and sweet as Max? But she didn't, and she knew that she would never be able to.

Aria shook her head, trying to deny his words. "Max..."

"It's ok Aria, one day you'll forget him, you'll move on."

"You know about him?" she whispered, unexpected shame flooding her body.

She felt like a traitor, a monster, a fool. Her father was the leader of the rebels; her brother's and Max were some of his strongest fighters in the cause, just as she had been before she had been broken. They had been willing to risk their lives for her, and she...

Well she had given her heart to a vampire, the oldest son in the royal family no less, the heir to the throne. They had been willing to die for her, and she had been falling in love with one of their greatest enemies. She thought of the prince as a monster, but she had also come to accept the fact that she was one too.

"I suspected," he said softly. "You can't blame yourself Aria, it was an awful time. Things were twisted and wrong in there. It's not your fault that you wanted to trust him. Of course you did, it was frightening, and you became confused. He had a month to twist you to his way of thinking, to make you think that you could trust him, that you could love him."

"Oh Max," she breathed, wishing that the explanation was as simple as that, but she knew it wasn't. The prince had not twisted her; he had not turned her terror and confusion against her. He had been kind and caring, and he had needed her, she knew that. Though he'd had an unknown fiancée the whole time, she knew that she had at the very least been a little special to him. But she still should have fought against her feelings even more, he was her enemy, he would always be her enemy, and they had never had a chance at a future. She had known all of that, and yet she had still gone to him willingly. Still offered him her blood with no reservations, and no fear.

She had given him her heart willingly also, it had not been twisted and distorted the way that Max believed it had. She hated to pop Max's bubble of her, but he could not go about thinking such things. He had to know that she had not been corrupted in there, but a willing, even eager, participant. He had to know that she was a horrible person. He had to know these things so that he would stop looking at her like that, so that he would understand she could never care for him the same way that he cared for her.

"I'm sorry Max," she whispered. "But that's not what happened. He didn't twist me, he didn't corrupt me. He was kind to me, he took care of me. I may have been his blood slave, but he only treated me as such when it was absolutely necessary. I wish I could say that I hadn't come to care for him, that I had remained loyal to you and everyone here, but I can't. I loved him Max..." She broke off, unable to speak through the pain that clawed at her. "I still love him," she choked out.

He stared at her for a moment, his eyes wide in disbelief, and then he shook his head rapidly. His sandy blond hair fell across his forehead, curling around his bright eyes. "But don't you see Aria that is how he twisted you. He knew that you'd always had nothing, that your life had been hard and unkind. He knew that by being kind, by giving you the things that you'd never had, you would come to rely on him, need him, and trust him. That way it would be more fun when he destroyed you, it's why he never told you he was

engaged.”

Aria’s hands clawed into the edge of the river bank, the moss dug underneath her fingernails. She wanted to believe Max’s words, wanted to make them true and maybe, just maybe, she could move on if she believed them, but she couldn’t. Yes, the prince had kept his fiancée from her, yes he had been dishonest, and yes he had broken her heart, but something between them had been real. Max knew that the prince was blind; he did not know that whenever the prince was near her, he could see again. There had been a strange connection between them from the very beginning, one the prince had recognized instantly upon seeing her, one that she hadn’t acknowledged until later.

And though the prince had omitted things about his life, she knew he had not been lying about the fact that he could only see when he was around her. He had been completely blind for over a hundred years, until he had seen her standing on stage being auctioned off as a blood slave. The fact that he could see her was the reason that he had claimed her, the first blood slave that he had ever owned. No, Max did not know about that, and as far as she was concerned no one ever would, not even Jack, the prince’s brother. That was one secret that would stay completely between the two of them. It was the one thing that she clung to, the one thing that made her believe that it had not all been a lie. The one thing that helped to ease her self disgust just a little.

For although she knew she would never see him again, never feel him again, and even though he had hurt her so badly, she needed to believe that he had cared for her, at least a little bit. That she had not been a complete and utter idiot. It probably wasn’t the best idea for her to cling to that, not when she needed to let him go, but she couldn’t help it. Right now it was the only thing that was getting her through the awful pain that clung to her every day.

“I don’t think so Max,” she said softly.

“I do,” he replied with more confidence than she had. “And one day you will realize it too. You just need time for his psychological games to wear off, and when they do, I’ll be here.”

Aria shook her head. “No Max...”

Her words broke off as he clasped hold of her chin, turning her so that she had to face him. He wiped the tears gently from her face. Tears she had not even known she was crying. “Yes Aria.”

Before she could react, he was leaning forward and kissing her. Aria started slightly in surprise, she didn’t know what to do, how to react, but before she could do anything he was already pulling away from her. She stared at him in wide eyed surprise, he smiled wanly back at her. “Just thought it was time for our second kiss.”

She couldn’t have disagreed more, but she didn’t say so. She was being selfish by not telling him that, she knew, but she had already lost so much in the past couple of

months, she couldn't bear to lose Max's friendship as well. Yet she knew that once he realized who she truly was, how little she deserved his love, he would turn swiftly against her. "We should be going," she managed to choke out.

He nodded, climbing swiftly to his feet; he wiped the moss and dirt from the river bank off of his pants. Holding out his hand, he helped her to her feet. Aria followed him back through the forest, her forest, listening silently to the sounds of the animals surrounding them. She had always taken solace, and refuge within these thick woods, but she hadn't been able to find either of those things as of late.

Aria leaned against the wall of the cave, staring out the entrance at the dark night. In the shadows of the evening, she could just barely make out the figures of a few guards, but she only saw them because she knew that they were there. If she had not known, she never would have been able to see them amongst their strategic hiding spots. The caves were good shelter, but without fair warning that an attack was coming, it was easy to get trapped within the thick walls. There were many escape routes throughout the underground system, but there were just as many dead ends.

She glanced behind her, but the cave was dark. The fires were lit much further beneath the earth, where they could not be seen from the woods. She did not fool herself into thinking that she was alone out here; her father had people watching her like a hawk since she had been taken, but at least she had a little sense of peace and quiet. Well, that was until she felt William coming.

She turned as her twin emerged from the dark of the caves. She would know him anywhere and often felt him coming long before he arrived. He leaned against the wall opposite her, his arms folded over his chest as he gazed at her. They both had the same bright blue eyes, the same dark auburn hair. Though they had come from two different eggs, they were even more similar than most identical twins. Right down to their quick tempers and impulsive actions.

Her impulsive actions had finally gotten her enslaved, and though she'd like to say that they were both more thoughtful now, she knew she would be lying. The only thing that had changed was she was sadder and more mature than she had been before going into the palace, and William was angrier. He blamed himself for not being with her that day, even though he had been hurt and unable to accompany her on the hunt. He blamed the vampires for taking her, and he especially blamed the prince for claiming her as a blood slave.

She had tried to explain to all of them that she had not been hurt, that it was only her heart that had been wounded, but none of them believed her. She supposed it didn't help that she was more like the walking dead, than a living person, since she had returned. She most certainly wasn't the same girl that had been taken from the woods, and they blamed the prince for that. They didn't understand that he had saved her from a more awful fate than the one she'd experienced. It had been another vampire that had claimed her originally, if it hadn't been for the prince far worse things would have been done to her. She had been lucky; they felt she had been tortured.

"Have you ever been in love?" she asked quietly.

He turned slightly toward her, his eyes bright in the dark. His dark eyebrows drew sharply together as he studied her. "Is that what you think you were?"

She was silent as she thought over her next words. She had never kept anything from William, they had always shared everything, always been together, but he had been so angry lately that she was afraid her words might send him over the edge. But she could not lie to him, and she had started this conversation because she needed someone to talk to, and William had always been that person. "Yes."

He swallowed heavily as he ran a hand through his disordered, shaggy hair. She could tell he was trying to keep hold of his temper, struggling to his fury from her. "Arianna, things happened in there, things I can't even begin to imagine..."

"Don't William. Max may want to believe that, but you know better. You know me, you know who I am. Do you really think I don't know what I felt in there?"

"I believe that you think you do." Aria's hands fisted in frustration, her jaw clenched tightly. It seemed that no one wanted to listen to her; no one wanted to understand her feelings. But she supposed that if it were William telling her these things, she wouldn't want to believe them either. "And no, I have never been in love."

"Oh."

He moved away from the wall, striding slowly to her, he threw his arm casually around her shoulders. He grinned down at her, his straight white teeth bright in the moonlight. She couldn't help but grin back at him. For the first time in their lives he may not understand her, but he would always love her. No matter what. She dropped her head to his chest and wrapped her arm around his waist. She listened to the sound of his heart as they stared out at the night. She had been so intent upon the reassuring beat of his heart that it took her a few moments to realize that all of the animals, and insects, had gone quiet.

Aria lifted her head slowly, her heart thumped wildly as she gazed out at the darkness. She searched for the guards amongst the trees, spotting their prone figures amid the darkness. "William," she whispered.

"I know. Come on."

He pushed her deeper into the cave, keeping his hand in her back as they made their way swiftly through the well familiar terrain. The guards still had not raised the alarm, a low pitched whistle that could easily blend in with the chirruping of the insects, but Aria strained to hear it. It had to be coming soon. "Hurry!" she gasped, a sense of doom descending over her as her breath came faster.

Her hand clenched upon William's, when they were far enough from the entrance, they broke into a run, their feet flying over the hard rock of the cave. They might already be too late if the vampires were already upon them. With the vampire's exceptional eyesight in the dark, and their rapid speed, it would be almost impossible for her and William to escape. They took a side tunnel on the right, ducking low as the ceiling became lower. William turned back, grabbed hold of one of the heavy iron gates that had been built into the wall.

"The guards!" she hissed, grabbing hold of his arm before he could close the gate.

"It's too late for them Aria," he said softly.

Her eyes widened, horror filled her as the low pitched warning whistle pierced the air. William froze for a moment; the gate was still partly open when they sensed, more than heard, something approaching. William jumped into action, rushing forward to close the gate as quietly as possible. There were many other tunnels leading through here, it could take awhile for the vampires to find the right one, and the gate should withstand an attack for long enough to give them extra time to escape.

They retreated, moving as quickly as they could through the stooped tunnel. Aria's heart pounded rapidly in her chest, a crushing sense of time running out seized hold of her as something large and heavy slammed into the gate, rattling it within its frame.

CHAPTER 2

Aria was panting for air as they raced forward. She could barely see William in front of her; they were going on instinct and memory alone, too afraid of what was behind them to grab one of the unlit torches from the walls around them. There was no way to know where their pursuers were, it was too much of a risk to light something right now. William led her around another turn, the ceiling thankfully expanded again.

William paused, turning back to slide another gate shut. They weren't far from the main room now. He pulled her forward; she stumbled over a loose stone, her ankle rolling out beneath her. A soft cry of pain escaped, but she hurried on, refusing to be hindered by the throbbing pain that raced up her leg.

The tunnel became narrower, William slid another gate home. The fire of the main room became visible as they maneuvered another turn, soft laughter reached them. Aria's heart hammered, she could barely breathe. She had never felt claustrophobic within the tunnels before, now she felt like a caged rat running aimlessly along. If they got out of this she swore she would never return to these caves. Then again, they could never return to them anyway, they were no longer safe.

They had been discovered.

William and Aria stumbled into the main hall. Everyone became silent as William spun around to slam another gate shut. "They're here!" Aria breathed.

There were a good hundred people in the room; panic claimed over fifty of them. Screams rang out, children began to cry. Though they had run drills, and practiced for this sort of thing, it had never happened before. Aria was dismayed and horrified to see the chaos that swiftly took over. Her mouth dropped as people began to run about, trying to gather as many of their things as possible. Others kept their heads enough to shut the other three gates that blocked the tunnels from the main room.

She wished that her father or Daniel were here, they would have an easier time at keeping everyone calm, but they had gone to meet with another group of rebels stationed about a mile away in another set of caves. "Everyone! Everyone! You have to calm down!" She raced into the center of the room, holding her hands up as she tried to soothe the fray. No one paid her any attention as they began to push and shove their way toward the only remaining exit. "Wait!" she cried, trying to stop them before they hurt each other. Trying to stop them before they ruined everyone's chance at escape.

Max grabbed hold of her arm, pulling her free of the crushing bodies. Thrusting her

behind him, he used his body to shield her as people pushed and shoved against them. Aria clung to his shirt as he pressed tighter against her, trying to protect her from the jostling and shoving, but he could not protect her from being pinned hard against the wall.

"Everyone calm down!" his voice was louder than normal, but not so loud that it would bounce down the tunnels, and not so loud that it caused the people to hesitate for even a moment. "Damn it!" he hissed, his anger and frustration apparent in the constriction of his muscles, and his fisted hands.

He turned toward her, bracing one hand against the wall by her head as he fought against the people pushing against them. Grabbing hold of her arm, he pulled her against him as he shoved his way back through the crush, fighting against the seemingly endless sea of people. Her heart hammered painfully in her chest, she searched wildly for William, but she couldn't see him amongst the wave of bodies.

They broke free; she inhaled the fresh air sharply, trying hard to get oxygen into her abused lungs. William was before her suddenly, he thrust her bow and a quiver of arrows into her hands. "We're going to have to go out another way."

Aria's eyes widened. The tunnel behind them, the one everyone was shoving through, was the only one that did not eventually meet back up, in some convoluted pathway or another, with the main tunnel they had just left. There were ways outside through other tunnels that led off the main one, but there was a chance that the vampires could already be in any of those tunnels. To open one of the gates back up, and go into one of those tunnels, was a huge risk. It was something they had never planned on having to do.

She glanced back at the exit tunnel, it was jammed full of bodies pushing and shoving at each other. In the drills they had run, and practiced, most of the people were supposed to be halfway through the tunnel by now. But panic had hindered things; she was certain that there were people on the ground in there, people injured and hurt and being trampled.

"We have to help them."

She took a step toward them but William grabbed hold of her arm, pulling her sharply back. "There is no helping them now Aria; we have to get out of here before we get trapped in here. We have to go."

"The people," she whispered.

"Will be fine, they have the safe exit, remember?" he retorted sharply. "Come on."

He pulled her back toward the gate that they had entered the cavern through. "We just came through there," she breathed.

"There are three gates closed between us and the main hall. It will be the safest one."

His long fingers worked deftly over the locks, throwing them swiftly open. Three other

men and one woman gathered with them, apparently deciding to throw their chances in with them, rather than the crushing mass of people on the other side. Aria did not know who they were, but the people within the caves changed often. Most of the rebels relocated constantly, preferring to stay on the move rather than remain cooped up in one place. It was a theory that her family often stuck to also, but her father had stayed here for far longer than normal. Aria knew it was because of her. Knew that he had wanted her to rest and recuperate in one place, and maybe even have some sense of stability for once in her life.

Aria had hated being stuck here, and now she knew why. She felt much safer moving constantly, felt much safer outside in the woods she knew so well. Yet, they had spent so much time over the years running in and out of the cave systems, that they knew most of them by heart. She always felt like a caged animal when she was within the caves, but knew them like the back of her hand. She had wanted to make her dad happy though, especially when he was so obviously worried about her, so she hadn't complained about staying here. She wished she had now. The caves would have been raided, even if they hadn't been here, but she couldn't help but feel like this was somehow her fault. That she had somehow brought them here.

"Come on," Max said softly, seizing hold of her hand.

They plunged back into the black tunnels. The darkness enveloped them; she could barely make out the back of Max's head as she strained to see. She wished they could light at least one of the torches, but that was just begging to be caught and killed, or captured and brought back to the palace where God only knew what kind of horrible fate awaited her. She had the distinct feeling that if she was brought back to the palace, it would not go over well. In fact, although the prince was engaged, she thought she would be made to pay dearly for her escape. She knew how badly he hated to be disobeyed, and her escape had been the ultimate defiance, and she would be punished for it. Either that, or he wouldn't even care that she was back there and just decide to let her go to whoever claimed her this time.

She shuddered at the thought. Her hand clung to the bow and quiver slung over her back. They were her specialty; she could shoot an arrow better than anyone else. She just wasn't going to be able to do it in these narrow confines, and from the way that William was heading, she knew that it was about to get a lot tighter in here. She hated this route through the caverns because it was so narrow, but it was the one that made the most sense right now. It would be harder for the vampires to navigate through here also, and at this point the other tunnel options led out to a waterfall. It was a beautiful sight, but the sound of rushing water blocked out the noise of their pursuers, and they needed their sense of hearing most right now. Their sight was just about useless. The rocks were also slippery, and climbing them under the best of circumstances was dangerous enough, without adding the bonus obstacle of rushing.

William took a sharp right. The tunnel began to climb steeply upward. They were heading

toward the back of the mountain, and what had once been an old coal mining operation, or so she had been told. Aria hated the old coal mines; they were creepy, dangerous, and filthy. Thankfully William took a left and began to climb toward the backside of the mountain. The air became easier to breathe, although the walls were still tight against them, she did not feel quite as pinned in.

Max's hand tightened around hers. She was grateful for his reassuring presence, his solid strength and warmth as he led her swiftly along. William stopped suddenly, causing the woman to bump roughly into him. They stood silently, straining to hear anything within the dark, damp space. They were only a hundred feet from the end of the tunnel, only a hundred feet from freedom, or certain death.

"We're going to have to move fast. Stay low and head straight for the woods. If we get separated for some reason we'll meet up again at the south edge of the lake," William instructed. "If we can't get to the south edge of the lake, we'll meet at the banquet tree."

The banquet tree was a tree she and William had discovered when they were children. It was simply an extremely large apple tree, but it had seemed massive and wonderful to them as they spent hours climbing its massive limbs, and gorging themselves on the apples they picked from it. For a couple weeks every year they'd had an ample supply of fruit, and aching bellies. But it had always been worth it.

They were also the only ones who knew where the tree was. They had brought the fruit back to the camps, willingly sharing it with everyone, but they had never revealed its location, and now that she thought about it, she didn't think anyone had ever asked. It was as if they had all understood that they'd needed a place of their own, and allowed them to keep it.

Aria's hand tightened around Max's. She understood that William was mostly concerned with her safety, but she could not lose Max. He had risked his life for hers; he had sacrificed himself for her. She would not take the chance that they were separated now. She thought that she should feel more guilt about possibly losing the others but she didn't, not when it came to her brother, and her friend. Their world was cruel, brutal, and for most people it was every man for themselves, except for the few people that ran in slightly larger circles. As she did.

It was nice to have friends, and family that she could rely on, that she could trust with her life. But the downfall of it all was the hurt that would come with the loss of one of them. And she had been lucky so far. Before her time within the palace, she had naively believed she would be lucky forever. She was not so naïve now.

William rushed forward, leading the way as they raced through the dark, up the slope, toward freedom.

They plunged into the night. Aria inhaled large, greedy gulps of the fresh air, relieved to be free of the confining space of the caves. They were almost a hundred feet from the cave exit when the screaming pierced through the rapid beat of her heart in her ears. She

froze, horror coiling through her as she turned slowly back around. They were higher up on the mountainside, staring down across the way. The lake was beneath them, gleaming in the moonlight that reflected off of it. Across the lake was the exit from the escape tunnel, hidden within a copse of trees.

The exit had been selected because it was the farthest point from the main entrance, and well concealed. It was also where the screams were coming from. Aria's mouth went dry; she took a step forward as horror and terror coursed through her. Across the lake, through the moonlight, she could see people scattering in every direction, fleeing as they tried to escape the monsters pursuing them.

Aria gaped for a moment longer, unable to believe the carnage before her. They had to do something. Now! She darted forward, determined to get down there, determined to help, determined to try and stop this somehow. Max seized hold of her arm, pulling her back. She struggled against him as he started to pull her toward the woods.

"We have to help!" she gasped.

He grabbed hold of her other arm, holding her tight before him as he shook her slightly. "There is nothing we can do Arianna, we have to go! We have to go now!"

She tried to fight him, but he retained his fierce hold. "We can't just leave them!"

His eyes were dark, sad, broken in the moonlight. "There is nothing we can do Aria, it's too late for them." Her gaze turned back to the sight below her, she couldn't abandon them. "It's how we were captured before Aria; you cannot run heedlessly in again."

His words froze her, she couldn't move as her heart lumbered to pump the blood through her suddenly frigid body. It was how they had been captured before, it had been her fault that they had been taken, and she couldn't allow that to happen again. Her gaze wandered hopelessly over to William. He stood at the edge of the forest, waiting impatiently for them. The others had already fled into the darkness. If she went down there again, if she tried to interfere again, they would follow her, and they would be caught. And there was nothing that any of them could do to help the people being hunted now.

There was no way to stop the massacre that was raging below them, no way to silence the screams. There was no one to save them if they were captured again, no one to rescue them as Jack had blown his cover amongst his family. They knew he was a traitor now, and would not welcome him back. They might not even be captured this time; they could just be slaughtered outright.

Max moved her back, pulling her stiff body away from the sight before them. "Hurry!" William hissed.

"It will be ok, Aria. It will be ok." Max wrapped his hand around the back of her head, pulling her close for a brief moment before tugging her toward the woods. They plunged into the darkness, moving swiftly through the dense forest. William led the way, taking a

zigzagging route that wound rapidly toward the banquet tree.

Aria felt numb, hollow. The screams of the tortured followed her, long after they were out of ear shot of them. Aria was panting, breathless by the time they reached the banquet tree. She fell against the large tree, clinging to one of its branches as she gasped for air that she couldn't quite get. Her legs buckled, she fell to her knees before their childhood tree. There had been so many dreams and plans and hopes that grew from this spot.

There were none now. Now there was only bleak hopelessness. Now there was only death, and the echoing screams of the innocent. Now there was only hurt and loss and suffering. Yet, beneath all of that there was something else, something new rising up to course through her. For a moment she couldn't identify the novel emotion through all of the agony and confusion rolling through her. For a moment, she didn't know what it was that was consuming her. And then, she did.

It was hatred.

It was pure and simple hate. She hated this world of cruelty, hated the monsters that had created it. She hated with everything that she had, and was. And she hated the monster that had done this to her, the creature that had stomped all over her heart, making her weaker, making her a broken shell of the person she had once been. And now, well now that shell was filling up again. That shell was angry and twisted and so hate filled that she could barely breathe through its fiery consumption.

The prince, she hated the prince, she realized.

There would be no more grieving for him, there would be no more wondering and hurting. What had passed between them was the past. It was over. She would forget it, she would move on, and if their paths ever happened to cross again. She would kill him.

CHAPTER 3

"There was a raid."

Braith stood silently, thinking over his brother Caleb's words as the tailor moved slowly around him. The tailor had stopped mumbling to himself, and although he continued to work, Braith knew he was listening intently to the conversation. "And?" Braith asked quietly.

"She was not amongst the captured."

"The dead?"

"No. The soldiers know that she is to be brought back here if caught. That they all are."

Braith shrugged, disliking the feel of the coat he wore. "No matter the orders, there are always casualties in war," he murmured. He expected Caleb to leave after delivering the news. Even twisted, brutal Caleb didn't like to be around him for any length of time anymore. No one did. Braith's temper had become volatile, his fury and paths of destruction were well known, and feared, amongst the residents of the palace.

A lot of blood had stained his hands over the past two months; he had consumed more blood in the past eight weeks than he had in the past eight years. But it was not enough, it would never be enough to bury the hatred and anger festering inside of him. His murderous rampage had died down, but only because he had calmed enough to realize that the deaths of innocent people did not ease his rage as much as he had hoped it would. Now he just consumed mass quantities of blood, but most of the time the people survived his attack now.

"Is there more?" he demanded impatiently of his brother.

Caleb cleared his throat. "She was not amongst the dead, and she was not amongst the captured, but she was there."

Braith's head came slowly up, he turned toward his brother. He could not see Caleb, darkness ruled Braith's life once more, but he could smell the faint hint of fear and excitement that rolled off of him. Braith stood for a long moment, stunned by Caleb's words. There had been no sign of her since she'd left here, and though he could have found her at a moment's notice, he refused to lower himself by going after her, by making her think that he wanted her back, because he didn't. She had betrayed him after all; he wanted nothing more to do with the traitorous bitch.

And yet he felt a moment of fear rock through him. He wanted her punished for her

treachery, wanted her to suffer for what she had done to him, but did he truly want her dead? Did he truly want her back here where she would be tortured and punished for her treachery? He had believed so, he had wanted it to be so, but now that his troops had stumbled across her, now that they were hot on her heels, he wondered what he would do if she was recaptured. She would be tormented, beaten, and eventually killed. She would be punished for being a traitor, and it would be a brutal punishment.

If he really wanted her back, then he would have gone after her himself and brought her back here by now. But even though he hated her, even though she had sliced him deeply, he had to admit that he did not want her dead. He wanted her to hurt as badly as he had upon first discovering that she was gone, but he did not want her dead.

In all the time since she had been gone, it was the first time that he actually realized this fact. He wanted her blood, he wanted to taste her and see her again, and he wanted to make her pay for what she had done. But he wanted to be the one that made her pay, not his brother or his father, and he did not want her dead. His jaw clenched tight as he grasped the lapels on the jacket he wore. He hated the jacket. The tailor made a soft sound of protest as he stepped down from the dais he had been standing upon, ignoring the annoying gnats of a man.

"How do you know she was there?" he growled.

"One of our people spotted her; it was why they went in when they did. They were hoping to capture her."

"Went in?"

"They were in a group of caves, apparently well engineered caves with a series of tunnels and gates throughout them. The caves were discovered last week, but they were going to wait until they knew where all of the exits were before raiding them. Our guards got a little overexcited when they spotted her though, and jumped the gun early."

Caves, she was living in caves. She had spoken about her woods, and her forest, with such reverence that he had assumed she'd returned to the trees and plants that had brought a small smile to her face when she spoke of them. That she had returned to the world of freedom and wilderness that she had so openly craved. Instead, she was living in caves, hidden beneath the earth, trapped beneath mounds of dirt and rock. It made no sense to him, but what made even less sense was the fact that he even remotely cared where she was living. What she was doing.

He had moved on with his life, he now owned several blood slaves, and though none of them were her, he found he did enjoy them. They made him forget for a little bit, they made it not so hard to get through the days. And unlike Arianna, these ones were more pliant and less defiant. He was getting married in a matter of months, granted he couldn't stand the woman, but he need only have a male heir with her and then he wouldn't have to have anything to do with her again. It was just a matter of time, and his wife's family would help to strengthen his own. He had not planned on marrying the woman, no

matter what his father wanted, but he was resigned to it now. He had never intended to do his duty as the eldest son. Not until Arianna had abandoned him, not until she had fled here with his brother and another blood slave.

After that, all he had wanted was vengeance, and to forget. All he had wanted was not to think about her soft smile, bright eyes, delightful innocence, and sweet blood. And there were even times during the day when he almost did forget, brief moments when he found a little reprieve from his memories in the copious amounts of blood. Those moments never lasted long, and there was a part of him that hated himself for what he was doing, but he knew that with enough blood, and enough time, he would eventually forget her. And eventually Arianna would die, she was human, and she lived a dangerous life. It was only a matter of time before it happened, he would know when that time came, and he had thought that he would feel relief when it did.

He wasn't so sure now.

"Was there any sign of Jericho?"

Resentment boiled through him at the thought of his younger brother, the sibling he had trusted and liked the most, and the one that had betrayed him the deepest. The one that had taken Aria from him. Though he doubted she had put up any fight. In fact, he was fairly certain that despite her vows of love, and her promises to never leave him, that she had probably run eagerly through the tunnel once it had been revealed to her. She was a fickle bitch after all, or at least that's what he had come to believe. Why else would she vow to love him forever and then leave him the very next morning?

And Jericho had become enemy number one now. Braith may not personally destroy Arianna, but he thought he would have a try at Jericho.

"They did not see Jericho there, but I'm sure he was nearby. He betrayed us for her after all; she must mean something to him."

Jericho had said that he was here to rescue Arianna because her father was the leader of the rebels. Jericho had come here for her because he was one of the few that could get her free. That was what he had said, but Braith had a hard time believing anything that had come out of his brother's mouth during those days. His brother had also said that he would not do anything without consulting Braith first, and then he had disappeared the next day.

In fact, he thought that Caleb was right, that Jericho did feel more for Arianna than just friendship and loyalty, why else would he have taken her like he had? Braith had never revealed to Caleb, or his father, Arianna's true history. There was no point in doing so, she was gone now, and there was no way to use her against her family anymore.

"There was a different man with her."

Braith's eyebrows lifted sharply, his mouth curved in a sneer. "Was there," he said sardonically. How many damn men that the little bitch have? He wondered angrily. First

the blood slave, Max, then his brother, and now some other mystery man. His fingers twitched into a fist, he struggled against the fierce surge of bloodlust that tore through him. He needed to bury his fangs in something in order to try and forget the anger raging through him.

"Yes. They have no idea who it was, but it wasn't Jericho and it wasn't the other blood slave."

A muscle in his cheek began to twitch in aggravation; he felt his temper beginning to unravel. He had thought Arianna a sweet innocent who had brought light back into his life. He was beginning to learn that nothing could be farther from the truth.

"I see." But he didn't see, and he wondered why he didn't go after her and drag her back here kicking and screaming. Why he didn't go after her, destroy her family, smash her rebel cause, and hunt down his treacherous brother and make them all pay. Braith paced away, shooing away the tailor that tried to follow him. He tore the jacket off, suddenly feeling claustrophobic within the material. The tailor made a strangled sound of despair as the material ripped, but Braith did not care. "Have they brought any blood slaves back?" he demanded.

"Yes, they are leading them onto the stage now."

Braith nodded, he grabbed his cane and hefted it into his hands. Keegan, his ever faithful wolf and seeing dog, yawned before rising to his feet. His claws clicked against the wood floor as he walked beside Braith. "Let's go."

Caleb hesitated for only moment before falling into step beside him. Braith was used to the darkness, used to navigating it; he needed no assistance as he wound his way through the hallways of the palace. The cane clicked off the floor, but it was Keegan that always alerted him to any new obstacle that may have been placed in the way. With a subtle pressure against his leg Keegan could steer him easily one way or the other.

Braith made his way swiftly down to the stage that held the future blood slaves. He looked it slowly over, but he saw nothing. There was no glowing light upon it, no redheaded girl staring in horror and fear at the crowd. He had been shocked into immobility at the sight of Arianna, unable to move, unable to believe that he could actually see anything again, let alone the frightened, dirty, bedraggled girl that was everything he had ever disliked about a woman.

She was not round, she was not voluptuous, she smelled far from decent, and yet he had seen her. She was the first thing he had witnesses in over a hundred years. And slowly, over the time he spent with her, she had become infinitely beautiful to him. Yes she was defiant, harsh, far too skinny for his taste, and not beautiful in the classical sense but she was also strong, sweet, innocent, and unbelievably wonderful. He had come to care greatly for her, until he had realized that it was all a lie. That she was in fact none of those things, and was instead a cunning, manipulative shrew.

He looked over the stage once more, but still nothing popped out at him. No other women appeared to him, no one else gave him sight again. "Is there anyone up there that could be her family?"

Caleb was silent for a few moments. "Not that I can see. I'm going to grab a few of them, I'm sure they'll eventually tell us more. And if they don't," Braith heard Caleb's shrug of indifference. "I will enjoy trying to make them talk."

Braith stood silently, listening as blood slaves were brought forth and auctioned off. Caleb claimed four of them. Braith briefly contemplated taking a few more of his own, but decided against it. He had enough for now.

He turned away, if there was anything to learn, Caleb would do it. He made his way back toward the palace, wondering where Jericho had been during the raid, wondering who it was that she had been with. Another man? Just how many damn men did she have in her life? He tried to tell himself that he didn't care about the answer to that question, but he knew he did. He could not deny it. The bitch had betrayed him, and now she was running free, wrapping even more men around her devious finger in order to get them to do whatever she wanted them to. He hated her for making him one of those men.

He made his way easily through the crowd, his mind churning; anger simmered hotly inside of him. He needed a new plan. He couldn't simply sit here and allow her to get away with everything that she had done. He could not allow his brother, the youngest, to be sitting amongst the humans, laughing about how he had managed to deceive his eldest brother, and his family.

Braith had made the decision to let them be, he was now beginning to rethink that decision. They should pay for what they had done, and he could make them do that. They may be able to avoid his men, but they could not avoid him.

Especially not her.

Rain dripped softly onto the makeshift tent. The piece of canvas offered little protection against the elements, but Aria didn't care. The air smelled wonderful, it was freeing after all the time in the caves. It helped to ease the sense of claustrophobia that still clung to her, but it did little to wash away the lingering screams that had woken her every night for the past week.

She could retreat to the shelter and warmth of the caves, but she knew that she would not. She couldn't bring herself to go back in them now, if ever. So instead she sat in silence, listening to the plop of the water upon the tent. Max and William sat beside her; they had been her constant companions since the night of the raid. William would wander out once in awhile to gather food but Max would not leave her be, and she wasn't sure

that she wanted him too. He moved closer to her, dropping a blanket around her shoulders. His hands lingered upon her for a moment, and she didn't shrug him away. She found she needed his comfort, his loyalty, his unwavering love right now.

She leaned into him, resting against his legs. "You need to get some sleep," he told her. "I will." They both knew she lied, but he didn't argue with her.

When she shivered, he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her against his chest and cradling her gently. Though her heart did not thump with excitement, as it had when the prince touched her, his strong embrace was wonderful. She felt safe in his arms, cherished. No, he did not affect her as the prince had, but he was a good man, he loved her, and he would do anything for her.

Maybe one day she would love him too, even if that day couldn't be now. Now she just wanted to feel something other than shock and anger and despair. Now she just wanted to sit with her friend, content in his arms as she listened to the rain fall. "It smells good," she said softly.

Max nodded, nuzzling her hair gently for a moment. "Yes."

Aria closed her eyes, concentrating on the beat of his heart. The prince had not had a heartbeat; in fact he hadn't had a heart at all as far as she was concerned. But Max did, and he used it freely. He pulled the blanket tighter around her, the heat of his body, and the soft splatter of the rain slowly lulled her into a fitful sleep.

When she awoke again, the sky was just beginning to lighten; the birds had not even begun to sing yet. She stared silently at the growing dawn against the walls of the tent. Max's arm was wrapped around her waist. She slipped from beneath his embrace, moving to the edge of the tent to pull the flap aside. It was going to be a warm day; the air was already muggy with heat. She sighed softly, slipping from the tent. She wanted to bathe, and then perhaps do some hunting with Max and William.

She gathered some of her clothes, scooped up her bow and quiver. Max and William were still sleeping; the sun had just poked over the horizon, when she dropped the flap back into place. She moved swiftly through the forest, winding her way toward the river they were camped near. She knew she shouldn't be doing this on her own, that she should have awakened someone to come with her, but she needed some privacy today. She needed some time alone to try and sort through the multitude of emotions swarming her.

She made her way swiftly to the river. She would have preferred the lake, but after the raid they had moved far from the caves, settling in a new area of the forest. It would be a long time before they went back near the lake again. Reaching the river, she stripped quickly and plunged into the chilly water. Not for the first time she missed the hot water of the palace, and the delightful spray of the shower. The lake had been tolerably warm and comfortable, but the river was fresh water from the mountains, and it did not warm up.

Aria bathed as quickly as she could, her teeth chattering and shivering the whole time. She was glad to escape the frigid water, glad to put some clothes back on so that she could warm up. Grabbing her bow and quiver, she tossed her towel over her shoulder and slung the quiver onto her back. The sun was breaking over the mountains, casting bright rays of light over the forest. She stood for a moment, her head tilted back to allow its warm rays to caress her, to soothe her, if only just a little.

She didn't know how long she stood there for, but the snap of a twig pulled her away from the healing sunlight to the world around her. Aria frowned, listening as she heard another soft snap. Moving behind a tree, she dropped the towel on the ground, and drew an arrow from her quiver. Kneeling, she slid the arrow easily into the bow. She didn't have to wait long before a buck wandered out of the woods, heading toward the river. Aria admired him, he was beautiful, but even though he was a gorgeous animal, he would also provide enough meat for the encampment to last a few days. He would feed the hungry children, and herself she realized as her stomach rumbled eagerly.

She was about to let the arrow fly when she felt it. The hair on the back of her neck stood up, a chill crept down her back before seeping through her limbs. She froze, she couldn't breathe. She didn't move, because she was afraid that moving would only trigger an attack. She had lived in these woods long enough to know when a predator was near. Lived here long enough to know when an animal was near its end, but this time she was not the hunter and it was her end she feared. She was certain that there was the deadliest kind of predator near her right now.

Slowly, ever so slowly, she turned to face the creature stalking her, watching her. It did not take her long to spot him. Braith stood amongst the trees, his dark hair highlighted by the rising sun. Light reflected off the dark glasses he wore to cover his stunning eyes, but she could feel the heat of his gaze as it raked over her. Her heart knocked against her ribs, it flipped and beat and pounded in a rapid pace that left her stunned, breathless. He was just as magnificent, dark and handsome as she remembered, but seeing him here, in her world, she also realized just how wild and untamed he was. Just how dangerous and lethal he could be.

Excitement strummed through her, for a brief moment all she wanted was to run to him, to throw her arms around him, to bury herself in his strong embrace and shut out all the horrors of the world like only he could make her do. For a brief moment, all of the joy and wonder she had ever experienced with him in the palace flooded rapidly back to her. She had been terrified in that palace, lost and confused, and adrift in a world that she didn't know and would never understand. But she had also been the happiest she'd ever been in her life. She'd been foolish, and naïve. And she had been in love.

Her arm wavered on the bow, dropping it momentarily lower; she could feel the hot press of tears burning her eyes. He looked wonderful, he looked amazing, and he was here. He had finally come for her. Though she hated to admit it, there had been a part of her that had wanted this. A part that had longed for him to come for her, a part that had wanted

him to take her away from all of this fear and pain, and keep her safe. She hated that part of her, tried to deny its existence, but it had always been there, hoping, waiting, praying, and now he was finally here.

But it was obvious that he hadn't come because he wanted to see her.

She could see that fact in the hard set of his jaw; see it in the tension in his broad shoulders. She could sense it in the anger that radiated from his hard body. He was here, but he hadn't come for a good reason. Aria swallowed heavily, fear trickled through her as she realized that he was truly furious right now. She could feel the rage thrumming off of him in nearly violent waves. She didn't know why he was so infuriated, so filled with anger, but she did know that it was directed at her. Well that was good, because she was pretty damn pissed at him too.

She didn't know why he had finally come after her, but from the look of him it appeared that he wanted to rip her throat out. Narrowing her eyes, she clenched her jaw as she lifted the bow higher once more, leveling it right at the spot of his non-beating heart. Yes, he had finally come for her, but it was obvious that one of them would not be walking away from this encounter.

CHAPTER 4

Braith studied her for a long moment. He had almost forgotten how wonderful it was to see her, and everything around her. The forest came alive with her in it; the colors were vivid, sharp to eyes so accustomed to darkness. Though the woods were beautiful, they were nothing compared to her.

Her face was thinner and more mature than the last time he had seen her. The youthful chubbiness of her cheeks had vanished in the face of her hunger again. Her eyes were a bright sapphire blue that rivaled the beautiful sky behind her. There was a wisdom and maturity in her gaze, a broken air that seemed to enshroud her, and had not been there the last time he saw her. He did not know what had happened to her over the past couple of months, but she appeared older, and far more wounded than he recalled.

Her long hair flowed around her shoulders; its wetness caused it to be darker than its normal fiery auburn color that had always captivated him. Though she was thinner than he liked her, he couldn't deny her simple, sweet beauty. She was far cleaner now than the first time he had seen her, but she was back in the boyish, ugly clothes again. Clothes that hid a figure that had once been lush, but was now lean again.

He saw the emotions that flashed over her face, the hope, the joy, and for a moment something he almost believed could have been love. But they were gone so swiftly that he wasn't even entirely sure he had seen them. Tears shimmered in her eyes; her hand wavered on the bow as it dropped slightly down. He had almost forgotten how convincing her phony pain and emotions could be. He recalled the night she had begged him not to kill the other blood slave she had been captured with, Max. She had been so sincere, had sworn that he was nothing more than a friend to her. Braith no longer believed that, he believed nothing of what she had told him. He didn't know girl before him, but he did know that she was not the girl he had thought she was. That she never had been.

He had come here to bring her back, to make her pay for her treachery. Now all he wanted was to destroy her himself. Her hand wavered, her eyes widened slightly before narrowing. The hand that had been going to drop the bow now raised it back up, leveling it at his heart. He had no doubt she would let the arrow fly, he just had no fear that it would hit him.

Just as he had no doubt that he would get his hands upon her, and she would pay.

"Arianna."

Her full mouth pinched tightly, her eyebrows drew sharply together. "Prince."

He moved away from the tree he had been leaning against, taking a step toward her. Even with the bow and arrow in her hands, he could get to her, reach her within a moment. Have her back in his arms again, her sweet blood back in his mouth. She had given it to him willingly last time, and he had almost killed her in his eagerness to consume it. Now he wanted it back, he wanted to taste it again, and have it fill him, and he didn't give a damn if she gave it freely or not. He found himself relishing the idea of taking it from her forcefully, of making her hurt as bad as she had made him hurt.

"Have you come to take me back then?" she asked softly.

"No."

She swallowed heavily, her chin tilted up a notch. He had not forgotten about her defiance, her willfulness, but he did not find it as delightful as he once had. In fact, it was aggravating the hell out of him right now. She should be cowering, trembling with fear. She had to know that she would not survive this meeting, and yet she did not show one ounce of trepidation. "To kill me then?" she asked quietly, her voice far steadier than he had thought it would be.

"Perhaps," he murmured still uncertain as to what exactly he did want to do with her. He had wanted to take her back, to make her pay, but then she would be killed, and looking at her now he wasn't sure he was willing to lose the strange sight she brought back into his life. What was he going to do with her then?

There was no tremor of fear in her. He knew there wouldn't be. Recklessly fearless, it was how she had described herself, her brother. And it was true. She was possibly looking her death in the eye, but she was not going to back down from him. She was not going to cower or beg for mercy. She was going to stand there and meet him head on, and she was going to fire that arrow. Of that he was certain; he just needed to be prepared for it.

"I see." Her eyes flickered briefly, darting swiftly around the forest. He could see the wheels in her brain spinning as she tried to formulate a plan of escape. They both knew it was useless; she would not be able to get away from him.

"Where is Jericho?"

Her gaze came slowly back to him. "Wasn't my day to watch him," she retorted sharply.

Frustration and anger built rapidly inside him, he was used to her defiance, but he didn't like it. And he sure as hell didn't want to have to deal with it after everything that she had done to him. "I'm surprised you're separated at all, but then I'm sure you've moved on to someone else by now."

Arianna nodded at him, a cynical smile twisted her full mouth. "You always did want to believe the worst of me," she said softly, but there was no hurt in her gaze, only a fiery rage that turned them a darker, fiercer shade of blue.

"And you never failed to disappoint."

True fury twisted her features; her hand shook slightly on the bow. Then she straightened her shoulders and rose slowly from her crouched position. "I'm glad I hold up to all of your expectations." Her back foot twisted in the earth, digging in slightly, she was preparing to make her move soon. "I hope your fiancée does the same."

He was mildly surprised that she knew about that, but then he should have known that his brother wouldn't keep his mouth shut. "Jericho told you."

"Someone had to, don't you think? It certainly wasn't going to be you."

"When?"

"When what?"

"When did he tell you?"

"What difference does that make?" she snapped for the first time looking slightly disconcerted.

He took a step toward her, but she didn't move away, didn't even flinch. He'd had enough of her defiance, enough of her hostility. She should be fearful; she should be telling him everything that he wanted to know. She should be begging for her life like she had begged for Max's, but she wasn't, and she wasn't going to. "Do you have no common sense whatsoever?" he inquired, his voice a low growl as he watched her. "No survival instinct?"

"I live in hell every day," she grated through clenched teeth. "A hell that you monster's created for us. The only sense I have is for survival, but since you've pretty much admitted that you're here to kill me I see no sense in worrying about anything else right now, do you?"

He took another step toward her. "I'll shoot this, I swear I will," she hissed.

He quirked an eyebrow, amused by her idle threat. She would shoot it, but it would do her little good. "Will you now?"

Her eyes narrowed, her hand clenched tighter around the bow. "Your lackey bastards were near here the other day. They raided one of our encampments. I'm sure you already know that though because I'm assuming one of them spotted me somehow. That's how you knew where to start looking for me." She continued to glare at him as she broke off, waiting for him to say something. When he didn't, she continued on. "There were children in those caves!" she snarled. "Children!"

"There are laws, and you and your people are breaking them."

Her eyes fairly sparked with rage, he could sense her rapidly unraveling control. He had always enjoyed baiting her, watching her response, but this was different, this was not the girl that had stayed in his apartment at the palace. No, this girl was stronger, harder; colder. This girl fairly vibrated with anger and hostility. She looked like a warrior, she was

a warrior, he realized. She had always been a fighter, but now she was so much more than that.

She was not the girl that had offered him her vein. She was the woman that was going to fire that arrow at any moment.

“Laws,” she snarled. “Laws! You’re a worse bastard than those monsters that came here to hunt us, and kill us. You sit there in your golden palace and you use us as your food, and your slaves, and you keep us starving and on the run. And you judge me you hypocritical son of a bitch!”

He knew she was going to let the arrow fly seconds before she did. He had pushed her to a breaking point, pushed her control to the edge. The string of the bow twanged as the arrow sliced through the air. He moved swiftly, darting out of the way of the lethal projectile moments before it slammed into the tree behind him. It would have been a fatal shot if he had still been standing there, that fact was not lost on him. She had shown no mercy, and neither would he.

He lunged at her. He had expected her to run, to try and flee on foot. It would have been pointless, but it was human instinct after all. What he hadn’t expected was for her to take to the trees like a monkey. Heaving the bow over her shoulder, she seized hold of a branch over her head, and heaved herself easily into it. She shimmied swiftly up the large tree, moving rapidly through the branches. Braith lunged for her, nearly catching hold of her pant leg. Her eyes were wide when she glanced back down at him, but it did not slow her down as she scurried up the tree.

She leapt onto another limb; she sat upon it for a moment before rising gracefully to her feet. Holding onto the trunk, and the branch above her head, she steadied herself. She stared down at him with narrowed eyes, her breath coming rapidly, and yet she still showed no fear. He had no intention of going up there after her, and she couldn’t stay up there all day, but it was only a matter of time before someone came looking for her, or came to the river. He had to get her out of the damn tree. And once he did, he was going to throttle her.

She stared down at him for a long moment, and then she turned and ran. His mouth dropped, he watched in wonder as she sprinted easily across the thick limb. She didn’t hesitate, didn’t pause as she dove off the limb, flying out across open ground before she caught hold of a branch from the tree next to it. He was too stunned to move for a moment, he could only watch as she swung herself easily onto the branch, hopped to her feet and sped across the newest limb. He recalled Jericho’s words that no one knew the forest like she did, but it appeared that not only did she know the forest she seemed to have mastered it. He was still gaping after her when she leapt easily into another tree, vanishing from sight.

It was her disappearance that drove him into action; he rushed through the woods, following her as she leapt and dove and ran through the trees with the agility of a

squirrel. He had never seen anyone move like she did, so effortlessly and easily. She was heading deeper into the forest, drawing him farther away from the area she had been walking toward when he found her. She was trying to lead him away from her family, and friends.

She raced down another limb, he watched in horror and amazement as she leapt fearlessly out of the tree. Except there wasn't another tree to catch hold of this time. She folded in on herself, curling her arms around her legs as she spun through the air. He had no idea what she intended until she hit the ground. She landed easily, bouncing swiftly up. She darted through the woods in a zigzagging pattern, easily avoiding any obstacle in her way. It was amazing to watch her, amazing to see her sleek agility, and her profound knowledge of the world around her.

Though he was fascinated by it, and felt that there were still many things she could do, many secrets and abilities that she had hidden, he was tired of being avoided. She was heading toward another large tree, if she got into it they would continue to play this game of cat and mouse even longer. He poured on the speed, rushing after her. She had just thrown her arms around the tree branch when he caught hold of her. She did not cry out, did not scream as she planted her legs against the tree trunk and shoved off it with all of her might.

He stumbled slightly backward as she lurched sharply against him with the full force of her small weight. He kept hold of the collar of her shirt though, clinging to her as she tried to dart forward, tried to pull free of his hold. She was far more stubborn, wild, and determined to escape than he had thought she would be. He knew she was a spitfire, but she was a lot more volatile than he recalled her being. She flung herself forward; the thin material of her clothing tore within his tight hold.

She staggered, seemingly just as surprised as him to be momentarily free of his grasp. He dove at her, wrapping his arms around her waist as he caught hold of her. She cried out softly in surprise as they tumbled to the ground. Though he didn't care about her, he shifted his weight away from her, trying not to crush her beneath him as they rolled over the ground. She was frantic now, squirming against him, her terror evident as she tried to escape his ironclad grasp.

He was surprised by the brief moment of guilt that tugged at him. He wanted her to pay for her perfidy, but he had not meant to terrify her to this extreme. She tried to stagger to her feet, but he kept hold of her waist, pulling her back underneath him as he flipped her over. Her eyes were wide, her hair a straggling mess around her flushed face. She was panting beneath him, her fear palpable as she continued to try and squirm out of his hold.

He seized hold of her hair, his hand wrapping into the thick, wet mess. She pushed at his chest, shoving against him as a soft whimper escaped her. He didn't know what he was thinking, what he was doing, but instead of burying his teeth in her neck and draining her dry as he had imagined doing for the past couple of months, his lips descended upon her

mouth, seizing hold of it. Her hands flattened against his chest as she went still as stone beneath him. He pressed tighter against her, wanting some sort of response, needing something from her, anything.

Needing to break her in some small way, just as she had broken him.

Then, her hands curled into his shirt, her fingers dug against his skin. A small gasp escaped her as her soft lips parted beneath his. She clung to him, her body melting against his. He invaded her, savoring in the taste and feel of her as he pulled her tighter. He forgot everything, all of her treachery, all of the anger and hurt as he held her. It was hard to remember anything when she was so right, and good in his arms. He had never felt anything as wonderful as she was, and as long as he held her, he didn't care what happened around them.

It wasn't until he tasted the saltiness of her tears upon his lips that he realized she was crying. It wasn't until he pulled away to wipe her tears from her silken cheeks that he realized he cared for her far more than he had been willing to admit to himself. It wasn't until she rested her forehead against his chest and began to sob heavily that he realized they were both doomed.

Aria watched silently as the prince threw another log on the fire. She folded her hands before her, clasping them tightly between her legs. Her eyes felt heavy, sore from crying. Her chest still hurt from the force of the sobs that had wracked her. Despite the heat, she was cold, freezing really. Numb with the shock, and horror, still clinging to her. He turned away from her, the muscles in his hard back flexing as he grabbed another log and tossed it onto the fire.

Aria glanced around the small house he had brought her to. She didn't know why she was here, how he had known about it, but it was a quaint little cottage. He turned back to her, studying her for a long moment before he made his way slowly back to her. "You need to dry off, you're shivering." She didn't tell him that she wasn't shivering because she was still wet and chilled from the river. They both knew that it wasn't the reason. "Arianna?"

She managed a small nod before rising to her feet and moving toward the crackling fire. She settled before it, holding out her numbed hands to the flames. He settled onto the arm of the sofa behind her, drawing his long legs up onto the cushions as he watched her. She pulled her hair before her, trying to dry it out and untangle it as she worked slowly through the thick, wet mess.

She didn't know what to say to him, what to do. She didn't know what he wanted from her. She started to shake again; she was trying not to start crying once more as she recalled the fierce, wonderful intensity of his kiss. For one brief moment she had felt whole, and alive, again. For one wonderful moment all of the pain of the past months had vanished beneath his touch. All of her hurt and the anger had melted beneath the wonder of his mouth against hers. She had tried to forget how amazing he could make her feel, she had remembered in an instant. And she was fairly certain that she would never be able to forget again.

"When did Jericho tell you about Gwendolyn?"

Her fingers froze in her hair; she turned slowly toward him, admiring the play of light over his hard features. "Gwendolyn?" she asked quietly, baffled by his question, and the name.

"The woman I am supposed to marry."

"Oh." Her eyes widened, her fingers slipped from her hair as the numbness returned in full force. She had forgotten about that little detail, that huge, awful betrayal. For a moment she couldn't breathe through the pain and anger that constricted her chest, through the knife that stabbed deep into her heart, destroying it. Her fingers clenched tightly in her lap, her nails dug into her palms. If she thought she had any chance of succeeding she might just punch him, but she had already managed to hit him once, in the palace, she didn't think she would get the chance again. "I didn't know that was her name."

His head tilted slightly to the side, he had slipped the dark glasses off, revealing the full beauty of his steel gray eyes, and the bright blue band that encircled his irises. It was so rare when they weren't in place, so rare when he relaxed his guard enough to take them off. She could see the faint hint of the scars that marred his striking eyes. Scars that served as a reminder that no matter how stunning his eyes were, they were flawed, and unseeing around everyone but her. "When Arianna?"

She turned sharply away from him, unable to look at him any longer. It hurt too much. "The morning he came to get me."

"Why did he tell you?"

She spun angrily back on him, her eyes narrowing fiercely as she fought the urge to punch him. "What difference does that make?" she spat.

He stared silently back at her. "I want to know, that's the difference."

"And I want peace, but we don't always get what we want."

His eyes narrowed, he leaned forward as he glared at her. "I had forgotten how annoying you were."

She glowered back at him, struggling against the tears that wanted to flow. "Then perhaps you should let me go."

His hard mouth curved into a wry smile as he shook his head. "That is not going to happen Arianna. Answer my question."

She shook her head, baffled as to why she was here and what he wanted from her. Did he just like to torture her by making her rehash the agony she had lived with ever since she had learned of his fiancée? She stared at the fire, watching as it snapped and crackled, shooting out sparks. She didn't want to tell him why Jack had told her about his fiancée, she didn't want him to know just how much she had cared about him back then. He had enough power and control over her, without giving him even more.

But she no longer cared for him like that; she couldn't care about him like that anymore she reminded herself. She had been dumb and innocent back then. She would never be either of those things again. Not when it came to him. She turned slowly back to him, meeting his intense gaze. It didn't matter if he knew why Jack had told her, he had no hold over her anymore.

"Because I didn't want to leave," she finally admitted. His eyes widened slightly, she saw the shock that rocked through him. "I was foolish enough to think that I wanted to stay, with you, no matter what the consequences of that action might be. Jack simply informed me of what an idiot I was."

"Arianna..."

She launched to her feet, unable to sit still anymore, unable to listen to him. There was a clawing sensation growing inside of her, a desperate need to be free, a desperate need to escape this whole awful situation. She paced away from the fire, stopping before the window to stare out at the forest. They were far from the caves, in an area she didn't know as it was close to civilization. It was an area of the woods she did not travel to, it wasn't safe here. Her fingers pressed against the glass, the sun was out now, her family and friends would be worried about her. They would be looking for her. She needed to get back to them; she needed to get away from him.

"You wanted to stay within the palace?"

"It doesn't matter," she whispered. She pressed her forehead briefly to the glass as she inhaled the fresh air seeping through the edges of the pane. "It's the past, it can't be changed. It's over."

She didn't hear him move, but that was not a surprise. It was rare to actually hear his approach. His hands were upon her shoulders, he held her briefly for a moment before turning her slowly away from the window. When she refused to look at him he seized gently hold of her chin and lifted it so that she had to meet his hard gaze. "I should have told you about her, but I didn't know. I didn't expect..."

"Expect what?" she inquired when he broke off.

He shook his head, bending to place a soft kiss upon her mouth. "Why did you want to stay?" he inquired, his hands clasping gently hold of her face.

She tried to pull away from him, but he held her tighter. He moved closer to her, his chest brushing against hers. His body was slightly colder than hers; the force of his presence was overwhelming. She could hardly breathe through the combination of excitement and trepidation pounding through her. She couldn't let herself get carried away here; she couldn't allow herself to hope that this might end differently than it had before. Things could never change between them; they were from completely different worlds. They were from completely different species even.

"What difference does it make?" she asked quietly.

He moved even closer, his lips were just centimeters from hers. He was the most irresistible man she had ever met, even as she tried to fight it, she could feel her body reacting to his, swaying even closer. "Because I want to know why you weren't going to leave, I need to know why you were going to stay Arianna."

"It makes no difference, prince."

"Braith."

"What?"

"I told you once before to call me Braith, not prince."

Arianna sighed softly as she lowered her eyes. Yes, he had told her that before, but ever since she had fled the palace she had started to refer to him as the prince again. It helped her to distance herself from him, something that she desperately needed to do in order to survive the hurt that clung to her. He may want her to stop calling him prince now, but she wasn't sure she could. Doing so would mean allowing him back into her heart and she couldn't do that.

She couldn't be hurt like that again; she didn't think she could survive it a second time.

"Arianna, tell me why you wanted to stay."

"No!" her voice was sharper than she had intended. She was ashamed to admit that even she could hear the panic and fear in it. "No! You don't always get what you want. Why can't you just let this be? Just leave me be! Why did you come here!? Why did you hunt me down after all this time? How did you even find me? I was just beginning to move on and you had to show up and destroy it all again! Destroy me again."

She tried to put on a brave front, tried to straighten her shoulders, and raise her chin, but she could feel her lip trembling. It didn't help that sadness filled his features; that a look of loss shimmered in his startling eyes. She wanted to scream in frustration. It was all so unfair. She wanted to move on; she wanted to start a new life. She wanted to attempt to regain some semblance of the life she'd had before he had entered it. But he had shown up again and sharply reminded her of the fact that the only life she truly wanted was a life with him.

It was also the only life she could never have.

"Arianna..."

She tore her gaze away from his, trying hard not to cry again. "Please Braith." She was hoping that the use of his name would earn her some reprieve. It did not.

He kissed her forehead, her nose gently. Aria shuddered, trying hard not to melt against him, trying hard not to give into everyone of her desires and just throw aside all of her hurt, and anger. She couldn't though; she could not survive this a second time. But as his lips brushed gently over hers, she felt herself leaning into him. Felt herself seeking the gentle caress of his mouth and hands. She hated herself for her weakness, but there was something about him, something that she could not resist no matter how hard she tried.

His fingers wound into her hair, he pulled her closer to him as his tongue stroked lightly over her lips. Aria was shaking, trembling, unable to put up any fight against his soft kisses and caressing hands. It was when his hands rubbed gently over the healing wound on her neck, that she finally came back to herself a little. She tried to pull away from him, but his hand enclosed on her shoulder. Ever so gently, he pulled her tattered shirt down a little, revealing the marks upon her. A shiver ran through her as he traced his fingers lightly over it.

She was suddenly flooded with memories of that night, of him upon her, feeding from her, nourishing his body with hers. She had been so enthralled, so unbelievably lost to him, and the joy that had suffused her as he had drained her body of its blood. As he had used her life force to nurture his own. She had never wanted the moment to end, but that was before she knew everything, before she had seen the raid on the caves, before she learned he was promised to another. Another that he probably loved.

Aria pulled her collar away from him, covering the wound back up. There would be no repeat of that night now. She could not allow herself to be lost like that again, no matter how badly she wanted to be. "I loved you," she whispered.

"Excuse me?" he asked in surprise.

"I wanted to stay in the palace because I loved you. I told Jack to leave me there, because I didn't care what happened, what would become of me, I wanted to stay with you. I loved you so much that I had no thought of my own safety, my own life, when it came to you."

"Arianna..."

"And then Jack told me the truth." She continued as if he had never spoken, because if she didn't get this all out now, she never would. If she didn't get it all out, then she would lose herself to him again. It would destroy her this time. "And then my love didn't matter anymore, nothing mattered. I didn't even matter. I was so hurt, so angry, so lost and confused and scared. I know you never promised me anything, I know there never could have been anything between us, not in the end, but I never would have allowed it to get that far if I had known the truth. If I had known that you loved someone else, that you

were going to marry her, I never would have allowed that night to happen. Never. You almost destroyed me with your lies and deceit. I will never allow that to happen again!"

He stood immobile for a moment, and then he seized hold of her chin, squeezing it gently. She glared at him, feeling sullen and disagreeable as she folded her arms over her chest. It was childish, she knew that, but she couldn't bring herself to be completely mature at this point. The past two months had been nothing but confusing, frightening, and so unbelievably hard that she felt she deserved some childish behavior right now.

And then he had reappeared and thrown a giant wrench into all of the hard work it had taken to try and piece herself together again.

"I didn't know Arianna."

"I don't care!" she retorted.

He rubbed his thumb lightly over her bottom lip. "I knew you loved me that night, you told me so, but what I didn't fully understand was how I had come to feel about you."

She stared at him for a long moment, trying to fight the hope and longing raging through her. No matter what he said, this could never be. He would have to leave, and she would have to go back to the woods and the caves. "Don't," she whispered.

"If I had known what was going to happen Arianna, I would have told you about her myself. I would have left you alone; I would have done anything other than what I did that night. I never meant to hurt you, I swear that. What I feel for you, it's not something I ever expected. I never thought that it could happen to me. If I had been stronger I would have resisted the offer of your gift until you knew the truth, but that night was a complete surprise to me also."

She stared wordlessly up at him, her mouth parted in shock. "Braith..."

"I don't love my fiancée Arianna. In fact, I dislike her intensely. It's an arranged marriage, her family is very powerful. It is not something that either of us want."

Aria was silent for a long moment as she absorbed his words. "That doesn't change anything Braith," she whispered. "You will still go back, and you will marry her, and I will... Well I suppose I will either end up being recaptured, killed, or perhaps even one day I will end up married to Max, or some other rebel though it is unlikely I will live long enough."

His eyebrows shot up, his eyes narrowed fiercely as he moved closer to her, pushing her against the window. Aria stared at him in surprise, stunned by the anger blistering from him. "To Max?" he snarled.

Aria frowned at him, trying not to be intimidated by him, but she was completely baffled by his sudden change. "Yes, I guess, maybe... Oh, I don't know," she breathed. "I don't want to bring children into this awful world but he's a good man, he's safe, and he cares for me. Perhaps he even loves me. That should be enough, shouldn't it?"

He was staring at her as if she had just sprouted another head. "You will not be with Max."

She blinked at the growled command, then her pride rose swiftly back up. "You're not my father, you can't tell me what I can, and cannot do!" she snapped.

He was fairly vibrating with anger. His hands were on either side of her, pressed against the window as he leaned ever closer. "You're right I'm not your father, but I am a part of you, and as that part I am telling you that you will not be with Max."

She frowned at him, confused and baffled by his response. "Part of me? I don't understand."

"My blood flows in your veins Arianna; it's how I found you. It is how I will always be able to find you."

Her mouth dropped, her mind spun. She recalled their last night together, when he had taken her blood. After, she had fallen asleep and drifting in and out of confusing consciousness. She had dreamt that he had held her tight, cradling her gently as he gave her something sweet and delicious to drink. Horror curdled through her at the same time that longing blossomed like a spring flower. It had all been a dream though, hadn't it?

"I don't..." she shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts, trying to clear the fog that was clinging to her. "No, it was a dream. Wasn't it?"

The anger melted from his body, his hands were upon her shoulders again, stroking gently over the marks on her body. "No, Arianna, it was not a dream. It was my fault, I took too much. I was so hungry..."

"You hadn't been feeding well, because of me. To protect me!" she recalled on a gasp.

"Yes. I didn't want them to know I wasn't feeding from you. But I took too much Arianna, you were just so delicious. I took far more than I had intended, and the only way to keep you alive was to give you some of my blood. I linked us forever by doing so."

Tears burned her eyes; she looked away from him, staring at the wall over his shoulder. He had also told her he loved her that night, it had all been very foggy, very hazy, but now that she knew that it wasn't a dream, she knew that he had said that as well. He had told her he loved her, and she had left him the next day.

"That's why Jack asked me if I had shared your blood," she whispered.

His hands clasped hold of her face; he turned her back to him. There was a ferocity in his eyes that shocked her. "Jericho asked you that?" he demanded.

Aria swallowed heavily as she nodded. "Yes, when he came for me, when he saw my blood still on me, he asked me if I had shared your blood. But I thought that it had been a dream, I was certain of it once he told me that you were engaged." Braith was silent for a long moment, his jaw was clenched. "He would have left me there if I had answered

differently, wouldn't he have?"

He shook his head, his dark hair falling around his face. "I don't know what he would have done Arianna. If anything, these recent events have made me realize that I don't know my little brother at all."

Aria clasped hold of his hands, holding them lightly against her face. She closed her eyes, savoring in his gentle touch, savoring in the strength of him. Yes, he did have a fiancée. Yes, she could not expect much, if anything, from him. However, he had loved her, he had told her so. He had not merely been using her, playing with her in order to cause her even more hurt, and anguish, when he turned on her.

"You said you loved me," she whispered.

He pulled her closer, enfolding her in his arms as he held her tight against him. "Yes."

She wanted to cry again, for everything that they had almost had, for everything that they had lost. For everything that they would lose, and could never have. But it was impossible to feel sad when she was holding him. It was impossible to hurt when he was kissing her forehead gently, nuzzling against her ears, touching her with such reverence and awe. She let herself drift into him, let herself get lost in him. These past months had been so awful, but his touch eased all of the rawness and pain that had been clinging to her. His touch made everything better; it was the salve to the ragged wound that she had so desperately been seeking. And for just this moment, in this time, she needed to feel better.

She needed to feel him.

CHAPTER 5

Aria woke slowly, her eyes were heavy and sleep clung to her. It was the first time she had slept without being plagued by nightmares and loss in so long. The first time she did not wake up in pain, the first time she could awaken and actually breathe easily again. Her gaze fell instantly upon Braith; he was standing by the window, staring out at the darkening night. Aria lay for a moment longer, enjoying this wonderful moment of peace, but realization crashed swiftly back over her.

She bolted upright, horror rolling through her as she stared at the night sky. The day was gone. Braith turned toward her, his eyes troubled as he studied her. "My father is going to be so worried, my family; my friends." Though the words were going to kill her to say, she said them anyway. "I have to go Braith."

He turned back to the night, before looking at her again. "It is late Arianna."

"I know, but..."

"Tonight, just tonight."

Aria stared silently at him, her mouth parted slightly as her heart hammered in excitement. She so badly wanted to stay with him for this night, and for every night after this, but she couldn't have those nights. She could have this one. Guilt tugged briefly at her as she thought of her family and friends, but it was only one night. It was the only night she would have for the rest of her life.

"Ok," she said softly.

His mouth curved in a soft smile, his head tilted slightly to the side. "I expected more of an argument."

She grinned back at him, her fingers playing with the soft cushion of the couch. "I'm not always difficult."

"Could have fooled me. Come." He held his hand out to her as he came over to her. She slipped her hand into his, smiling softly at him.

He led her down a darkened hall, flicking on light switches as he moved. The mouth watering scent of food hit her before they even reached the kitchen. Her mouth parted, her eyes widened in surprise as she stepped into the room. Food was set up on the counters, cheeses, breads, fruits, and meats were stacked neatly upon two plates. She glanced around, wondering who had done this, but she saw no one else within the small house. Her gaze fell upon Braith, who was watching her in amusement.

"You did this."

"I'm not completely helpless," he replied lightly. She couldn't help but grin back at him. It was one of the sweetest things anyone had ever done for her. She didn't stop to think about what that said of her life, it wasn't worth it. She was ok with getting by on very little. "Come on, you're hungry."

She didn't ask him how he knew that, her stomach was rumbling loudly, and repeatedly. She settled into a stool at the counter while he heaped food onto her plate. She cocked an eyebrow at him, amused by the amount of food he was piling on for her. "I'm not starving," she told him.

"You've lost weight again," he replied, sliding the plate before her.

Aria shrugged; there was no help for it in the forest. They didn't have enough to eat, and they worked endlessly. "Thank you," she said softly. He slid into the seat across from her, folding his arms before him. Aria studied him for a moment, feeling slightly self-conscious as he watched her eat. "What is this place?" she asked softly.

"It belonged to my mother's family, it was their summer getaway."

"Really?" Aria glanced over the large, airy kitchen. "It's very nice. Will they come looking for you here?"

"Jericho and I were the only ones that ever came here, except for some cleaners once every couple of weeks."

"Why did the two of you come here?"

Braith shrugged as he sat back. "To hunt, to get away. To be alone for awhile."

"To get away from what?"

He watched her for a moment longer before leaning back in his seat. "From many things," he replied evasively. "Eat Arianna."

She picked up a piece of apple and began to chew on it, barely tasting its sweetness in her mouth as she thought over his words. "Will they come looking for you here?"

"No. I doubt my father even remembers where this place is, and Caleb is busy. They won't even notice I'm gone."

"What about Jack? Will he come here looking for me?"

Braith tilted his head slightly; confusion filtered through his eyes, then realization dawned. "I forget you call Jericho that."

Aria smiled at him, leaning slightly toward him. "It's what we know him as. He certainly isn't a prince to us."

He grinned back at her, poking her nose lightly as he settled back in his seat. "I suppose

he isn't. But no, Jericho will not come here. I doubt he will even think about it."

Aria nodded, relieved to know that they would not be disturbed tonight. She settled in, a large weight lifting off of her as she eagerly dug into the delicious food. They talked softly, exchanging stories. She told him what it was like to grow up within the forest. She told him about her father, whom she loved dearly, and her brothers Daniel and William. She told him of things she had been too frightened to tell him about before, when he had not known that her father was the leader of the rebels. She didn't know much about her mother, she had been killed when she and William were children. Her father didn't talk about her very often, it was too painful for him, but when he did talk of her Aria listened intently, eager to learn anything she could about the woman that she had never known.

Though Braith listened intently to her, he did not say much about his life. His mother had also died when he was young, but young to him had been a hundred and seventy five years. He didn't speak of his father much, and when he did, Aria got the feeling that he didn't like him, and that they didn't get along. He barely mentioned Caleb, or his sisters, he spoke a little more of Jericho, and though she caught the underlying tension in his voice, she also caught the only hint of fondness she'd heard toward any of his family when it came to his youngest brother.

She enjoyed listening to him talk, and thought she could do so forever. Even though she knew that was impossible, she decided to pretend that just for tonight, they could have forever. It was wonderful to be his equal for a change, and not his slave. The moon rose high in the sky, and was beginning its downward descent when he stood. "You must be tired."

She was tired, but she didn't want to go to sleep. She didn't want this night to end. She could sleep tomorrow when he was gone, and she was alone again. "I'm ok."

He slipped his hand into hers, pulling her against him. His hand wrapped around the back of her head as he cradled her gently against him. She held him for a long moment, simply relishing in the feel of his hard body against hers, simply relishing the feel of being in his arms again. She gasped, shock racing through her when he bent and scooped her easily into his arms. She stared down at him in wide eyed wonder as her fingers lightly stroked the nape of his neck. His eyes were intense and burning as he watched her for a long moment before striding easily from the room.

He navigated the dark hallways with ease; until he reached a door that he thrust open. He didn't bother with the light switch as he strode over and placed her lightly upon the bed. Aria watched him as he moved around, drawing the curtains shut and blocking out the light of the fading moon. Her heart hammered with excitement, her mouth was dry as uncertainty claimed her. She didn't know what was going to happen, what he expected, or what she was even willing to give to him. She wanted to pretend that they had forever, but they didn't. Yet, it was Braith. Even if she never saw him again, she knew she would never love anyone the way that she loved him. This was more than likely their last night together, if she was never going to see him again, didn't she want to give him

everything she could?

He was as silent as a ghost as he came back to her, slipping onto the bed beside her. He pulled her against him, kissing her softly. All doubts and fears vanished; she didn't want to think, not now. And he made it so very easy to forget everything, except for him. His hands stroked over her face, her hair, as he pushed her gently upon the bed. His eyes were bright in the dim light of the room. He stared at her for a long moment, his hands lightly holding each side of her face.

"You are beautiful."

Though it may not be entirely true, she felt beautiful when she was with him. She felt as if she were the only woman in the world, and in some ways, to him, she was. She was the first woman he had seen in years. She lowered her lashes as tears burned her eyes, she didn't want to think about anything else, but she couldn't help it. This was it. This was all she would have of him.

"Arianna?"

She lifted her eyes to him, forcing a smile. "It's ok Braith, I'm ok."

He kissed her nose softly, pulling her against his side as he rolled off of her, cradling her tightly. "There are some other things I need to tell you Arianna. I don't want you to be hurt again; I don't want you to be surprised by anything you hear about me."

She frowned, lifting her head to look at him. He looked troubled, his eyes were distant, haunted. "What is it?" she asked softly.

His fingers stroked through her hair, running it lightly through his grasp. "Before you, I never had a blood slave."

"I know."

"After you..." his voice trailed off for a moment, his fingers tightened briefly in her hair. "There were many."

Aria stared at him in surprise, and then hurt curled through her. She had thought that she was special. No, she was special to him. She couldn't start thinking like that, couldn't let herself start to doubt that. It would ruin this small bit of bliss they had managed to find together. She was special to him, he did care about her. She just had to keep believing that it was true. He wouldn't be here if it wasn't. "Why?" she choked out.

His gaze was hard upon hers; there was a defensive air about him. "I wanted to forget."

"Forget what?"

"You."

Her eyes widened, she bit hard on her bottom lip. She knew how that felt, the driving need not to think about anything, not to feel anything anymore. "Did it work?"

"That's why I'm here." She managed to smile wanly at him, but she couldn't shake the lingering hurt that clung to her. "I never gave them my blood Arianna; I've never done that with anyone else."

She managed a small nod, trying not to show how upset she was. She knew that she was failing. "It's ok."

"Arianna, I thought... I don't know what I thought. That's the problem, I didn't want to think."

"I know Braith, I know how you felt, how it hurt to think, to breathe even. I know because I didn't want to think or feel anymore either. It's ok, I don't like it, but it's ok. It's... It's what you had to do."

She could barely speak by the time she was done, hurt clogged her throat, but she couldn't find any anger. She couldn't be angry now. She hadn't been there for him, she had thought that he had lied to her, and he had thought that she'd betrayed him. She couldn't be angry now when he was looking at her with such a hopeful, needy expression. He may not have given them his blood, but she was sure that he had done other things with them. Things that they had not done together. Aria quickly shut the thought down. It had no place here, this was their one night, he wanted to be honest, and she could not fault him for that. But she was not going to ruin this night, she couldn't.

"And what did you do to stop from thinking?" he asked softly though she heard the tight tension in his voice.

He had buried himself in women, and blood. She had buried herself in the woods, in the wild, in the solitude. "Went fishing."

He lifted an eyebrow in surprise, his head tilted slightly to the side. "You went fishing?"

"Yes, I'd go to the lake almost every day and go fishing. It was quiet, peaceful; I could lose myself in the nature and serenity of it. Even when Max..."

"Max?" the name was almost growled at her.

She frowned at him. She had taken his shocking news relatively well; he owed her the same respect. "Yes, Max. He is my friend. He was also a blood slave, though his experience was far worse than mine. He needed the solitude, the peace, the company of someone who understood at least a little of what he had gone through. He would join me most days, and we would just sit silently together."

"I think Max wants to be more than a friend," his voice was low, gravelly. She heard the displeasure in his tone.

"Braith..." She didn't know what to say, what to do. But he was being honest and she should too. "Yes, he does. And at one time I had a big crush on Max. He was older, my brother's best friend, and my first kiss." Braith's hand tightened on the back of her head, he fairly vibrated with anger. "But even before we were blood slaves, even before I met

you, I had decided that it could never be between us.”

He was struggling to keep control, struggling to keep himself calm. “Why not?” he asked quietly.

Aria shrugged. “My life isn’t one that I would wish on anyone else, especially not a child. It’s too hard, too brutal.”

He was silent for a long moment, and then he pulled her slowly down to him. His lips were warm against hers, soft, and soothing. His hand cradled the back of her head gently. She lost herself to him again, forgetting everything and everyone. The effect he had over her was amazing, and absolute.

He pulled slowly away from her, softly kissing her lips, and then her nose. “It will all be ok,” he whispered. “Everything will work out.”

She managed a wry smile as she nodded. They both knew that it would not be ok, but here, tonight, in his arms, she could believe anything. She fell into his kiss, losing herself to the touch and feel of him. He was wonderful, amazing, everything she had always wanted, and could never have. He rolled her slowly over, his kiss moving leisurely over her neck. He pulled her shirt down, revealing her shoulders. He stilled upon the bite mark, his lips hovering over it as she felt the hard press of his fangs against her flesh.

“It’s ok,” she breathed, her fingers curling into his thick hair. “It’s ok Braith.”

He didn’t hesitate, but bit gently down, reopening the wound and causing her blood to spurt once more. Aria arched against him, the pain was sharp, and fleeting. Then she felt the familiar pull, the familiar tug of her blood into his body. But unlike the first time, he was not half starved now; he was far gentler, and far more caring as he moved over her. She clung to his hard arms, tears streaming down her face as she savored in the wondrous joy of the moment. She never wanted it to end, never wanted to part from him.

He pulled slowly away from her, kissing her softly, holding her tight as he wiped the tears from her cheeks. “Don’t cry Arianna.”

She couldn’t stifle the tears, or emotions streaming from her. She ran her hands over his beloved face, wanting to savor every detail of him before they were separated again. For good. He pulled slightly away from her, biting deep into his wrist. She watched in wide eyed wonder as blood flowed from him. Unlike the last time, she would remember this exchange.

She felt she should be repulsed by the idea of drinking his blood. The vampires were her enemies after all, they always had been, but she could not bring herself to feel revulsion as he held his wrist out to her. The need in his eyes was glaringly obvious, and she was not going to turn him down. She would never hurt him in such away. She took hold of his wrist, watching him as she brought it to her mouth. His eyes sparked with desire, and love.

His blood was sweet as it flowed into her, powerful as it seeped into her cells. He kissed her forehead gently, his nose rubbing briefly against hers as he nuzzled her. "I love you too Arianna," he breathed, his mouth hot against her ear. His words only caused more tears to flow.

Aria woke to the smell of something delicious cooking. She smiled softly, stretching out upon the comfortable bed as her stomach rumbled in eager anticipation. She didn't know what he was cooking for her now, but it smelled wonderful. Upon crawling out of bed, she discovered the bathroom, and the shower. Drawn by the lure of hot water, she was unable to resist climbing into the shower and staying in there for a very long time. She discovered the robe after forcefully removing herself from the dwindling heat.

The robe smelled of him, which made it even more irresistible to slip on. The soft material felt fantastic against her bare skin. She hesitated a moment, self-conscious about going bare beneath the robe, but she wasn't ready to put her clothes back on. They weren't filthy, but they most certainly weren't as clean as the robe, and she wanted to enjoy her brief reprieve for a little while longer. She didn't think Braith would mind anyway.

She slipped from the room, following her nose as she padded silently down the hall. "Something smells amazing, and I've decided the shower is the best invention ever."

She turned the corner, holding the knot on the front of her robe as Braith came into sight. He was standing in the kitchen doorway, his back to her. She frowned, uncertain as to what he was doing there. His head turned toward her, his gaze was dark and stormy as he caught sight of her. There was also fury blasting from his eyes. She hesitated, her feet staggering slightly on the hardwood floor. She didn't understand the rage in his gaze, didn't know why it would be directed at her. They had been fine when they had fallen to sleep, better than fine even. She had never felt so content and happy in her life.

And now it seemed as if the sight of her was enough to send him into a rage. Aria began to shake; her hands trembled on the knot of the robe. What was going on?

His eyes narrowed slightly, and then his hand slammed into the doorway with enough force to splinter the wood. Aria gasped in surprise, jumping slightly as the wood cracked loudly and bits of it scattered to the floor. Her heart jumped in surprise, but she still did not feel any fear, not of him anyway. He wouldn't hurt her she knew that, she just didn't understand what was wrong with him right now.

He turned slowly away from her, his back ramrod straight, his muscles quivering with

tension. Aria looked slowly away from his rigid back, her eyes widening, her mouth dropping as she caught sight of Jack on the other side of the room. He was standing by the door outside, staring at her. There was surprise in his features, but there was also confusion, fear, and a deep sadness that shook her.

It was then that she realized their wonderful world of bliss had been forever shattered once more. "Aria," Jack greeted softly.

She stared at him for a moment longer, then fear and horror tore through her. She wanted to reach out to Braith, but her hand remained frozen on her knot. She didn't know what to say, what to do. She was practically naked, standing in their family house, her hair wet and straggling. She knew what it all looked like, and she didn't care. What she cared about was the fact that Jack had found them. That he had come here to ruin their brief time together, again. Anger spurted through her, they'd had so little time together as it was, and now it was over.

She glared at him, her hands fisting at her sides. Jack quirked an eyebrow as he studied her questioningly. "I'm assuming you didn't force her here," he said softly.

"No," Aria responded, when Braith didn't.

Jack stared hard at her for a moment before turning his attention to his brother. "What are you doing Braith?" Jack asked quietly.

Braith's body remained ramrod straight. Fury radiated from him, shaking the arm that was slammed into the wall. Aria knew that it was more than just Jack being here that was shaking him, but also the fact that their time together was over. They both knew Jack was here to take her back, and there was nothing that either of them could do to stop it. She had to go back to her world, just as Braith had to return to his. Neither of them could hide away forever, it was impossible.

"That's none of your business," Braith growled.

Jack's eyes flashed with anger. "It is my business. She's a young girl, you have no right..."

"I'm not a child!" Aria interrupted sharply. "And you are not my father, or my brother, Jack."

Jack's eyes were hard as he stared at her. "No, your father and brothers would have come in here looking to kill; they would have been disgusted to find you like this." Aria recoiled from his harsh words, her mouth parted, she felt as if she had been slapped by him.

"Don't," Braith snarled, his hand clenching on the ruined doorframe. "Don't talk to her like that."

"You have no idea what you have gotten yourself messed up with here Aria," Jack continued as if Braith had never spoken. "And yes, you are a child. Especially when compared to us. You are a small blink in our lifespan Aria. You should know better Braith,

I thought better of you than to do this with a young girl, a human girl no less! What the hell are you doing!?"

Braith bristled at the reprimand, the muscles in his back rippled. "Like I said before, that's none of your business."

Jack's eyes widened slightly, he shook his head. "How did you even find her? What are you even doing outside of the palace?" Neither Braith nor Aria answered him. Jack glanced rapidly between them, then his shoulders slumped slightly and his gaze landed upon Aria. "You lied to me."

Aria shook her head. "I didn't lie to you."

"Then what the hell do you call it!?" he exploded. "I asked if he had shared his blood with you! You told me no!"

"I'm not going to tell you again to watch how you talk to her!" Braith warned.

Aria reached out to him, grasping hold of his arm as she sensed his rapidly unraveling control, he was nearing a volatile snapping point. She didn't want them fighting, not only were they brothers but she had a feeling that they would destroy this house, and each other, if they did. And the last thing she wanted was for either of them to be hurt.

"It's ok Braith." He relaxed slightly, but a tremor remained in his muscles, and she was not fooled into thinking that he wouldn't attack at a moment's notice. "I didn't remember Jack; I thought it was a dream. I didn't lie to you on purpose, it was..." She didn't know what it was, she couldn't explain it. "I'm sorry Jack."

"Don't apologize to him," Braith told her.

"You put us all in danger," Jack scolded.

Aria bit on her bottom lip, her fingers wrapped tighter around Braith's arm. She stepped closer to him, needing his touch to soothe her raw nerves. He glanced back at her, his eyes softening as he took her in. She stared up at him for a moment, trying hard to calm her racing heart. He finally released his hold on the wall, pulling her tighter against him, but also moving her slightly behind him. Jack watched them silently, his eyes narrowed as he studied them.

Aria rested her forehead against Braith's chest as she took a deep breath, trying to calm her raw, savaged nerves. Braith wrapped his hand around the back of her head, holding her tight to him for a long moment. He bent his head to hers. "Why don't you go get dressed Arianna," he whispered in her ear.

She shook her head, her gaze darting back toward Jack. "No, I'm not leaving you."

"It will be ok," he assured her. "I'd much prefer you in clothes though, ok?"

She wanted to put clothes on, she felt slightly vulnerable at the moment, but the last

thing she was going to do was leave the two of them alone together. "No Braith."

He sighed impatiently, his eyes narrowed as he studied her. She could sense his frustration with her, but she was not leaving here if there was a chance that they were going to hurt each other. "Go Aria," Jack told her.

She shot him a fierce look. "Jack, we may be friends, but you need to stop treating me like a child." Jack's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "Both of you," she added, turning her attention back to Braith. "I'm not as old as you, but I've seen and experienced a lot. So no, I am not leaving here until I am certain that you will not kill each other."

Braith's jaw clenched tight in annoyance, Jack's mouth quirked in sardonic amusement. "Well apparently she disobeys everyone, even the mighty future king," Jack drawled. Braith shot him a fierce look. "Are you going to be his queen Aria? Oh but you could never be the queen there's already somebody set up to produce heirs for him. Will you be the mistress then, the kept woman?"

Hurt speared through her, she shrank from the sharp reminder that she could not be his queen; that she never would be. There was already another woman in line for that. Her fingers dug tighter into Braith, she struggled to breathe through the pain constricting her chest. "That's enough!" Braith snarled. "You say one more word and I'll rip your throat out myself Jericho, do you understand me!?"

"One more word of the truth?" Jack demanded.

Aria clung to Braith as he tried to pull away, tried to lunge at his brother. "Stop Braith, please. Just stop, both of you, stop!" Braith tried to shake her free, but she somehow managed to insert herself in between the two of them. "Stop!"

Aria was breathing heavy, terrified that she was about to witness two brothers kill each other. She didn't realize that the sleeve of her robe had fallen down, exposing her shoulder, until Braith grabbed hold of her, pulling her back as he yanked the sleeve up to cover her skin and the dark mark upon it. It was too late though, Jack had not missed the fresh wounds upon her body. He stared at her covered shoulder for a moment longer, before finally lifting his startled gaze to hers.

"I told you, I am here willingly," Aria said softly, defiantly.

CHAPTER 6

Braith held the robe tight around her, surprised to realize that she was not wearing anything underneath. He had at least expected the thin nightgown he had set out for her, but perhaps she had not noticed it, or she had simply chosen not to put it on. Either way, she was not wearing clothes. He didn't know if he was more excited by this prospect, or infuriated by it. Though, if his brother hadn't been standing there, Braith knew what the answer to that question would have been.

Arianna seemed oblivious to his surprise over this new development as she continued to glare at Jack; her chin raised in defiance, her eyes narrowed in anger. Braith's gaze turned back to his brother. "I came here willingly, and I know that there is no future for us Jack. You don't need to continuously remind me of something that I am painfully aware of. I wanted this. I needed this."

Though her voice was strong, Braith could see the tears burning in her eyes. "Aria," Jericho said softly, looking lost and dumbfounded. Her fingers curled fiercely around Braith's arms, she clung tighter to him, shaking slightly.

"I know everything," she told him. "I know it all and I accept it for what it is Jack."

"Do you know about the blood slaves?" Jericho demanded fiercely. "The many he has kept in the past months? Do you know what he has done to them, with them Aria? You are not special!"

Though Braith still thought of him as his brother, he was beginning to realize more and more that this man before them was no longer the Jericho he had known, but was in fact more the Jack that Arianna knew him as. This was not the same brother that had left the palace, it was not the same Jericho that Braith had grown up with, and been close to. This man was a stranger, one that seemed determined to rip Arianna away from him. He didn't think it was because Jericho had romantic feelings for her, but in fact had come to think of her as a sister, or a good friend. One that he was trying to protect, unfortunately Jericho seemed hell bent on trying to protect her from him. And hell bent on hurting her, and tearing her away from him, in his desire to try and keep her safe.

Jericho just didn't realize that he was trying to keep her safe from someone that would die to make sure that she stayed that way also. And Braith knew that the man across from him was no longer Jericho, but was in fact, the man that he had rebuilt himself into. He was now this creature called Jack.

Arianna glanced up at him, biting hard on her bottom lip as her eyes swam with tears.

Anger spurted through him; she had been hurt and jerked around enough. He could not stand the fact that she had to experience even more of it. He cradled her face lightly in his hands, savoring in the feel of her silken skin. "I know," she said softly.

Braith rested his forehead against hers, taking a small moment to steady himself. Taking a small moment to enjoy the peace and splendor she brought to his hectic world. The last thing he had ever wanted to do was reveal to her what a monster he had been these past couple of months, he was immensely glad he had now.

"Jesus," Jack whispered. He pulled a chair out from the table and slid limply into it. "What have you done Braith? What have the two of you done?"

Braith kissed her softly, holding tight to her for a long moment before pulling slowly back. "I put some clothes out for you; they're on the chest in my room. Please go get dressed Arianna." She glanced at Jack, her forehead furrowing in consternation. "We'll be fine," he assured her.

She paused for a moment more before finally nodding her consent. He watched as she moved swiftly down the hall, glancing wearily back at them. She hesitated before slipping around the corner and disappearing from sight. Braith turned slowly back to his brother, folding his arms firmly over his chest as he stared hard at him. Jack didn't know that Braith could see the incredulous look on his face, didn't know that he was watching his brothers every move.

"What is this Braith?" he asked softly.

"I don't know," he answered honestly.

Jack frowned at him, his hands curled upon the table. "She may think that she can handle this, but she can't Braith. She's strong Braith, she's seen a lot, but she's also very innocent to the ways of the world. You didn't see her after I took her away from there. You don't know her the way that I know her..."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Braith demanded.

Jack sighed as he leaned forward in his chair, clasping his hands before him on the table. "I've been in those woods for six years Braith. I've seen firsthand what these people suffer through, what our kind has forced them to suffer through. I've known Aria for over four years now, she's proud, she's wild, and she has one of the kindest hearts I've ever known. She's been broken ever since I pulled her out of that palace. She may think she can handle this, she may even feel that she is prepared for it, but compared to us she is just a child Braith. And it's obvious that she's in love with you."

Braith shifted slightly, glancing behind him to see if she was coming back yet. He was bristling, resentful of his brother's words, and the fact that Jack seemed to think he knew so much more about her. "She is more than a child," he grated.

"She is seventeen years old! You are to be king; you are to be married..."

"I don't need you constantly reminding me, or her, of that fact!" Braith snarled. "I was not lucky enough to be born the middle, or youngest son. I was not lucky enough to get the chance to leave that place, and all of my responsibilities, behind. I was not lucky enough to escape father's brutality!"

Jack was silent for a long moment. "I know that Braith, probably more than anyone, it was why I wanted to leave in the first place. Though, at the time I had wanted to win father's favor by doing something daring, and treacherous. I wanted to earn his respect, and I wanted him to think of me as more than just a punching bag. But once I was free, and amongst these people, I realized just what a monster he is by living amongst the people that he has hurt even worse than us. Aria's family, and Aria, is the biggest contributors to this realization. She's special, I care for her, and I do not want to see her hurt anymore. You're my brother, I love you, but I'll never return there. These are my people now, I need to protect them."

"And you think that I won't protect her?"

Jack studied him for a long moment. "I think you will try, but there is only so much you can do. You hate father as much as I, but you have always been big on responsibility, and duty. You will not turn your back on that. It is why I did not tell you that I was going to take her. I knew you would stop me simply because it would weigh heavily on your conscious to be involved with such treason."

"You have been gone for a long time Jack; you don't have a clue as to what you're talking about," Braith growled.

Anger spurted across Jack's face. His hands sprawled on top of the table as he half rose from the chair. "And why is that?" he demanded. Braith glanced back down the hall. Arianna was still not in sight, but she wouldn't be much longer. He turned back to his brother, Jack had become a man in the time he had been gone, but Braith still saw the little boy in him. "You're to be married Braith, you are to take over for father. That is your world, this is not..."

"She is my world," Braith interrupted sharply.

Jack stared at him for a long moment, and then his gaze slid slowly past him. Braith held out his hand as Arianna arrived at his side. She took hold of his hand, squeezing it tightly between the both of hers as she held it before her. Jack studied the two of them, he slid limply back into his chair.

"Dear God Braith, this is a mess," he breathed. "Your father is worried about you Aria."

She bit on her bottom lip as she nodded. "I'm sorry for that." He ran his hands through his shaggy hair, nodding as he played with the fork Braith had placed on the table. "How did you know I was here?"

"I didn't. I knew Braith might be here."

Arianna glanced up at him, frowning in consternation. "I didn't expect him to look for me," Braith said softly. "I didn't think he would expect the two of us to be together, and come here."

"I see," she said softly.

"I only hoped that you had just brought her here, and not returned her to the palace. I only hoped that it was not someone else that had taken her," Jack explained further.

"Now you trust me with her?" Braith growled.

Jack quirked an eyebrow at him as he tilted his head. "I just wanted to believe that father had not destroyed all of your humanity, as he has with Caleb. I knew you would be infuriated that I took her from you, I half expected you might try to find her again just to soothe your pride, but I had to believe that you would not punish her for something that I had done."

Braith continued to glare at his brother, infuriated with him. It was the soft rumbling of her stomach that finally pulled his attention away from his sibling. "You should get something to eat Arianna."

"Braith..."

He cradled her face gently in his hand. "I can hear your stomach rumbling." Her face flared red as she ducked her head. "Come on."

He led her forward, pulling out the chair for her to sit. He watched his brother wearily as he pushed her slowly in. Jack was frowning, his eyebrows drawn sharply together as he studied them. Arianna stared silently back at him, her gaze weary and resigned. Braith made her a plate of food and slipped it in front of her.

She hesitated for a moment, but eventually her hunger won out. She dug eagerly into the eggs. "You can see!" Jack blurted in shock.

Arianna froze with the fork halfway to her mouth, her gaze darted swiftly to Braith. She didn't even breathe as she watched him, her eyes wide with worry for him. Braith rested his hand reassuringly on her shoulder. "I can," he confirmed.

Jack's eyes widened. "What? When? How?"

Braith shrugged, he settled into the seat beside Arianna. "Eat," he encouraged gently. She took a few more bites, but he could tell that her appetite had vanished beneath her apprehension.

"How Braith?" Jack pressed.

He turned back to his brother, keeping his hand on Arianna. Jack may have taken her from him, but he was one of the few people in the world that Braith trusted with Arianna. "I don't know," he answered honestly.

"But your sight is back? You can see again?" he asked excitedly. For a moment his anger and disbelief was gone as pure joy for Braith blazed forth. Braith had never complained about being blinded, had taken it in relatively easy stride, but he had hated it. Jack had known this, and sympathized with him because of it.

"Sometimes I can, yes." Jack frowned in confusion. Arianna was unmoving, he could hear the fierce beat of her heart, sense the fear that ran through her. He had told her not to tell anyone about his ability to see around her for fear that someone would hurt her because of it, that they would want to keep him weak and blind. Jack would not hurt her though, of that Braith was certain. He ran his hand over her thick hair, savoring in its silken feel as he tried to ease her tension.

"And other times?"

"I am still blind."

Jack was completely confused, but Braith felt no need to elaborate more. He felt he could trust his brother with her safety, but Jack had taken her from him, he had betrayed him, and in all honesty Braith liked keeping him in the dark and confused. Arianna remained silent, her mouth compressed in a hard line as she watched them. Ever so slowly, she picked her fork back up and began to eat again.

"Well that's strange," Jack said slowly.

"I suppose it is," Braith agreed.

"When did this start?"

"A little while ago."

Arianna continued to pick slowly at her meal until she finally pushed the plate away. "I should get back soon. I've already caused my family enough worry."

She didn't look at either of them as she uttered the words. He could hear the pain in her voice, the strain it had caused her to say those words. He leaned closer to her, inhaling her sweet scent as he briefly nuzzled her hair. She finally turned toward him, her eyes morose, but there was an air of resignation and steel resolve to her.

"Arianna..."

"It's ok Braith." She smiled thinly at him, lightly stroking his cheek. "Thank you for bringing me here. Thank you for giving me last night."

He grasped hold of her hand, hating to see her like this, hating the distance he felt her putting between them. "Arianna, not yet."

She smiled sadly at him as she turned her cheek into his hand. "Yes, it's easier to just do it now. Jack will take me back. It will be ok."

She squeezed his hand, clinging tight to him for a long moment before she rose. His chest

constricted, panic tore through him. He couldn't lose her again, he simply couldn't. He leapt to his feet, the chair skittering back with the force of his weight. "Arianna..."

"It's fine Braith, we will both be fine." Though she said the words, he could feel the agony that radiated from her. Her heart was pumping loudly, tears burned her eyes, but they didn't spill over. "We will be fine," she said again.

He reached out for her, pulling her tight against his chest as he cradled her gently. He could stay here; he could become like Jack and hide in these woods. He could stay with her, help with the rebel cause. Make sure that she was safe. They could both be happy. But even as the thought crossed his mind, he knew that he couldn't. His father had not destroyed the forest in search of Jack, but if Braith were to leave, and his father was to discover why, he would destroy everyone, and everything, in order to find him and punish him. If he ever found Arianna...

Braith could not finish the thought, it was too awful. What his father would do to her in order to punish Braith would be horrendous, atrocious. He could not put her in such a position, could not risk her life in such a way. She hugged him tightly, burying her head against his chest as she clung to him for a long moment.

She pulled slowly away, her head bowed. He grasped hold of her chin, tilting her head up to kiss her softly. She melded against him, a soft sigh escaping her. He barely registered the sound of the door opening and closing as he lost himself to the wonderful feel of her. It was a long while before he roused himself from her again, a long while before he pulled himself away from the sweet taste of her mouth.

She stared unblinkingly up at him, a small smile curving her mouth. "I am going to miss that."

He ran his finger over her swollen lips. "I can come back," he said impulsively. He had never intended to come back, it was too much of a risk to her, but now faced with the prospect of never seeing her again, the words popped out of his mouth. "I will come back."

Tears slipped down her cheeks. "Braith, you're getting married."

He shook his head, his thoughts turning dark. The last thing he wanted to think about was his upcoming wedding, and the bitch he was marrying. Especially not when he was holding the woman he wanted to spend forever with. "I'll come back Arianna, as soon as I can. I will be back. I will find you."

She bit on her bottom lip, tears spilled down her cheeks. "Won't it be dangerous for you?"

"I'll find a way," he vowed, stroking her face ever so gently.

She smiled tremulously. He could tell that she wanted to argue with him, wanted to tell him no, but neither of them were strong enough to walk away. Not right now anyway. She enfolded his hands in hers, clinging to him for a moment longer. He kissed her again,

before taking hold of her hand and leading her over to the door.

Jack was standing near the forest, his back to the house. He turned at the sound of the door opening. Arianna's hand clutched tighter around his, a tremor worked its way through her. She didn't want to say it, didn't want to end their wonderful time together on a bad note, but she had to. "The blood slaves Braith, do you..."

"There will be no more Aria." She stared at him for a long moment, wanting to believe him, needing to believe him. She could forgive him for these past months, she hated what he had done, but she understood what had driven him to it. She could not forgive him, or understand if he continued on such a path. There could be nothing between them then; he would not be the man that she loved if he continued to hurt her people. Seeming to sense her hesitance, he bent over her, his hand stroking over her cheek. "I swear Aria there will be no more blood slaves."

She smiled wanly as she managed a small nod. He kissed her gently, his attention turning away as Jack came toward them, his eyes weary and sad. "Make sure that she stays safe until I can come back," Braith grated.

"You're coming back?" Jack asked in surprise, his mouth dropping as he stared at the two of them.

Braith glared at him. "Yes."

CHAPTER 7

Aria glanced up at Max as he stepped closer to the map laid out in the middle of the cavern. His eyes were dark and intense as he stared down at it, his eyebrows drawn tightly together. William stood beside him, his arms crossed over his chest as he bit thoughtfully on his bottom lip. Aria's father was talking softly, his dark head bent over the map as Daniel traced a line through it with a stick.

Daniel was the only one of them that had inherited their mother's fair coloring. His hair was wheat colored; his fair skin speckled with freckles that made him appear far younger than his twenty one years. His eyes were the same bright blue as Aria and William's. Aria sat back on her heels, her legs were cramping up, but she couldn't move away from the map. She was far too fascinated, and horrified, by it.

Her gaze drifted slowly to Jack. He was standing off to the side, his arms folded over his chest as he stared at the back wall. Ever so slowly, his gaze came down to hers. It took all she had not to leap to her feet, grab hold of his arm, and drag him from the cavern and demand to know what the hell he was thinking.

Aria glanced back down at the map, swallowing heavily as Daniel poked the spot where the palace was. She had always had the rudimentary knowledge to read a map, but Braith had taught her how to read so much more. She did not share this revelation with the people surrounding her; she didn't think they would appreciate it much, and no matter what she said or did they wanted to continue to believe that she had been manipulated by Braith. That one day she would realize that her feelings for him were not real. She was tired of trying to convince them they were wrong, it was wearing on her, beating her down, making her everyday struggle to just survive even more tiresome.

"Is this how you remember it?"

Aria didn't realize her father was talking to her at first, until she noticed that they were all staring questioningly at her. She swallowed heavily, trying to wet her suddenly parched throat. "I guess; I didn't really pay much attention. I didn't get out much either," she finished on a whisper.

Though it wasn't memories of being kept as a blood slave that made her voice tremble, her father seemed to think it was. He gave her a sympathetic look before resting his hand lightly on her shoulder. He had been treating her like she was breakable and fragile ever since she'd returned and she was becoming frustrated with it.

"Max?"

Max was standing off to the side, his arms folded over his chest as he stared at the far wall. His jaw was locked tight, his forehead furrowed slightly. She hadn't been abused, but he had, and now her father was talking about going back in there as if it were the simplest, easiest thing in the world. About all of them going back in there. "From what I recall, yes."

Aria's heart hammered and flipped, she could barely breathe through the terror constricting her chest. "You can't do this," she whispered. "It's slaughter to go in there, we can't."

Her father patted her shoulder again before rising to his feet. He knew that this was reckless; he knew that it was crazy, but he seemed hell bent on doing it anyway. And she knew that it was because of her, because he believed that she been hurt and mistreated during her time with Braith. It didn't matter how often she told him that she hadn't been; he was convinced she was lying in order to protect him.

He moved away from the map as William and Daniel leaned closer to it. "We'll send a small scouting team in first, have them canvas the area. They will be able to discover the weakest areas and the best places to establish our soldiers in. We will need to take the palace swiftly."

"Dad," she whispered, clutching her hands tightly before her. Her legs were shaking, her head was spinning. "The last time someone tried to take the palace it was a massacre."

He wasn't paying attention to her though as he moved away. Panic was thrumming through her. She couldn't allow this to happen, she couldn't allow people to die because her father wanted revenge for things that had never even occurred. At least not to her.

But they had happened to other people, and they were continuing to happen right now.

However, the rebels had made an attempt to take the palace when she was a child, and they had been decimated. In retaliation for the rebel's defiance, the king had sent out thousands of troops that had razed, burned, and slaughtered their way through villages and forests. It was how her father had become the leader; the last one had been brutally murdered and hung within the largest village as an example of what would be done to others who tried to attack the palace.

"We will have to be smarter about it this time, go about it in a slower more methodical way."

"I would like to go in," William said softly.

Aria's mouth dropped, she spun on her brother, her twin, her other half. "No William," she breathed. "You cannot go in there."

"Yes I can."

"No! Your coloring, you're too similar to me. They'll know you. Tell him Jack. Tell him!"

She was practically begging, and she was crying as she turned frantically to Braith's brother. "Tell him about Caleb, and what kind of a monster he is. Tell him what Caleb would do to him if he discovered him in there! Tell him he is a fool! That they all are!"

"Arianna, enough," her father said sharply.

"Who is Caleb?" Daniel asked softly.

"My brother," Jack answered.

"The middle one," Max elaborated.

"I thought you were held by the oldest brother," Daniel said.

Aria wiped the tears from her face, shaking as she tried to regain control of herself. Acting crazed and wild would not help; it would not get them to listen to her. It would do none of them any good if she was a raving lunatic. She needed to be calm, and she needed to be collected if she was going to talk them out of this crazy suicide mission.

"I was," she said softly. "Braith is a good man..."

"He's not a man," Max growled.

Aria glanced at him, hating the look of hurt and disgust that radiated from him as his gaze landed hard upon her. They would hate her, they would all hate her if they knew the truth, but at the moment she couldn't bring herself to care. "My oldest brother believes in duty and honor. He values them highly," Jack told them.

"Including holding young women hostage and using them," her father interjected sharply.

"Braith was kind to me," she said for the thousandth time, but none of them wanted to hear her.

"Caleb is not like Braith, or me," Jack continued, his glance at Aria sympathetic but hard. "Caleb is like our father, cruel, twisted; vengeful. If he discovers that you are Aria's brother he will torture you in ways that you have never imagined possible. Your hair color alone might be enough for him to take his revenge on you."

"But your older brother wouldn't?" William inquired the scorn in his voice more than apparent.

Jack stared hard at Aria for a long moment. She didn't know what to say, what to do. If they found out that she had just been with Braith, that she intended to see him again, they would go crazy. They would think she had lost her mind, that her time as a blood slave had twisted her. They would not stop to think that she was with him because she truly did love him; they would assume that she had lost her mind, and they would lock her away. She would never see Braith again, and they would all run off half cocked, determined to avenge her for absolutely no reason other than bullheaded male stubbornness.

"No, he wouldn't," Jack said softly.

Aria couldn't look at him anymore. She felt ashamed, she felt lost, and she felt completely awful. She was running around behind her family's back, and yet she was sitting through this horrendous meeting discussing how to invade the palace. Something that could get Braith seriously hurt, if not killed. Something that could get members of her family killed.

She had spent her entire life fighting against the vampires, wanting to destroy them, and now she found herself frantic to do anything to stop this.

"Well isn't the future king special," Max drawled.

"He is," Aria said softly.

Max's lip curled in disgust, her family stared at her as if she had sprouted another head. "Ok William can't go in then, but I can."

"Daniel," Aria moaned, dropping her head into her hands as her mind spun. She needed to think of something, anything that would stop this. She turned back to Jack, but he was leaning against the wall again, his arms folded back over his chest. "You don't know what you are doing."

"Yes, I do."

Aria could barely breathe through the lump in her throat, could barely see through the tears burning her eyes. She had to stop this, she didn't know how, didn't know what to do, but she knew that she had to stop this. She didn't know when Braith would be back, she didn't know if she should even tell him what they intended. She'd be betraying her own family if she did. She'd be betraying her own kind.

But if she remained silent and something happened to Braith, or someone in her family...

She shut the thought down. She couldn't live with herself if something happened and she could have stopped it. Her legs gave out; she slid limply to the ground, her mind spinning as they continued with their plans. Plans that she could barely comprehend anymore. Plans that were slowly tearing her in two.

Aria knew that she shouldn't do it, but she couldn't stop herself from slipping through the woods, back to the lake. It had become her favorite place over the past couple of months, and now that she needed it the most, she was not supposed to go near it. But after the events of the past few hours she didn't give a damn what she was, and was not,

supposed to do. Not anymore.

She slipped easily through the forest, sticking to the trees, remaining hidden amongst their thick foliage as she darted from limb to limb. She moved slowly, keeping an eye out for any threat. She knew the forest better than anyone, knew the signs of danger. She could read the animals as well as she could move through the trees. They remained alert, and active, the birds continued to sing, the squirrels hopped eagerly in out of the branches, barely noticing Aria's presence amongst them.

She reached the lake, sitting amongst the limbs of a tree as she surveyed the area around her. The lake was pristine, clear. There wasn't even a ripple amongst his glass surface. She folded her hands beneath her, resting her head upon them as she sprawled out on the limb, content to lie amongst the branches and just watch the lake for a long while. Content to just take solace in the beautiful sight before her.

She didn't realize she had drifted off until she tried to roll over and nearly fell from the tree. She started, sitting up on the branch in surprise. She hadn't even been tired, but the events of the day had beaten her down, and taken more of a toll on her than she'd realized. She sighed softly, her gaze turning to the sky. According to the movement of the sun she had been asleep for a couple of hours.

She would have to go back soon, but before she returned she wanted to take a swim. She kicked her shoes off, letting them drop to the forest floor before climbing to her feet. She ran to the end of the limb, leaping off of it as she dove into the lake. She stayed beneath the water, swimming out for a long while before popping back to the surface. The water felt wonderful, refreshing, cleansing after the awful events of the day.

She swam for a long while before finally heading back. She stopped a few feet away from the shore, treading water. Jack was leaning against the tree, her shoes dangling from his fingertips as he watched her. Aria frowned at him, pushing the hair from her eyes as she swam forward.

"You need to stop taking off like that."

"I can take care of myself." She grabbed her shoes from his hand, but did not put them on. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you."

"Did my father send you?"

"No, they're still making plans. What are you going to do Aria?"

"What do you mean?"

"Are you going to tell him?"

Aria couldn't meet his gaze. The water had managed to soothe her for a brief moment, but now she was back into the harsh reality of her life. "Are you?" she whispered.

"He is my brother, but I chose my loyalties when I took you from that palace. I cannot go back on that now, no matter how much I might want to."

"You would allow him to be killed?"

He was silent for a long moment, his eyes sad yet accepting. "He would allow the same thing to happen to me, if the roles were reversed. He would hate it as much as I do, but we are on separate sides of this war. There is nothing that we can do about that. Now you have to choose a side Aria."

She shook her head, hating the fact that she wanted to cry again. "How can I choose a side Jack? It's not so simple. If I choose him then I forfeit my life, there would be nowhere for me to go after that. If I choose my family then I am giving up the only man that has ever made me feel this way, the only person I have ever been in love with."

He stared at her for a long moment, and then he turned his back on her. She followed him as he made his way through the forest. They moved slowly together for a long time in silence. "I didn't say it was going to be an easy choice, it wasn't for me either. But it is one that you are going to have to make. And soon."

"I don't know when he'll be back," she whispered.

"He won't be gone for long..."

"You don't know that."

Jack was silent for a long moment, and then he stopped walking and turned to face her in the dwindling daylight. The strong resemblance he bore to his brother caused a tug of longing to pull at her heart. He watched her with the same intensity that his brother always did, studied her with the same confusion that she had often seen on Braith's face. It seemed that neither of them knew exactly what to make of her. But then, she didn't know exactly what to make of them either.

She had thought Braith a cruel, monstrous bastard, and now she was in love with him. She had thought Jack a human, their friend, and companion, but it turned out she was the only one in her family that hadn't known that he was actually a vampire, and a member of the royal family. She had been kept in the dark, because they all thought her too weak to be able to handle the truth. In truth, she was far stronger than any of them knew. There was far more to her than they had ever imagined. The only one that seemed to understand, and accept the true depth of her strength, was Braith. He was the only one that did not try to coddle her, did not try to shelter her anymore from the harsh realities of both of their existences. He was the only one that knew she was strong enough to handle the truth.

And if there was one thing she was becoming very tired of, it was being coddled.

"I do know it, and by the time he comes back you are going to have to make your choice."

"What if I choose wrong?"

He glanced over at her, his eyebrows raised as he studied her. "I don't think you have a right choice here Aria."

She bit on her bottom lip as she nodded. "You're right. Are you going to tell my family about this?"

Jack shook his head as he started walking again. "No. Braith is not a threat to them. Even if you choose them, he will not hurt them, that's not who he is. If you don't choose him he would not purposely hurt you in such a way. No matter how much it will hurt him if he loses you."

She grasped hold of Jack's arm, pulling him to a stop beside her. "I do love him," she said softly.

He managed a wan smile, his hand enclosed hers. "I know that Aria. And though it is baffling to me, I know that he loves you."

She frowned fiercely at him, not at all liking his comment. "Thanks."

He grinned at her; his hand squeezed her tightly before releasing her. "I just never thought it of Braith. We may have been the closest out of all our siblings, but he always kept a part of himself distant, aloof. As the future king, he had to stay distant. It would always be his job to uphold his duties and responsibilities. And to Braith those responsibilities always came first. I didn't think he would ever be capable of loving someone; he kept himself too separated for that.

"You may be the first thing he has ever chosen over his obligations."

Aria was silent for a moment, and then she resumed her pace at his side. "But he hasn't chosen me."

"He's chosen you more than I've ever seen him choose anything else. He came here for you, didn't he?"

Aria shook her head. She watched her bare feet as they moved through the forest, avoiding any obstacle that may pop up. She didn't tell him that she was fairly certain that Braith had originally come here to kill her, or at least make her pay severely for her disobedience. "I choose your side over my family."

Aria glanced up at Jack, brushing aside her damp hair. "Why?" she asked quietly, still not completely understanding why he had taken their side.

"Because the only person I cared about within those walls was Braith. Because once I was here, I knew that I was on the wrong side. There's no need for anyone to be living like this, there is no need for the cruelty that has been bestowed upon the humans. Not anymore."

"It sounds like you picture a world where we can all happily coexist," she said softly.

He shrugged. "I'm not delusional," he replied. "But I do think things could have been different, maybe even still could."

"Perhaps." Though she didn't hold out much hope for that.

"You do need to stop taking off on your own though. Not even Braith can help you if you get caught again, and what Caleb would do to you..." His voice trailed off, his eyes were distant as he stared at the woods around them.

Aria didn't want to know what Caleb would do to her. She didn't even want to imagine what Caleb would do to her. He had unnerved her from the moment she had met him. There was something wrong with Caleb, something sadistic and cruel. Something that would take great pleasure in making her scream, in making her beg for mercy. In making her suffer.

Aria shuddered, she tried to shut the thought down, but it would not stop. "Ok?"

She swallowed heavily as she nodded. She hated to be restrained, confined, monitored, but Jack was right. "Ok," she agreed.

He slid his arm though hers, pulling her lightly against his side. "I think of you like a sister."

She managed a wan smile as she leaned against his side. "An annoying one?"

"Yes. You are also going to have to do something about Max."

"Max?" she asked in confusion.

"He's in love with you." Aria frowned, her hand tightened on Jack's arm. Jack was right, she had to make it clear to Max that there would never be anything between them. She hadn't been fair to him lately, telling him no well leaning on him to help get her through the past months. Guilt and self hatred twisted through her stomach, she was ashamed of herself and Max was going to be hurt. But she knew now, that even if she never saw Braith again, he would always own her heart. "And he's not very stable right now."

"That woman that held him, she was awful to him in there, wasn't she?"

Jack was silent for a long moment before he nodded briskly. "She was, and Max is convinced that it was the same with you."

"I've told him it wasn't."

"And he doesn't want to believe that. It's easier for him to think of us all as monsters. If I hadn't pulled the two of you out of there, he would hate me too. He still doesn't trust me."

Aria frowned as she glanced up at him. "Do you think he would do anything to hurt you?"

Jack shrugged. "He might try, but not for awhile, not until things are more established. He knows that I'm needed right now, but after..."

Aria stared at him in wide eyed surprise. "And you're not angry about this?"

He glanced down at her. "What was done to him in there was something awful Aria. We will never know the extent of the cruelty he experienced, of the abuse that he took. No one comes out of that completely normal. I understand his anger and his hatred. But if he tries to kill me, I will not hold back."

Aria swallowed heavily, she hated the awful situation they were stuck in, hated the fact that she would have to choose between Braith and her family, hating the fact that she was becoming increasingly worried and fearful of Max.

CHAPTER 8

"Do you ever do what you're told?"

Aria didn't bother to look up from the berries she was collecting. "Not usually."

"You know you're supposed to stay close."

She glanced up at Max as he stopped at her side. His shadow fell across her, blocking out the sun. "I'm close."

"Within eyesight Aria," he growled.

She dropped the berries into her bucket, trying hard to keep her patience. She hated being ordered about, hated his high handed demeanor, but most of all she hated the fact that he felt he had any say over what she did, or didn't, do. "I have my bow," she reminded him.

"That will do a lot of good against a group of marauding vampires."

Aria rolled her eyes as she wiped her hands and rose slowly to her feet. "I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself," she reminded him.

"So capable that you were caught already."

Aria heaved an impatient sigh; she grabbed hold of her bow as she tried to ignore the tugging waves of guilt crashing through her. She didn't think she would ever be able to forgive herself for what had been done to Max, but she could not continue to live under the weight of that guilt. She also could not allow him to continue thinking there was any hope for them. Even if she gave Braith up, she would not choose Max. There could never be anyone, but Braith.

"I'm fine Max."

"I understand your need for solitude Aria, I do, but you have to understand that I am only concerned about your safety."

"I know," she said softly, just agreeing with him in the hope that he would back off. Aria jumped in surprise when he seized gently hold of her chin. She frowned fiercely at him, trying hard to keep her temper.

"I know you feel that this raid is a bad idea, I know you think that they treated you kindly in there, but..."

"Max I can only tell you so many times that I was treated kindly in there. I know you had an awful time, I know that, but you have to believe me when I tell you that I didn't. This raid is a bad idea, it's an awful idea. I know you want revenge, but risking innocent lives is not the way to get it."

His eyes were hard, narrowed as he glared at her. Jack thought that Max was in love with her, but at the moment, she felt that he might actually hate her more. She wanted to reach out to him, wanted to explain it all to him, wanted him to understand that she didn't mean to hurt him, but she couldn't find the words to even attempt such an explanation. "Max," she whispered.

He shook his head, his shaggy blond hair falling across his forehead. "You don't know what you're talking about Aria. What they did to you in there, it's confused you."

Aria wanted to argue with him further, but it was useless, and something else had caught her attention. She tilted her head, her eyes narrowing as all of her senses focused upon the forest. It had become eerily silent. Aria glanced around the shadowed woods, panic hammered through her. The birds had stopped singing; the squirrels no longer ran through the trees.

"One day you will realize..."

Aria slipped her hand over Max's mouth, silencing his words. She placed her finger over her own mouth, motioning for him to be quiet. He frowned at her, but Aria was no longer paying attention to him. She could read the woods, and right now they were telling her that something was not right, that danger was coming. She just didn't know what direction it was coming from, didn't know which way to flee. She tilted her head back, glancing up into the high reaches of the tree.

She pointed up as she took her hand away from his mouth. Moving silently, Aria grasped hold of the lowest tree branch and easily scooted her way through the branches. Max was not as swift as she was, but he followed her. Aria climbed higher, burying herself within the thick foliage. She searched the forest but still saw no cause for the odd silence that had descended over it.

She reached back down, grasping hold of Max's hand to help pull him onto her branch. His skin was slightly paler, he looked as if he were about to throw up. He had always hated heights, but they didn't have many options right now. He opened his mouth to speak but she shook her head fiercely at him. She still couldn't find the danger hidden within the shadows.

And then she saw them. They had come from behind the tree, and were underneath it, before she knew what had happened. She plastered herself against the trunk of the tree, holding tight to it as Max pressed against her. Aria was shaking, terror pulsed through her. If they looked up...

If they looked up, she and Max were dead. Max could not move through the trees like she

could, and even she could not outmaneuver a group of vampires forever. They would catch her eventually. Her heart was thumping so loudly that she was certain they would hear it, certain that they would look up and spot them within the foliage of the tree. Aria's breath caught in her throat, she could hardly breathe as Caleb appeared beneath them, moving slowly behind the six soldiers before him. His head moved constantly as he searched the woods. The excitement strumming through his body was nearly palpable.

Terror pulsed through her; her legs were trembling so bad that she could hardly stand anymore. Max was frozen before her, his lean body as hard as rock as he pressed against her. If Caleb was here then only bad things could follow.

Aria's eyes widened, her mouth dropped as Braith stepped into sight behind his brother. Her heart leapt, flipping wildly as she took in his magnificent form. Longing spurted through her, she almost called out to him, almost flung herself from the tree, and into his arms. And if it hadn't been for Caleb mere feet before him, she probably would have. For a moment all she wanted was to be in his arms again, to hell with the other monsters with him.

It had been a week since she had last seen him; a long tortuous week that had been filled with uncertainty, fear, and a desperate longing that was shaking her thoroughly. She had gone two months without him, had spent two months trying to forget him, but this past week had been the longest and the hardest thing she had ever had to endure. Her fingers twitched, she wanted to cry for the unfairness of this whole situation. She remained frozen instead, motionless with the terror that had locked her muscles into place.

Braith froze, his head turned slightly from side to side. Then, ever so slowly, he tilted his head back. She knew the minute that his shaded eyes locked onto them. Max took a small step closer to her. She could barely breathe as she was squished against the trunk of the tree. Though his jaw clenched slightly, and a muscle jumped in his cheek, Braith showed no other sign that he had seen them. However, she could sense his shock, his displeasure, his anger.

He turned away from them, moving onward through the forest as the small troop disappeared from sight. Max relaxed against her, breathing a huge sigh of relief. "Good thing your former master is blind."

Aria was fighting against tears, fighting against screaming in frustration and terror. She wanted to tell Max that Braith had seen them, that he knew they were there, and that he would keep them safe. She thought it might help him to understand that Braith was not a bad man, that he was in fact a very good man, and that he loved her. She thought it might help Max to understand that not all vampires were evil, but she could not bring the words to leave her throat. She had promised Braith that she wouldn't tell anyone his secret, and she meant to uphold that promise. Even if it meant continuing to alienate her friend.

"We have to warn the others," Aria whispered.

Max nodded, he moved slowly away from her as he began to gingerly make his way from the tree. Aria hesitated, staring out over the forest as she searched for any sign of Braith, and the others. They had moved on though. She descended rapidly, dropping silently to the ground beside Max. They moved swiftly through the forest toward the campsite they had left behind.

"What are they doing here?"

Aria shook her head helplessly. How was she supposed to know what they were doing here? "I don't know Jack."

"Did Braith tell you about this?"

"No," she retorted, anger spurting through her. "I would have prepared people if he had. I sure as hell wouldn't have been hanging out in a tree with Max if he had!"

Jack's face was hard, his eyes cold and thoughtful. "He may not have known."

"Of course he didn't know! He wouldn't have left me out here, unprepared."

"Aria..."

"He wouldn't have Jack," she insisted, infuriated that Jack would even think such a thing. Infuriated that she was also thinking it, even though she knew it was wrong. Braith would not do that to her, she knew that, but she still couldn't stop the doubts creeping through her.

"He knew we were in that tree Jack. If he was here to hurt us, or to recapture us, he would have turned us in. I couldn't have escaped them all, and I wouldn't have left Max behind."

"He might not have seen you. He said himself that his vision comes and goes; we have no idea of knowing how good it is when he does have it."

"I know he saw me," Aria insisted unwilling to discuss how she knew this.

Jack leaned back, biting on his bottom lip as he closed his eyes. He shook his head before pacing away and coming rapidly back. He stopped before her. "I don't know what this bond is between the two of you, I don't know what to say about it, but I do know that it has put us all in danger. Especially if Caleb is here."

Aria's jaw clenched, her eyes narrowed as she glared up at him. "Did you stop to think that maybe Braith is here because Caleb is here? Did you ever think that he is here to offer what protection, and help, he can?" she demanded fiercely. "You say you and Braith were close, and that you were good friends, yet you have no faith in him. You have no idea what kind of a man he truly is!"

"And you do?" he growled.

Aria stared defiantly back at him. "I know better than you."

He studied her for a long moment before cursing loudly and pacing away again. "We need to get these people somewhere safe."

"Yes."

He cursed again before retreating toward the caves. Aria was unwilling to follow him into that dark, cavernous zone though. The last thing she wanted was to be trapped within the caves again, but that was where everyone had retreated to in the hope that they would stay safe. He turned back to her, but she remained unmoving just feet from the cave.

"Aria!" he hissed.

She shook her head, trying hard to keep breathing, but finding it very difficult through the constriction in her chest. She had never truly liked the caves, but now she found herself terrified by the prospect of going back in there. Her skin was clammy, she was shaking. She found she would almost prefer to be in the hands of Caleb than back in there, trapped amongst the cold rock.

She took a small step back as Jack came toward her, frowning in puzzlement. "Aria?"

"I can't," she whispered. "I can't go back in there."

His eyes widened in disbelief. "Aria you must," he insisted.

She shook her head again, taking another step back. Her heart was thrumming, her whole body was shaking. His gaze raked over her, then turned back to the caves. "I'll be fine in the trees," she told him.

"Like hell," he hissed.

"I'll be safer in the trees than in there!" she retorted sharply. "I can move through the trees faster than I can through the caves."

"You can't stay out here Aria; we cannot take the risk of you being captured again."

He was coming at her before she even had time to blink. A scream welled in her throat, but his hand was over her mouth as he lifted her up and forcefully carried her toward the caves. Aria struggled against him, wanting nothing more than to be free of his ironclad hold. Then he entered the cave and all she wanted was to be free of the confining space,

and stale air. She couldn't breathe, she couldn't think as her head began to spin rapidly. She went limp against him, struggling to inhale through her nose as she watched in wide eyed horror as he carried her deeper into the earth.

They were a half a mile down before he finally released her. Aria fell to her knees, gasping the thin air, struggling to control the rapid beat of her heart as a scream rose in her throat. She didn't know what was wrong with her, what was happening to her, but she couldn't control the wild, frantic sway of her body. She tried to choke back the scream, but she could not keep it bottled within her any longer.

It ripped free of her, echoing loudly through the caves, bouncing off of the rock walls in an endless wave that pierced sharply through the air.

CHAPTER 9

Braith froze in mid step, his foot hung in the air as his head turned slowly to the side. He tuned out the normal sounds of the forest, filtering through the noise as he strained to hear what had caught his attention. He was certain that it had been a scream, certain that it had been Aria's scream. His foot dropped upon the forest floor, crackling the leaves and sticks beneath his boot. The men with him stopped walking, turning back to him.

"What is it?" Caleb demanded.

Braith shook his head. His brother had not heard the scream, neither had the others. He didn't know if it was because they weren't as attuned to Aria as he was, or if it was the fact that his hearing was more acute due to his blindness. At his side, Keegan bristled, turning to survey the area of the forest Braith was certain that scream had come from. "It's nothing," he replied.

Though it was far more than nothing. That scream had been echoing and terrified. And it had come from the one person that he cared about. "I have to go."

"Wait what!?" Caleb stammered.

Panic was beginning to seize hold of him, clawing at his chest, tearing through his insides. He had to get away from his brother, and he had to find her. He had seen her in the tree with that boy if he had done anything to hurt her Braith was going to rip out his throat. He moved swiftly through the trees, blurring as he raced across the forest. Though he could not see his surroundings, he could sense the obstacles in his way as he swiftly dodged them. Keegan was unable to keep up with him, but Braith sensed when the wolf broke off, going deeper into the woods.

The others tried to keep up with him, but he was faster and stronger than them, and he lost them easily amongst the forest. He jumped on top of a boulder, racing up the side of it before reaching the top and leaping off. Trees began to blur into focus, wavering on the outskirts of his vision. He could smell her blood, taste it in his mouth again. He was getting closer to her.

Hunger spurted through him, his veins burned with the almost intense need to feed that engulfed him. He had not fed since he had left her here a week ago, he had returned briefly to the palace, but no one appealed to him anymore, not even the willing humans he had fed from before. In fact, he was surprised to realize that the mere thought of feeding from anyone else repulsed and sickened him. It was her blood he wanted, her blood he needed, and until he could feed from her again, no one else would do.

And then Caleb had insisted upon going on one of the searches, had insisted upon going into the forest with one of the hunting parties. Braith had known that he'd have to go with him, he couldn't take any chances that Caleb might accidentally find her, that he might stumble across her. The thought was horrifying to him. He'd come with Caleb to make sure that such a thing didn't happen, and it nearly had earlier, and might still happen if Caleb was somehow able to track him.

He skidded on a patch of leaves as he came to an abrupt halt outside of a narrow crevice between the rocks. He would have missed it if he hadn't been tracking her scent. He slipped into the hole, barely fitting in between the boulders surrounding it. His eyes adjusted swiftly to the blackness, picking up the small bits of light within the enshrouding dark. Her sweet scent became stronger; her terror was nearly palpable within the confines of the cave.

Braith moved swiftly through the winding, tight turns, keeping his senses attuned to other presence's as he wound through the cave. He needed to get to her, but he had to proceed with caution. He had just placed himself right into the heart of the lion's den, he was certain of that. He was surrounded by rocks, walls, and his enemies. He was completely silent as he slipped through the narrow tunnels, keeping himself highly attuned to his surroundings. He felt like a rat trapped within a maze as he stalked her scent. He couldn't believe that they lived down here. That Arianna lived down here.

She hated to be confined, hated being trapped anywhere. She was everything that the woods were, open, wild, and free. It was confounding to him that she could be beneath the earth within these stale confines.

Her scent was enveloping him as he turned another corner. Voices began to reach him, drifting softly through the tunnel. He stopped, his head tilting to the side as he picked up three separate sets of male voices. One of them was Jack, but the other two he didn't recognize. He crept closer, straining to hear the words.

"What the hell happened?" one of the strange voices demanded.

"I don't know," Jack responded. "But we have to get her out of here. We have to get moving, now."

Braith bristled, he assumed she was Arianna as her scent was exceptionally strong here, and his vision was nearly perfect again. He lingered within the shadows. "Be careful with her Jack! Watch her head!" the other strange voice snapped out. "Damn it, give her to me."

"I've got her Max."

"Give me her!" Max snapped back.

"Just give her to him Jack; you're going to need to keep your hands free if they come in here."

Braith's eyes widened, and then narrowed sharply. It was bad enough that his brother was touching her, but he sure as hell did not want that boy holding her. There was a soft rustling, and then Arianna made a soft, disgruntled sound. "Put me down!" she ordered. "Max, put me down!"

"Aria..."

"Let go of me! Let go of me!" her voice was nearly hysterical, it trembled and shook with the fear choking it. "I want out of here!"

"Aria..."

There was the sound of scuffling and then she gasped loudly. "Stop, please." Her voice was a low moan of pain and anguish. And it was more than he could take; he was going to kill someone.

He stepped around the corner, his eyes narrowing and his hands fisting as he took in the sight before him. Jack was standing toward the back of the small opening, his face hard, and his jaw clenched tight. Arianna was struggling against the boy holding her, Max, as she tried to tug her hand free of his restraining grasp.

"Stop Max, let her go." The other boy stepped forward, reaching out for Arianna as her struggles to break free became more frantic. "Aria, you have to calm down. Please."

"Let me go!" she snapped. Tears streaked down her face as her breathing came in rapid pants. Braith had only ever seen her like this once before, and it had been when she'd thought that Max's life was in danger. Then, she had been terrified for her friend. Now the terror was for herself; something that he had thought impossible until this moment.

"Let her go."

Their heads snapped toward him, their mouths dropped in surprise. "Braith," Jack whispered in shock and horror.

A small cry escaped Arianna; she was finally able to tug her hand free of Max's relaxed grip. She ran at him, flinging herself into his arms. He lifted her, cradling her against his chest as she clung to him, burying herself against him. He wrapped his hand around the back of her head, threading his fingers through her silken hair. She pressed tighter against him, her tears wetting his shirt as she shook within his grasp.

"Shh Arianna, shh," he soothed gently. "What happened? Did they hurt you?"

"Braith what the hell are you doing here?" Jack demanded.

He bowed his head briefly to hers, pressing his mouth against her soft hair as he eagerly inhaled her sweet scent. She was the best thing that he had ever felt, the best thing he had ever held. Jack moved away from the wall, the shock of Braith's appearance was swiftly wearing off of the other two. He did not miss the stake that appeared within Max's grasp. Jack grabbed hold of Max's arm, holding him back as his sharp eyes narrowed upon

Braith.

"You know what I'm doing here," he said to his brother, adjusting his grasp on Arianna in order to keep his body in between her, and the growing hostility of the men across from him. He grasped hold of her face, gently pulling her out of his chest. Her eyes still swam with tears, but she was no longer openly sobbing and she seemed to have regained some control of herself. "Are you ok?"

She managed a nod, her bright eyes questioning as she studied him. "It's not safe for you here," she whispered.

"I know." He looked back at the others, his eyes resting upon the redhead who was gaping at the two of them in shock. His gaze turned slowly toward Arianna before coming back to Braith. Max looked like he was about to snap, fury radiated from every inch of him as he glared furiously at the two of them. "Did they hurt you?" he growled. He didn't care if they were her friends and family, he was spoiling for a good fight.

"You shouldn't be here, you need to leave," she whispered fervently, her hands clutching at him as her eyes became frantic. "Braith..."

"It's ok Arianna," he said softly. "I'll be fine."

"She's right Braith, you need to leave," Jack insisted. "Where is Caleb?"

"Elsewhere."

"Braith..."

"He doesn't know where I am," he interrupted sharply.

"But he could find you, and by doing so, find the others."

"He could also find you." Jack became silent, his eyes hooded as his gaze turned slowly toward Arianna. She was still shaking, but her tremors were less fierce now. "Did they hurt you?" he demanded. He would hate to do it, but he would kill Jack if he had harmed her in anyway.

She shook her head, biting on her lip as her gaze darted wildly around the cave. Terror shimmered in her eyes, her fingers clenched tighter upon him. "I don't like it in here; I don't want to be here."

Of course she hated it in here. He had known that she would. "I'll take you out then."

"No," Jack inserted sharply as the other two men took a swift step forward. "She needs to stay with us, and she needs to be somewhere safe. It is not safe above ground right now."

"I'll be safe in the trees," she told him.

"No Aria, absolutely not. We have to meet up with your father."

Arianna was shaking her head; her tremors were growing stronger again. "No, no, no. I am not going deeper; you can't keep forcing me to!"

Braith ran his hands over her hair, trying to soothe her, but failing as she continued to shake like a leaf against him. "He forced you down here?" Braith snarled.

"Braith..."

"Back off Jack or I'll rip your damn throat out if you take one more step toward her, if you touch her one more time!"

"No," Arianna said softly. "You can't fight, not here, not now. Please."

Braith's hands tightened on her shoulders, he was trying to keep her behind him, but she kept insisting on trying to get in front of him. "Who the hell do you think you are?" Max snarled.

"Don't push me!" Braith hissed at him, fighting the rising tides of anger surging through him. They had forced her down here, forced her into this place that was obviously terrifying her. Jack pulled Max back a step, but the other man remained immobile as he watched them intently.

"Don't push you!" Max snapped back, fighting against Jack's restraining hand. "You're lucky I don't kill you!"

"You could try, but you will not succeed."

Rage flashed across Max's face. Jack pushed him back as he tried to lunge forward. Max struggled against him, but Jack was successful in keeping the smaller man pinned against the cave wall. "Stop it!" Arianna commanded loudly. "Stop!"

Her shaking was growing stronger by the moment, but he could also sense her anger growing beneath her terror. Max's gaze raked scathingly over her, glaring at her from head to toe. Braith bristled beside her, pulling her further back from the infuriated boy. He didn't trust Max. He knew that Max would kill him in a heartbeat, but he was beginning to fear that he might also hurt Arianna in his rage and hatred.

The other boy stepped forward, shooting Max a dark look as he placed himself in between them. "I'll go up with her."

"No William," Arianna said softly, shaking back her dark hair. Braith took note of the striking similarities between Arianna and this boy. They had the same eyes, the same hair color, and the same lean build. He remembered Arianna telling him about her twin, remembered Jack talking about the similar hair color; it was more than obvious that this was him. "It's safer for you to stay here."

"I'm not letting you go up there alone." His sapphire eyes were intense as they turned toward Braith. He studied him for a long moment, his gaze not trusting, but not hate filled either. Not like Max's.

"I won't be alone," she said softly.

"Aria..."

"I'll be ok William, really."

William remained hesitant. "No Aria that is not going to happen."

"I can keep her safe, I can't promise that for you," Braith told him.

William nodded. "That's fine."

"No," Jack said forcefully. "I can't risk the two of you being captured, especially with Daniel gone. That is too much leverage over your father should something go wrong."

"I will keep her safe," Braith growled. "And you don't have an option here Jack; I'm taking her out of here no matter what you want."

Arianna's fingers curled tighter in his shirt, she pressed closer against him, her forehead resting briefly upon his chest. "You're being foolish Braith. I know you don't want to see her upset, but would rather see her dead? Damn Braith, be logical about this, she is safest down here!" Jack protested.

"I am being logical about this, and I am telling you what is going to happen. I will keep her safe. When you return above ground, you know where we'll be."

"You can't take her to mother's house. Caleb will go there."

"I'm not taking her to the house."

Jack was silent for a moment, and then realization finally filled his gaze. His mouth parted slightly, his fingers twitched at his sides. For a moment, his grip on Max eased. "You know what that means Braith."

"I do. Find us when you are able to." He turned his attention back to William. "You stay here. She will be fine, but I can't protect you both."

"No." William was shaking his head forcefully. "Absolutely not. She may trust you, but I can't."

"You have to," Jack said softly. "You can't go with them William."

"You can't seriously be considering letting them leave here! Of letting this monster take her back!" Max exploded his face fligid with rage. "Have you lost your mind?"

"Go," Jack said softly.

"No way!" William was coming at them, his jaw locked in determination. Jack grabbed hold of his arm and pulled him back.

"He isn't going to leave here without her," Jack's gaze was steady, yet sad as he stared at the two of them. "He isn't going to be separated from her again, and he'll kill you if

you try to stop him. You cannot go William. This has to happen," Jack said forcefully.

"We should kill him!" Max snarled.

Jack was pulling a struggling William back, pushing him toward Max as he fought to keep them away. "That will not be possible," Jack muttered, his frustration growing.

"I knew it, you are a traitorous bastard. You are on their side, not ours. You're giving her to him!"

"No Max," Arianna said softly, her fingers digging into Braith's shirt and skin. "I gave myself to him, long ago."

Max went limp, his mouth dropped as his eyes bugged out of his head. "Aria," William breathed.

She bowed her head for a moment before lifting it to gaze at her brother and friend again. "I'm sorry, I know you didn't want to believe it but I tried to tell you." She broke off a single tear slipping down her cheek as she swallowed heavily. "Neither of us wanted this, but it's happened, and I can't... I can't let him go."

Braith cradled her cheek for a moment, seeking to give her comfort in this tumultuous situation. "We must go," he said softly.

"Wait." Arianna broke away from him. Braith tried to catch hold of her, but she had already moved swiftly out of his reach. Jack caught hold of her, grasping her arms, holding her back as she tried to shove past him. She glared fiercely at Jack as she struggled to get free of his grasp. Braith reclaimed her, taking her gently from Jack's grasp. "I want to say goodbye to my brother!" she protested angrily.

Braith glanced at her brother, he was afraid that William would not let her go. However, Jack had been right about one thing, Braith hated to see Arianna unhappy, and she would be miserable if he did not allow her to do this. He nodded briskly at Jack, who stepped aside to let William come swiftly forward. The siblings embraced tightly well Max glowered silently at them both.

CHAPTER 10

Aria clung tightly to Braith, burying her head against his back as he carried her swiftly through the forest. She was exhausted, her feet hurt, and all she wanted was to curl up and go to sleep, but Braith insisted that they keep moving, that they get as far from the caves, and that area of the woods, as possible. The moon was bright; it left a trail across the forest floor as it crept steadily higher into the night sky.

Though she tried, she was unable to suppress a yawn as she fought against the pull of sleep. She hadn't slept well since she had last seen him, and now that she was with him again, she knew that she would sleep peacefully and soundly, and she could not wait for it. He stopped suddenly, tilting his head back as he studied the night sky. Ever so slowly, he let her down, dropping her onto her feet.

"You need some rest," he said softly.

She nodded, pushing back the thick waves of hair that fell across her face. He pulled off his coat, laying it upon the ground. "I wish I could do something more."

Aria managed a small smile for him. "I'm used to sleeping on the ground. Don't worry."

He studied her for a long moment, before coming back to her. His hand stroked over her face, cradling her gently as he bent to place a light kiss on the tip of her nose. "Hopefully not for much longer."

"I like the woods. It's where I belong."

He grinned at her, kissing her again before slowly pulling away. "Yes, it is. But you also like beds."

"I do," she agreed. "And I love showers." He laughed softly, shaking his head as he stepped away from her again. "Where are we going Braith?"

He knelt beside the coat as he held his hand out to her. She took it, slipping down beside him. "There's a place I know where we should be safe."

"And where is this place?"

"About fifty miles from here. I will get us there tomorrow."

She stared at him in wide eyed surprise. "And Jack will know where we are?"

"Yes."

She sat silently, watching him as he rose to his feet and began to move around the woods. "What is going to happen Braith?"

"I don't know," he answered honestly.

"Are you going to return to the palace?"

He stopped walking as he turned back toward her. "I will not be able to return again Arianna."

She froze, her hands clenching tight upon her legs as she stared at him in wide eyed disbelief. "It is your family Braith, your heritage."

He was immobile, his jaw locked tight as he watched the woods behind her for a long moment. Then, ever so slowly, his gaze came back to her. "You are my family now Arianna," he said forcefully. "And I intend to make sure you stay safe."

Her mouth parted slightly, tears sprang to her eyes. "Braith," she breathed.

He was back before her in a heartbeat; his hand entwined in her hair, his mouth soft and firm against hers. Her toes curled as his kiss sent waves of heat and desire crashing through her body. She was trembling, shaking as she clung to him. She lost herself to his wonderful touch, scent, and feel. His presence was overwhelming, and yet so blissfully soothing. His hands were caressing as he stroked over her, pushing aside her clothes to caress her skin.

Aria's trembling increased; she was inundated with swirling emotions. Her mind and body were spinning as he pushed her gently back onto the coat, his hard body pressing against hers as he came down on top of her. Aria clung to him, needing something solid in this spiraling, out of control world. The muscles in his arms were shaking as he enveloped her in his tight embrace. She could feel his fangs against her mouth, pressing against her as his excitement grew.

Her fingers entwined in his hair, she held him tighter, fighting back the tears of love and joy that burned her eyes. He pulled slightly back from her, his fingers caressing her cheeks ever so gently. "Arianna..."

"I love you," she whispered, lightly stroking over his extended fangs.

His eyes sparked brightly, hunger blazed within his gaze. He bent, his mouth pressed against hers again, but the driving hunger had left his kiss to be replaced with a gentleness that left her breathless. She stroked him, guiding his head toward what he needed most right now. Her blood.

His lips skinned over her briefly, before biting down. Aria's hands clenched upon his arms, a soft sigh escaped her as she felt the soft pull of her blood being drawn from her. She closed her eyes, savoring in the delightful feel of him feeding from her, taking nutrition from her body. She drifted in the bliss that rushed over her, consuming her within its wonderful cocoon of happiness and awe.

He pulled back from her, his breath warm against her skin, his fingers gentle as he stroked lightly over her. She was half asleep, drifting in a world of bliss and happiness when he offered her his wrist, allowing her to feed from him. Allowing her to take wonderful nourishment from his body also.

Aria stared at the small town, her gaze darting rapidly over the buildings as Braith led her down the broken streets. It was a poor town; that much was obvious by the rundown buildings, lack of vehicles, and the overly thin animals lurking within the shadows. Braith held tight to her hand as he led her swiftly forward. From behind some of the windows she could see people peering out at them, but no one came forth, and the curtains were swiftly dropped back into place when she glanced their way.

"What town is this?" she asked softly.

Braith shook his head, his hard gaze darting over the decrepit buildings. "I don't know."

He led her down another street, this one containing stores. There were a few people moving about in this area, hurrying from one place to another without stopping to talk to each other. They seemed terrified, beaten, broken by whatever events life had thrown at them. They were the saddest, most heart wrenching people she had ever seen.

"Braith..." His hand tightened upon hers, he pulled her closer against him as his stride quickened a little more. "These people..."

"Broken."

Aria shuddered at the word, but it was the most appropriate way to describe the lost souls wandering down the streets. They turned another corner, hurrying forward as they slipped past houses that were even more worn down by time and poverty. There was a lump of anguish in Aria's throat. The towns closer to the palace fared much better than this forgotten wasteland. Here they seemed to have nothing. There, though they were poor, there were more opportunities for employment, and more money was tossed around by the wealthy residents within the palace towns.

She fought back tears as a young boy darted out of an alleyway. His clothes were no more than rags, cloth was wrapped around his feet for shoes, and he was so dirty that she could not discern the true color of his hair. Braith tugged her back as she took a step toward the child, feeling as if she had to do something, but having no idea exactly what it was she was supposed to do. The boy stopped to stare at her, his eyes wide with surprise as he took her in.

"Keep moving Arianna," Braith said softly.

"There has to be something..."

"They are not human."

Aria's mouth dropped as she spun toward him, her eyes wide in shock and horror. "What?" she whispered.

"They are vampires."

Terror spurted through her as she took a step closer to him, pressing against his hard body. Her heart hammered, her breath became labored as she glanced wildly around the decrepit streets. She hadn't known that there were vampires that lived like this, hadn't known that there were vampires that had as little as she did within the forest. She had thought that they were all wealthy, that they all enjoyed the luxurious life that the palace had presented. But these vampires had so very little, and they were starving.

And she appeared to be the only morsel of food in this hell hole.

"Are they going to come after us?"

"Not if they want to live."

A chill crept down Aria's spine as he growled the words. He pulled her against him, wrapping his arm around her waist as he held her tightly. They turned another corner; the houses became sparser as the woods began to creep in on them again. Aria glanced over her shoulder, dismayed, and not at all surprised to see that they had attracted a small following. "They're following us," she breathed in horror.

"I know." She swallowed nervously, trying hard to keep her panic under control as her heart thumped and pounded with renewed intensity. It was her that they were coming for, but they would kill Braith to get at her. She was shaking with fear now. "It's why William could not come with us. I could not protect you both." She managed a small nod as she bit nervously on her bottom lip. "They won't get anywhere near you Arianna."

"And you?" she whispered.

He shot her a small, arrogant grin that did not quite reach his eyes. "Impossible."

Aria wished that she could take solace in his answer, but there were even more of them back there now. She was grateful for the reassuring weight of her arrows on her back, but she wasn't sure that she had enough in her quiver to make a dent in the growing population behind them. "Keep your eyes forward," Braith said softly.

She turned back around, her fingers twitching to grasp hold of her bow. She wanted the extra security of its weight in her hands. "Where are we going?"

They rounded another corner, the woods pressed closer to them. "You know that tree thing you can do?" Aria nodded at him. "Why don't you scurry on up there now."

"I'm not leaving you down here alone!" she hissed.

"I'll be fine, Arianna. You need to get up there."

“Braith...”

“Go Arianna, now!” It was the harshest he had spoken to her in a long time, and it left her stunned. Her heart leapt, her mouth went dry with terror as she glanced back at the growing crowd again. Braith was strong, but there were so many of them back there. “Go,” he urged, his voice a little softer.

Aria swallowed heavily, but she did not refuse him as he nudged her gently forward. “I’ll be fine Arianna, go.”

She scurried forward, grasping hold of the first lower branch she came across. She threw her arms around the limb, swung her legs over, and maneuvered swiftly up the large oak. She glanced back down at Braith; his head was tilted back as he watched her. She hesitated for a moment, loathe to leave him, but she needed a better spot, and a better angle, if she was going to have any hope of taking any of the creatures out with her arrows.

She climbed higher, searching for the branch she could use to reach the next tree. Finding the right one, she ran across the limb. She leapt into the air, feeling a brief moment of elation and delight as the air rushed up around her. Her legs kicked briefly, she seized hold of the other limb. Her arms locked around it as she swung easily back into the leafy branches.

Braith moved swiftly across the ground beneath her, keeping his eyes straight as he walked. Aria glanced back as the crowd of fifteen hit the edge of the forest. She had to get the shaking of her hands under control if she was going to continue to make her way through the trees, and not get killed. She darted swiftly across another limb, leaping easily into another tree, and then another.

Braith kept pace with her, but the others were gaining on them, and she needed to get a little further ahead. She moved easily, running and leaping until she found a notch in a tree that would be a good place to set up. She pulled an arrow free, placing it easily into her bow. She loved the trembling feel of power that vibrated up the bow and into her hands. Braith studied her for a moment, shaking his head as he watched her.

She didn’t have time to fire the arrow as Braith suddenly launched forward, blurring with speed as he raced at their stalkers. Aria’s mouth dropped, her eyes widened as he grasped hold of the first one and slammed him into the ground. She was stunned, momentarily dazed by his display of speed and overwhelming power. A soft squeal escaped his victim, but it was short lived as the victim’s throat was crushed beneath the strength of his hand. Aria watched in horror as three others launched at Braith.

Pushing aside leaves with the tip of her arrow, she took aim at one of the creatures clawing at Braith’s back. The arrow released with a soft twang, it flew straight through the air, striking its intended target in the back.

The vampire fell off of Braith, squealing as it clawed at its back and squirmed and

withered upon the ground in agony. Five pairs of red eyes swung her way as she drew their attention to her location within the tree. She had no fear that they would be able to get her out of the tree; they would have to catch her first in order to do so. Her main concern remained centered upon Braith. Aria quickly drew another arrow, notching it in the bow as she took aim at the next creature that had zeroed in on Braith.

She fired again, this time her arrow flew straight into the creature's heart. It wheeled back, howling as it fell upon the ground, withering in its death throes. Four of the vampire's ran off, fleeing back toward town. Three others became aroused by the scent of blood. Aria recoiled, horror and nausea twisting through her as they fell upon the one she had killed with delight and maliciousness.

Braith used their distraction to destroy two more of them, tearing their heads from their bodies, before turning his attention to the three now feasting upon their friend. She didn't know what to do as he stalked toward them, fury evident in the stiff set of his shoulders. Aria turned away, unable to watch as he attacked the creatures. Their cries of fear and pain echoed through the air. She wanted to cry, she wanted to block her ears and flee through the trees, she wanted to escape this horror she found herself trapped in.

She did none of those things as she remained frozen within the tree, shaking with the shock that clung to her. A sharp tug on her foot caught her off guard, nearly ripping her from the tree. She scrambled for purchase; her fingers sought some grip upon the hard tree. Her arm hooked over the branch, saving her from plummeting out of the tree. She was gasping for breath and terrified, but she managed to gather her wits enough to look down at what had nearly caused her freefall.

A vampire stared back at her, its fangs extended, its eyes red with hunger and murderous intent. Aria's eyes widened in surprise, she had been so upset by the death before her that she had missed this approaching danger. It was foolish, stupid, and she was paying for it now as his hand wrapped tightly around her boot.

Aria turned away from him, swinging her other arm up as she attempted to get into a better position in the tree. It jerked down hard on her again, knocking her newly acquired grasp off of the limb. A small gasp of pain escaped her as her hooked arm took the brunt of the violent jerk. She kicked out, trying to knock the creature's grip upon her free, but it refused to relinquish her as its hand slithered up to her ankle. It was surprisingly strong, even in its emaciated state. Or maybe it was the hunger that drove it to such levels of strength.

Her arm was aching, her armpit was rubbed raw. Her shoulder felt as if it were going to tear as pain began to spread rapidly through it. She was barely clinging on, barely remaining within the branches of the tree. She kicked out again, trying to knock the creature free as it ripped hard on her again. A tortured cry escaped from her, a wrenching agony tore through her shoulder as a loud pop filled the air. She no longer felt her arm as it released its hold upon the limb she had been barely clinging to.

The creature was still holding onto her ankle as she free fell into the air for a few feet. Its grasp kept her in the tree, but it did not keep her from slamming off of another branch. Her back screamed in anguish, the wind was knocked from her. She barely managed to get her good arm up in order to protect her head from the impact of the tree trunk. She was able to twist around, shoving herself off the limb as the vampire scrambled to get a better hold on her by moving up her calf. She kicked out, catching the thing beneath its chin, snapping its head back as it hissed and lunged at her. She kicked out again, knocking it back further. Anger filled her, frustration at her situation surged to the forefront as she swung out with the full force of her rage. Bone splintered, blood splattered over her as its nose shattered with a loud crack.

The creature howled in pain. It instinctively released her as it grasped hold of its twisted nose. A soft cry escaped her as she freefell into nothing. She tried hard to reclaim some hold upon the tree, but it was too late. She tried to keep herself straight, hoping to avoid as many of the branches as possible as she fell, but they slapped and tore painfully at her.

She heard Braith shout her name, but she couldn't respond to him as she was batted and bounced rapidly back and forth. The branches mercifully gave way, propelling her toward the ground. Arms wrapped tightly around her, sheltering her from hitting the ground as Braith took the impact of her body upon himself. A cry of pain escaped her as he cradled her wounded body gently against his chest.

His hands were upon her face, pushing her tangled hair back from her. His hand was upon her cheek. "Arianna," he whispered frantically. "Arianna?"

She took a deep breath, wincing as her bruised body protested the movement. She took a moment to assess the damage that had been done to her. She was satisfied that though she was in pain, she would heal eventually. "I'm ok," she told him, clenching her teeth as even that small movement caused pain to flare through her chest.

"Look at me."

She inhaled a small breath as she forced her eyes open. She blinked in surprise, uncertain about the emotions that surged through her. His much loved eyes were intense, terrified, and a vibrant angry shade of red. His much loved face was smeared with the blood of his victims. She had never seen his eyes this color, but then, most of the time they were covered by the dark glasses. She didn't know what to make of this stark reminder of what he was, what he was capable of, even if it was all because of her. His gaze searched her face, running rapidly over her, trying to reassure himself that she was, in fact, alright.

Then, his gaze rose to the tree, and the amount of fury that radiated out of him shook her to the marrow of her bones. She did not look back up at the creature in the tree. He may still be alive right now, but he was as good as dead. Braith's gaze came slowly back to hers, warming slightly. He placed her gently down, his eyes firing with anger as she winced involuntarily.

He bit hard into his wrist, holding his arm out to her as his blood trickled slowly out of his wounds. "It will help you heal faster," he said softly.

She hesitated for a brief moment, there had been enough blood today, but she could not refuse him. Not when every part of her hurt and not when he was looking at her with that pleading expression. She took his wrist, pressing it against her mouth as she drank slowly. His blood was sweet, delicious, and healing as it seeped into her system, flowed through her wounded and bruised muscles and dislocated shoulder. After a long moment, he pulled his wrist slowly away from her. His lips were soft upon her forehead as he released her. "Keep your eyes closed Arianna."

"Braith," she whispered, fighting the chills and tears that burned her eyes.

"Just keep your eyes closed, it will be over quickly and I don't want you to see this."

She closed her eyes, unable to resist obeying him. She did not want to see what he was going to do, and she would not be able to stop him either. She bit on her bottom lip, forcing herself to remain calm as she tried, and failed, to block out the sounds of the ensuing slaughter.

CHAPTER 11

Arianna curled against his chest, her hand entwined in his shirt as she slept soundly within his grasp. Braith had hoped that they would be at their destination by now, but the fight with the other vampires, and the tending of her wounds, had put them behind schedule. It was night again; she was exhausted, and beaten. His blood would help her to heal faster, but she still moaned every once in awhile, and her face was still scrunched slightly with pain.

He watched her as he moved; still awed by the fact that he could even see her. Still surprised by the fact that he had not found her beautiful at first. Yes, she was thinner than he liked, even now he wished there was more weight upon her, and he had always preferred lighter hair color, and a more refined beauty. But her features, though sharpened by her thinness, were soft, gentle, and yet possessed a strength and character that was entirely captivating.

They certainly captivated him anyway. He could not take his eyes away from her full mouth, slightly pointed nose, and dark eyelashes as they curled against her lightly freckled cheeks. When she had been in the palace, out of the rays of the sun, those freckles had almost disappeared completely.

She stirred, her eyelids fluttered open. Her sapphire eyes blazed up at him, a soft smile curved her mouth as she cuddled tighter against him. That smile was painfully rare, yet stunning and achingly beautiful. He knew that she had been shocked and horrified by what she had witnessed earlier, but she had not held it against him, or blamed him for his dark nature. She had not turned away from him in revulsion and fear.

"We're almost there," he told her.

She winced slightly as her wounded shoulder was jarred slightly. Anger spurted through him, but he swiftly buried it before she could see it, or sense it. She had seen enough mayhem today without needing to see anymore from him right now. She stared around the forest, her delicate forehead furrowed in confusion. It didn't look as if the woods were going to end, but they would soon.

"I can walk," she said softly.

"That's ok."

She turned back toward him, her dark eyebrows drawn tightly together. "Your arms must be tired."

"I'm fine Arianna; you weigh as much as a feather."

Displeasure flashed across her face. He bent over her to press a soft kiss on her nose, hoping to ease her irritation with him. "Are we going to be safe?"

He wanted to tell her that, yes, they would be. He wanted to be able to give her that much, but he couldn't. She had never known safety, had never known a place to call home where she could feel secure, and one day he would give her that, but unfortunately it would not be today. It probably would not be for a long time. Sadness crept into her eyes, she leaned her head against his chest.

"We'll stay together, right?" she asked softly.

"Yes."

"That's all that matters then."

His hands clenched tighter around her, he would try to give her the moon if she asked for it, but she had never asked much from him, if anything. She did not want money and jewels, did not want clothes; she only wanted safety, a place to call home, and him. He just didn't have the ability to give her everything she wanted right now. But one day he would, he promised himself that. The woods gave way, opening into a large clearing. The house stood in the center of the clearing, lights blazing from the windows lit the ground around it.

Arianna was staring at it in wide eyed wonder, her hands curled tight in his shirt as she gazed up at it. The house was on stilts, high up in the air, parts of it were actually built into the trees surrounding the clearing. The sides were all clapboard, though parts of it looked far more weathered than others. The house had been built up even more since the last time Braith had seen it; it seemed to disappear into the woods behind it now, spreading outward in a ramble of buildings and rooms.

Someone had been busy.

"Wow," Arianna breathed. She wiggled in his arms, and this time he allowed her to drop to her feet. Her mouth was parted slightly, her eyes wide as she tilted her head back to stare up at the giant tree house. She was most comfortable amongst the trees; this was something spectacular, and wonderful, to her. "What is this place?"

Braith stared at the growing ensemble of buildings and hallways connecting them. "It belonged to my mother's family originally."

She turned toward him, her gaze questioning. "And now?"

"And now it belongs to my brother in law." Arianna's mouth dropped, she turned slowly back to the tree house.

"Where is your sister?" she asked softly, apparently deciding not to press the issue.

"You met Natasha, briefly. She did not leave the palace when Ashby was placed here."

"Not even for her husband?"

Braith slipped his hand into Arianna's, pulling her closer to him. "Not all relationships are like this Arianna, not everyone chooses who they want to be with. Natasha and Ashby were forced together by their families. Natasha is spoiled, rich, and well accustomed to the lap of luxury. Even if she had come to care for Ashby in their time together, she would never leave that behind for him. She wouldn't leave it behind for anyone."

Her mouth was slightly parted, her eyes brimmed with tears. "You left it for me."

He nodded, stroking her cheek briefly. "I'd do anything for you." A single tear slipped free. He brushed it gently away before bending to kiss her softly.

"Why was Ashby put here?" she asked softly.

Braith turned slowly back to the tree house, and its ramshackle buildings. "During the war with the humans Ashby's family took the side of the humans. As punishment they were all slaughtered, but Ashby was sent to live in exile here, where he was to stay alone, and starving. Though it appears he has decided to add even more buildings to the original structure."

"Why was he kept alive?"

"My father felt that this would be a better punishment for him. No luxury, no ready human blood, and no women. Ashby was well known for his love of women and blood. All people, and vampires within the area, were ordered to stay away. There used to be guards here, but they seem to have disappeared, or perhaps Ashby is not as weak and deprived as my father had intended. At one time the guards had reported that he was so famished and decimated that he was no longer capable of movement." Fear flashed over Arianna's face, she glanced sharply back at the buildings. "I won't let him anywhere near you Arianna."

She nodded slowly, but still looked fearful. "Why wouldn't they come here to look for you, if it was your mother's home?" she asked softly.

A shadow passed across one of the curtained windows, moving swiftly across the room. Braith stiffened slightly as he watched Ashby move through the house. His gait, and swift stride, proved what Braith had already suspected. Ashby was no longer too weak to be a threat. "Because Ashby is the reason I was blinded."

Arianna inhaled sharply, her gaze slid slowly back to him, her eyes bright in the light of the moon. "Braith..."

He took hold of her hand, pulling her closer to him. Pulling her hair forward, he draped its thick waves around her neck, trying to mask the scent of her blood, though that would be impossible. The sweet smell was hard to miss. He wished that he had something to cover her with, but the summer months didn't allow for much extra clothing. Though it appeared that Ashby had been feeding, Braith didn't know how well, or the last time.

Arianna was a fierce temptation that he wasn't sure Ashby wouldn't go after. And Braith did not want to have to kill him, at least not immediately.

"Come."

She followed silently behind him, both of her hands clasped tightly around his, a tremor ran through her. He led her up a set of rickety steps, clenching his jaw as they creaked and swayed beneath them. He had not wanted to alert Ashby to their presence, but it was already too late for that. The stairs swayed beneath them as they stepped off them and onto a wobbly deck that he wasn't entirely certain would hold up beneath their weights. He wouldn't have been surprised if Ashby had set up booby traps. When Arianna tried to walk beside him, he pushed her gently back with a soft admonishment to walk only where he had. She frowned fiercely at him, but for once did not argue.

Braith wondered again where the guards were. He should have left Arianna in the woods, but even if he could not sense the guards, that didn't mean they weren't still out there. He couldn't risk it; he couldn't take that chance with her life. He held his arm out, keeping her behind him as he reached forward to try the knob. He was not surprised to find it locked.

He waited for a moment, trying to decide if he wanted to break in, or knock. He glanced back at Arianna, she was biting her bottom lip nervously, her eyes wide with fear. He squeezed her hand for reassurance, but he could tell it did little to soothe her. In the end, he decided on knocking. There was something about this situation that he found strange and offsetting, for some reason he felt that knocking might be the bigger element of surprise here.

From inside he could hear the approaching sound of footsteps; a soft whistling pierced the air. Braith was jarred for a moment, thrown back to a time when they had all lived together in the palace. Ashby had always whistled, not a loud piercing whistle, but a soft rhythm that had drifted cheerfully through the halls. It had been lively and carefree, as upbeat and easygoing as the man that issued it. All of the women had loved Ashby; they had thrown themselves at his feet, enchanted by his good looks, and his charming demeanor.

Now that whistle drifted easily through the air, lazy and casual, not at all the sound that a prisoner fighting for their lives should be making. This whistle was happy, easy, and so unbelievably joyful that it set Braith's teeth on edge. The two of them had once been good friends, more than brothers-in-law, but actually brothers. Then Ashby had betrayed them, Braith had been blinded, and their friendship had been forever severed. Ashby was supposed to have been punished for that betrayal, but it was more than obvious that he was no longer serving that punishment.

The door was flung open; Braith came face to face with the man who had once been his best friend, and was now one of his greatest enemies. The grin on Ashby's handsome face froze, he stood motionless for a moment; his eyes were bright with merriment

before reality began to sink in. He looked much as Braith remembered; he had not wasted away, did not appear starved, and in fact appeared to be slightly heavier than he had been in the palace.

Then, Ashby's grin faded, disbelief, shock, and finally panic flitted swiftly over his face. Braith was moving forward even as Ashby was trying to slam the door shut. The hard wood slammed off of his hand, bouncing back against the wall with a loud crash that shattered wood and caused Arianna to gasp loudly. Ashby was scrambling backward, trying to escape when Braith seized him by the throat, lifted him up, and slammed him off of the wall with enough force to shatter the plaster.

He hadn't seen Ashby in a hundred years, but the knife of betrayal that stabbed through him was just as fresh and sharp as it had been back then. This had been a bad idea. Braith had come here knowing that no one would look for him here; he had come here thinking that Ashby may still have contacts that would help him keep Arianna safe. He had come here expecting Ashby to be paying for his sins, not thoroughly enjoying his life.

The full force of his hatred for Ashby was slamming rapidly through him, and all of his reasons for being here vanished in an instant.

Now he just wanted to rip Ashby's throat out. Ashby's bright green eyes were wide and terrified, his hands clawed at Braith's arm, trying to dislodge Braith's fierce grip. His heels kicked against the wall as a choked gasp escaped him. Braith's fangs were fully extended, he pressed his face closer to Ashby's, enjoying the growing terror radiating from him.

"Hello brother," Braith growled.

Ashby choked, his movements became wilder as Braith pressed down harder. "Braith." Arianna's shocked whisper barely pierced through the red haze of his fury. He turned slowly toward her, trying to make her out through the cloud that surrounded his vision. For a moment he thought he was going blind again, but then he realized that it was his anger that shadowing his vision now. "Braith."

Braith clenched down tighter, and then he eased his grip. Arianna knew exactly what he was capable of, but he couldn't bring himself to kill in cold blood in front of her. He may kill Ashby later, but he would need more of an excuse than the fact that his ex brother-in-law had opened the door. He shoved Ashby roughly back as he stepped away from him.

Ashby's hand went to his throat; he staggered away from the wall, his gaze hooded as he stared hard at Braith. Arianna stood back, her hands clenched on the bow at her side. He hadn't realized she had pulled it out until now, and she wasn't going to put it away if the stubborn set of her jaw meant anything. She stared defiantly back at him for a moment before her gaze slid angrily to Ashby.

Ashby was watching her, his forehead furrowed, confusion etched into the handsome lines of his face. Then, his gaze slid slowly over her, raking her from head to toe. The confusion in his bright green eyes was apparent as he turned slowly back to Braith. His

eyes were questioning, dark, full of wonder and disbelief. "Where are the guards?" Braith inquired his voice a low growl.

Ashby swallowed, he rubbed his throat again, but he didn't speak. Braith grabbed hold of his shoulders, slamming him off the wall as he shook him roughly. Ashby staggered slightly but swiftly caught his balance again. His lips curled into a sneer, his fangs extended but he did not come at Braith, he was too smart for that. They both knew that he would not win. Braith was older, stronger, and well sated.

"Where are the guards?" he demanded again.

Ashby straightened his shoulders, fixing his shirt as he straightened away from the wall. He had always been meticulously dressed and groomed. "Dead." Braith nodded slowly as he glanced around the large room, he had already expected that answer.

His mother's family had once had the home finely appointed with classical furniture, and works of art. All of those things had been stripped from the house when Ashby had been banished here. Now, though the room was still fairly bare, Braith was not surprised to see that Ashby had managed to find a few nicer things to decorate it with. Ashby had always had fine taste and liked the finer things in life; he would find a way to incorporate them into his home.

"Who speaks with the guards from the palace when they call?"

"I do."

"So you discovered the code word, and killed them."

It had not been a question, but Ashby answered anyway. "Yes."

"When will someone from the palace be getting into contact again?"

"Not until tomorrow morning. They checked in about an hour ago. I won't tell you the password." Braith hadn't suspected that he would. Ashby would stay alive for as long as he was needed. When Ashby's gaze slid back toward Arianna he stepped in between them. "She's human."

"Very astute of you," Braith growled.

Ashby's eyes narrowed on Braith. "Why are you here Braith? What the hell are you doing with a human? Why is she not wearing a leash?"

Arianna bristled slightly as she stepped forward. "I am not a blood slave," she coldly informed Ashby, her jaw clenched tight as she glared at him.

"Arianna." Braith pushed her slightly back, wanting to keep her as far from Ashby as possible.

Ashby was studying her in surprise and disbelief. Then his gaze drifted down to her shoulder. Her loose shirt had slid slightly down, revealing the marks that marred her

porcelain skin. Hunger flashed through his eyes, but something even more flitted across his features. "You're not a blood slave, and you're not a palace woman, yet you nurture him?"

Arianna was beginning to grow thoroughly annoyed with Ashby, her hands twitched upon her bow. Braith wouldn't put it past her to draw an arrow and shoot him just to make herself feel better. He reached out, pulling the collar of her shirt up, stroking her skin for a brief moment before he covered the marks. Her eyes fired with love, her mouth parted slightly.

"How did you know her shirt was down?" Braith turned slowly back to Ashby, a small smile curved his mouth. Ashby's mouth dropped, his eyes widened. "You can see!" Braith just shrugged in response. "What? How? I don't understand." Ashby's attention turned back to Arianna, he shook his head, causing his dark blond hair to spill across his forehead. He seemed completely mystified by her. "I thought your eyesight was gone for good."

"Do you have a place where she can lie down?" Braith inquired, unwilling to even begin to ease some of Ashby's shock and questions.

"I'm not leaving you," Arianna protested instantly.

"You're exhausted."

"I'm fine Braith."

"Arianna..."

"No, I am not leaving you alone with him!" she retorted fiercely.

"What the hell," Ashby whispered, his head bouncing rapidly back and forth between them.

"Shut up!" Braith snapped at him. "Arianna..."

"I'm fine Braith, really. I slept on the way here, remember. I don't want to leave you alone, or be alone right now." Her response was so honest, so vulnerable that it tugged at his heart. He didn't want her anywhere near Ashby, but he couldn't force her away. Especially not now that he realized that beneath her defiant expression and posture, she was terrified.

"Sit down."

He wasn't surprised when she didn't move but simply stood immobile with her hands clenched around the bow. "Jesus," Ashby said softly. "What the hell is going on Braith? Why are you here? And what the hell is she to you!?"

"That's not your concern," Braith informed him. "Who are you expecting?"

"I don't know what you mean," Ashby replied, trying hard to appear nonchalant and

failing miserably.

"You were whistling when you opened the door, you weren't worried that there may be a threat on the other side. Who are you expecting?"

Ashby tilted his chin to glare at Braith. "You have your secrets and I have mine," he responded softly.

"I have my secrets but I can, and will, rip your throat out." Braith pushed him back, keeping him tight to the wall. "I already owe you one Ashby; you think I won't take great pleasure in drawing your death out."

Ashby's turned toward Arianna, his eyebrows drew sharply together. "She doesn't look too pleased by that notion."

"I don't have to watch," Arianna informed him tautly.

Braith gave her an approving nod before turning his attention back to Ashby. The knock on the door snapped all of their heads around. Ashby opened his mouth to shout a warning, but Braith seized hold of his throat, cutting his cry swiftly off. Before Ashby could react Braith delivered a swift blow that knocked him out, rendering him unconscious. Arianna was gaping at him, her eyes wide with shock. He placed his finger to his lip, directing her to remain silent as he made his way toward the door. He heard the arrow being knocked back against the bow, but he did not look back.

He pulled aside the curtain a little. He could not see who was on the porch, but he was satisfied that it was only one person. He threw the door open, not at all surprised to see the girl standing outside. She was, however, stunned to see him. Her mouth dropped, her eyes widened, a small cry escaped her as Braith seized hold of her arm and pulled her swiftly into the house.

CHAPTER 12

Aria sat on the edge of the couch, her hands clasped before her, the bow and quiver by her feet. She wasn't taking any chances; she didn't want them more than arm's length away from her. Ashby was holding a rag to his cut lip; his gaze hooded as he stared hard at Braith. Aria leaned forward, not liking the look in Ashby's bright green eyes.

He was exceptionally good looking in a very easy going, charming way. His dark blond hair was shaggy as it fell forward in waves, highlighting the carved planes of his face. There was an air of indifference surrounding him, and yet Aria sensed that there was something more to him, something that even Braith didn't know about. Something that Ashby had managed to keep hidden from everyone that had ever known him.

She didn't know why she was so convinced of this; perhaps it was years of honing her instincts within the forest. But she could not shake the feeling that there was far more to Ashby than met the eye.

The young girl sat across from him, her brown eyes wide as she nervously watched them. She was pretty, with long dark hair that fell in thick waves about her delicate shoulders. She was older than Aria, about twenty two or three in appearance. Though there was no way to know her real age, as she was not human. A fact that had been made clear when she had attempted to attack Braith, only to be swiftly rebuffed.

He had tied her hands behind her back, and then secured her to a beam in the ceiling with enough rope to allow her to keep her hands down. Her legs were also tied, with another length of rope that ran to a different beam. Aria was edgy, nervous about this situation, uncertain as to what they were doing here, and what Braith planned for these two.

Ashby appeared just as uncertain as he watched Braith wearily. "What have you gotten yourself into Braith?" he asked quietly.

"I don't see how that is any of your concern."

She felt the spark of hunger and curiosity that raced through Ashby as his eyes raked over her again. Aria shifted slightly, hating the way he continued to look at her like she was something to eat, or an oddity that he couldn't explain. Aria forced herself not to squirm beneath his scrutiny, forced herself to return his gaze.

"You've come to me Braith; that makes it my concern. You have brought whatever trouble you are in into my world. I have a right to know what the hell that is."

Braith turned to him, but his jaw was tight, and Aria was well aware of the fact that he was not going to talk to Ashby. She was just as curious as Ashby was, just as puzzled as to what Braith had planned, but if Braith didn't want to say it in front of Ashby then she wasn't going to press him. "This isn't your world Ashby, it's your prison. Or at least it was supposed to be. Who is the girl?"

"Who is your girl?" Ashby retorted.

A low growl of anger and frustration escaped Braith. The hair on Aria's neck and arms stood on end as he stalked toward Ashby. She was afraid that he was going to kill Ashby; apparently Ashby felt the same way as he recoiled from Braith's approach. Aria leapt to her feet, intending to stop Braith when the girl charged at her with a soft, violent hiss. Aria spun, but she was caught off guard by the girl's sudden attack. Stunned by the brutality and hunger the girl radiated, Aria fell back as she lunged forward with a ferocious snarl, red eyes, and hooked fingers.

She was defenseless, having left her bow by the sofa. Reacting on instinct alone, she slammed a fist into the girl's cheek, putting the full force of her weight behind it. Aria's blow barely did anything to affect the vampire, but the ropes caught suddenly, jerking her roughly back. The girl fell back on her ass, a frustrated cry escaping her as she slammed her hands on the floor.

Aria took a small step back, her heart hammering with terror, her throat dry with the shock strumming through her. Braith was before her, his hands grasping hold of her arms. "Are you ok?" he demanded. Aria swallowed heavily, trying to calm the frantic beat of her heart, and her fear. "Arianna?"

"I'm fine. I'm fine," she said softly.

He grasped hold of her chin, turning her face toward him. His eyes were intent, dark, and simmering with the barely contained fury and bloodlust pulsing through him. She had seen that look a few times from him, but it still scared her, mainly because she knew there was nothing that she could do to stop whatever it was he intended. "Braith..."

But it was not the girl that Braith took his anger out on, it was her. His mouth seized hers in a desperate, needy way that left her stunned and shaken. He took firm possession of her, pulling her roughly against him as he clasped her tightly. Though she was originally shocked into immobility by his fervent need, she felt herself melting against him. She gave into to his wild desire mainly because she couldn't refuse him anything, but also because she needed this as badly as he did. His hand was firm in her hair; his fingers gently cradled her skull as he deepened the kiss.

He pulled slowly away from her, his arms trembling around her as he rested his forehead against hers. Aria struggled to catch her breath, struggled to calm the hum of desire his volatile kiss had ignited. She clung to his strong, well muscled arms, trying hard to keep herself grounded in this strange new world and the overwhelming sensations that he evoked in her. He clasped hold of her face gently, kissing her nose lightly as he held her

for a moment longer.

"I need you to go into the other room for a minute."

"Braith..."

"Just for a minute Arianna, I don't want you to see this."

Aria's eyes widened. Horror, disbelief, and disgust tore through her as she realized what he intended to do. She wanted to argue with him, wanted to tell him no, but she couldn't find the words. They were outnumbered here, between Ashby and the girl they were under constant threat of attack. But the girl was tied up, defenseless. It wasn't right. She was shaking her head, trying to get the words out, but he was already pushing her toward the door of another room.

"Braith wait," she said frantically clinging to his arms. "Don't do this, not like this Braith."

"I'm not going to kill her," he assured her softly.

"But..."

"It's ok Arianna; go on now, just for a moment."

She was frowning fiercely at him, but he had already managed to navigate her through the doors and into a room that appeared to be a library. Braith glanced around, displeasure crossing his features as he took in the vast array of books. "Braith?"

He kissed her quickly before spinning away from her. "I just need some time alone with them, with him. Stay in here."

She didn't have time to argue with him as he closed the door. Anger and disbelief surged through when she heard the click of the lock pop into place. Her hands fisted, she bit her bottom lip in frustration as she fought the urge to race at the door and pound on it until he opened it again. It would appear childish, she knew that, but she also knew that she was not going to be confined to this damn room, and she was not going to let him order her around like this.

She spun toward the other doorway, making her way swiftly through the other rooms. As she moved through the ramshackle house the rooms and doorways became more haphazard. It was easy to tell what had been the original house, and what the newest additions to the massive tree structure were. The floor creaked beneath her, but she was not afraid that it might collapse, it seemed solid enough. She passed by an extended version of the library, a rather large and surprisingly well equipped kitchen, a den, three bedrooms, and two bathrooms with showers. Wonderful showers that if they were here long enough, and things settled down, she was going to enjoy.

Then, there were the empty rooms, apparently built just to keep Ashby busy during his time of confinement. The additions wound deeper through the forest, branching off into new and different angles. Limbs from the trees had been used for support and

incorporated into the rambling structure. Despite its empty air, and slightly lonely feel, there was something about it the strange house that intrigued and soothed her. She had always been more at home within the trees than anywhere else; this was the kind of place that she could live in. This was the kind of place that she could one day call home. It was a strange realization, one that was shocking even to her as she'd never thought of a stable home, but it felt right somehow.

She came to the end of the structure, stopping as she came face to face with the wall before her. Frustration filled her, she had been hoping that this wandering labyrinth somehow came back around on itself, but it did not. Fighting the urge to kick the wall in anger, Aria fisted her hands and spun back around. She wanted nothing more than to be with Braith, but she was not going to be relegated to this small role, she was not going to be ordered about and hidden away like a child that could not fend for herself.

She could fend for herself; in fact she was far better at it than almost anyone else she knew.

Maybe she wasn't as quick and strong as a vampire, but she had her own set of skills that elevated her above most humans. She stormed back through the rooms, determined to have it out with Braith. She was making her way through the kitchen when he appeared in the doorway. She could see the barely contained fury simmering beneath his surface; sense the thin thread of control that he had over himself.

Aria froze as she took him in. He was being pushy and overbearing, but for the first time she glimpsed the fear he was trying to keep from her. The fear that he wasn't going to be able to keep her safe, that he would lose her. She also saw the strain he was going through at having to face Ashby. The stress that seeing the man that had betrayed him, and blinded him, for nearly a hundred years was putting on him.

Braith's eyes were smoldering, his shoulders rigid. Need radiated from him, his hunger was nearly palpable within the room. He had fed recently, but the stress of their current situation was clearly wearing on him. She felt that he hadn't even realized how hard, strenuous, and draining this would be on him.

She couldn't promise him that they would be safe, that they would make it through this, but she could help to ease the burning hunger throbbing from him. She reached up, pulling the collar of her shirt down, baring the fresh marks upon her skin. His eyes sparked with yearning, she could see the press of his fangs against the inside of his clamped mouth. A muscle twitched in his cheek. She didn't jump when he slammed his hand against the wall, causing a few pots within one of the cabinets to shift and fall with a soft rattle.

"It's too soon. No."

The words were grated at her, harsh with the struggle he was waging with himself. "I can take it."

"You were hurt today, wounded. No."

He was going to fight her, she knew that. No matter how much he needed this, her safety was number one with him. And if he felt that he was going to hurt her, or that this would be a danger to her, than he was not going to do it. But she was far more stubborn than he was, and she wanted this just as badly as he needed it. She was beginning to realize that she craved him feeding from her as much as he craved her blood. Despite the brief pain the experience brought her, it also brought moments of pure, unadulterated joy. It was thrilling and wondrous to be able to sustain him with blood, her body. It was exhilarating to have him on her, in her, gaining strength from her. She may not be the only one that he could gain such nourishment from, but she was the only one that he wanted to feed from anymore, and he needed her now. If he was going to have any sort of relief, she was the only one that could give it to him.

Her heart thumped with the excitement of that knowledge as she moved slowly toward him. "Arianna."

His voice was a soft plea, and though all she wanted was to give him whatever he wanted, she could not back down from this. He may not feel it was safe to feed from her right now, but he did need to. She stopped before him. He reached forward to pull her shirt up but she caught hold of his hand, resting it against her chest, on top of her heartbeat.

"Do you feel that?" His eyes were dark, stormy as he raised his gaze to hers. She knew that he could feel it, it was impossible not to feel the fierce beat of it. "It's yours. I am yours Braith. I'm strong, I can handle this; take what you need for me."

Though he was still vibrating with hunger, his eyes were also filled with awe. His fingers curled against her chest, he bent to her kissing her forehead lightly, then her cheek, and ear. "I am yours also Arianna, never doubt that."

"I never will," she vowed.

His hand curled in her hair, caressing her gently. Though his finger trailed over the old marks, he did not bite her, but simply stood over her, soothing and stroking her. He shuddered, his hard muscles rippled against her, she felt his struggle, his weakening, his hunger. He kissed her neck softly, his lips pulled slowly back. The hard press of his fangs caused her heart to lurch with excitement, need blasted through her. A low moan of pleasure escaped, her knees nearly buckled as he bit into her, joining them completely. She was clinging to him, shaking as waves of ecstasy crashed over her. No matter how awful the world around them was, this exchange, this one moment of perfect bliss, and pleasure, was worth every horror she was certain was coming their way. If it wasn't already here.

He pulled away from her, nuzzling her gently, licking the lingering drops of blood from her skin. He had not taken as much as he normally would have. "You need more..."

"I'm fine."

"Braith, you need to stay strong. You need to take more."

He cradled her face gently, stroking her cheeks lightly. "It is too soon for you."

She swallowed heavily, trying to rid herself of the lump forming in her throat. Though the next words were going to kill her, she managed to strangle them out. "Then you must go to someone else."

His hands stilled on her, he lifted her face to him. She could not stop the tears that spilled down her face, could not hide the pain that such a thought caused her. It would be awful for him to turn to someone else for this, awful for her, but he needed to feed. He needed to stay strong, especially now, and she could not give him all that he needed at the moment. Maybe one day, when there wasn't so much pressure and strain on him, she could be enough. But that was not today, and it probably wasn't going to be anytime soon. They both needed to accept the fact that he would have to go somewhere else, to someone else, and there was nothing that either of them could do to stop it from happening.

"That thought does not make you happy."

She bit her bottom lip, shaking her head at him as he wiped the tears away. "No, of course not. But I would rather you stayed strong than have you get hurt because you were hungry, or weak."

"I will not be either one of those things."

"Braith..."

"I will find other ways Arianna. I will substitute what you cannot give me with animals."

"Is that the same?" she whispered.

He smiled softly at her, kissing her nose lightly. "It may not taste as good, but it is just as nourishing. But then, nothing tastes as good as you." She shook her head at him as he pushed her hair back. "You're the most delicious thing I've ever encountered."

Aria shuddered; a chill ran down her spine as delight filtered through her body. "You don't have to say that," she breathed.

"It's true." His hand was on her neck, his palm pressed over the marks upon her. His marks. "I don't want anyone but you Arianna. The idea of it is repulsive to me, especially since I know it hurts you."

"I don't want you to suffer."

"I will not suffer and I will not turn to someone else. You are mine Arianna, you will always be mine." His voice rang with possessiveness, she could feel his tension spiking again. It was the first time she realized that it wasn't just this entire situation that had

him so out of sorts, but also her. It was a frightening and disconcerting realization, she didn't know how to help him, how to ease the stress thrumming through him. "The thought of you turning to someone else makes me want to destroy this entire place. Makes me want to shred someone limb from limb. I would not inflict such hurt upon you."

She stared at him in surprise, disturbed by the rapid change she sensed in him. Disturbed by the fact that she was a large part of the instability she sensed growing inside of him. "I would never do that," she promised. He was dark, hard, and distant in a way that he had not been since she had first met him within the palace walls. For a moment it seemed as if he didn't see her, as if he was trapped in the thought of her with another man. "Braith, I would never turn to someone else. You are the only one that has anything that I want."

He swallowed heavily, she didn't think he was aware of the fact that his sudden instability had caused his fangs to sprout forth again. He closed his eyes for a moment, when he opened them again she was relieved to see a softening in his gaze. "I know Arianna. I know you wouldn't."

"Never Braith. Never." She hoped that her insistence would help to get through to him, but she still sensed something dark and turbulent beneath his calm outer surface. His hand was tense upon her neck, his grip almost painful. "The thought is repulsive to me Braith."

"I know."

"Then why do you seem so troubled? So angry?"

He looked slightly startled by her observation, his gaze darted to his hand. Horror rolled through his gaze, his hand loosened on her. He shook his head, his eyes filled with a self hatred that rattled her. He pulled his hand away, taking a small step away from her. "I'm sorry Arianna; I did not mean to hurt you."

"You didn't," she assured him quickly, terrified by the strange gap she felt widening between them. A gap she didn't understand, just as she didn't understand what was going on with him. She reached for his hand, grabbing it tightly in hers. "Braith you could never hurt me."

He did not look appeased by her words. He didn't even look as if he believed them. "We should return."

"Braith, what is wrong?" she demanded, becoming frightened by the strange air that now encompassed him.

He grabbed hold of her, pulling her against him. A small gasp of surprise escaped her. He fell to his knees before her, wrapping his arms around her waist. He clung to her as he rested his head against her stomach. "You humble me Arianna. I do not deserve you; I did nothing to earn your love, or the gift of light that your presence has brought back to my life." Arianna was frozen, shocked at the sight of the most powerful creature she had ever known, her prince, on his knees before her, broken by the anguish pouring from him.

Anguish she did not understand.

Tears spilled from her, her chest constricted in pain. She buried her hands in his hair as a soft cry escaped her. She bowed over him, cradling him against her, trying hard not to give into the powerful sobs that wanted to escape her. He was humbled by her, he felt that he did not deserve her, and yet if it had not been for him she would still be dead and lost inside. She may well be dead if he hadn't been there to intervene. If it wasn't for him, she never would have known the joy of love, the wonder of things that she had never understood and never wanted to, until he walked into her life. If it wasn't for him, she never would have learned what life was truly about, she would have lost out on so much without his love to save her.

She slid to her knees before him, clinging to him as he enveloped her, rocking her against him, holding her, and touching her so reverently that she could barely breathe through the love swirling and building throughout her. His presence overwhelmed her; it floored her, and rocked her with its intensity and need. His hands were in her hair; his mouth was hard on hers, passionate, burning with a need that left her shaken. For the first time she realized that though he did not pressure her, did not push her toward anything, there was something else that he wanted even more than her blood.

He also wanted her body.

Aria shuddered, desire pooled through her. It was something that she had not been ready for, something she had not given because circumstances always seemed to separate them. But even though they were on the run, adrift in a world that provided no security, there were no barriers between them anymore. She didn't even care that they were kneeling on a kitchen floor right now; she was so swept up in both of their needs and desires.

He pulled away from her, shaking as he held her tight. "Arianna," he moaned.

"I understand. I know what you need." But though she said the words, she wasn't sure they were right. She knew he wanted this as badly as she did, but she wasn't entirely certain that it would be enough. She sensed that he may need more than just her blood and her body. He already had her heart and soul; she didn't know what else she could give him to ease the distress she sensed growing within him.

"Arianna." His voice was a low groan of pain and need. "You are so innocent. So sweet..."

"I am not that sweet."

His smile was wan, his eyes dark and tortured. "True," he agreed softly. She grinned at him, sensing the lightening in his mood that she had been hoping for. "There is so much you don't know about me though. So much that you could never understand. There are things that I have done..."

She placed her fingers over his mouth, silencing him. "Don't Braith. You're not going to scare me away; you are not going to drive me away. You are not your father, you are not

Caleb.”

“I am a killer.”

“I have killed also,” she managed to choke out.

“In self-defense. I killed for pleasure, for joy.” She tried to turn away from him; she didn’t want to hear this. She knew what he was, knew what he was capable of; she had witnessed the full force of his brutality earlier. He grabbed hold of her though, pulling her back toward him. “You need to hear this Arianna.”

“I understand Braith; you don’t have to do this.”

“I do, because you don’t understand.” She frowned fiercely at him, her hands clenching tight on her legs. “I never killed for pleasure, never killed for the joy of it.” She didn’t understand where he was going with this. “Until Jack took you from the palace.”

Aria recoiled, the color drained from her face. He was right, she didn’t understand this. He had told her about the blood slaves he had taken after her escape, and though she hadn’t asked, she had assumed that he had not killed them. The Braith she knew was kind, caring, overly protective of her, and as willing to die for her as he was willing to kill for her, but he was not vicious. And this conversation was taking a turn toward cruelty that she had not expected from him.

“And then I lost myself to the pleasure of the blood, the pleasure of sex, and the pleasure of the death.” She felt nauseous. She was going to throw up. He was a killer, she understood that. There were other women before her, she knew that, he was over nine hundred years old for crying out loud, she’d be a fool to think there hadn’t been other women, but she didn’t want to hear about them. And she didn’t want to hear about him glutting himself on them, on thriving on destroying them. He leaned closer to her, his eyes burned with a strange fire. “I did not enjoy it for long Arianna.”

She shook her head, forcing herself not to recoil from him. She loved him but how did she assimilate the monster he was describing to the man before her. “Then why?” she managed to croak out.

“Because I wanted to forget you and I thought that it would help.”

She stifled a moan as she closed her eyes. Guilt stained her soul and twisted in her stomach. It was not her fault that he had done those things. He had chosen to kill, but her absence had been the catalyst that sent him spiraling over the edge. “Why are you telling me this?” she whispered.

He sighed softly; his hand was gentle as he gripped her chin. “Because you need to know.”

She shook her head in denial. She loved him, she truly did, but now she felt wounded and raw. He had starkly reminded her of things that she did not want to recall, reminded her of the fact that though she had no one to compare him to, there were probably hundreds,

if not thousands, that he would be comparing her to. He had also harshly reminded her of the fact that he was a monster, or at least had the potential to be. He would never hurt her, but what would he do to someone else that stood in his way? What would he do if her family stood in his way?

She knew the answer to that, and though she wanted to deny it, she knew that it would be something swift, and vicious.

"Arianna, you need to understand what it is that I am saying to you." She blinked, her eyes burned with tears, but she was confused as to why he kept pushing this. "I can't lose you again Arianna; it sent me into a dark spiral. It snapped something inside of me, turned me into something evil and twisted. I upheld my promise, I did not reclaim any blood slaves after the last time I saw you. I couldn't, the thought of them was disgusting to me. But I cannot lose you from my life again, many will not survive it."

Her eyes were wide, her mouth parted in disbelief. "You're not going to," she promised softly.

His hands were on her face, his eyes forceful and smoldering. "Whatever this is between us, it's something that I don't understand, it's something strong, intense, pure, and yet consuming. It is something wonderful and precious, but it can also turn me into something horrendous. Losing you will also drive me mad. I am one of the strongest of our kind, I am a prince, and my blood is strong, old, untainted. If I snap, if I go on a rampage, I will destroy many people before I am stopped. If I am stopped."

"Braith I will never leave you," she promised.

"You are human Arianna. As long as you stay human you will be mortal, at risk of death."

"Braith..."

"I cannot take the chance of you being killed. I cannot risk that."

Realization was cold and vile as it hit her with the force of a hard slap. He did want more than just her blood; he wanted more than just her body even.

He wanted her life. He wanted the only thing she couldn't give him right now, if ever, but seeing the stress in him now she wasn't sure she would be able to stop him from taking it by force.

CHAPTER 13

Arianna was still pale, and shaken. She had not spoken since he had made his revelation to her, she had barely even moved. Every once in awhile, she would stare at him, her eyes would darken slightly, and her hands would begin to tremble in her lap once more. She was the strongest human he had ever encountered, perhaps even the strongest being he had ever come into contact with, but his confession, his openness, had rattled her completely.

As had his intention to take her humanity from her.

It was not something he wanted to do, not something he looked forward to doing, but it was something he had to do. Something he was going to do. He realized that now, he just hoped that eventually she would come around to be willing. He didn't know how he would handle it if she wasn't, didn't know how he would handle it if she remained human for much longer. But he could not take the chance of losing her again. When he thought back to the things he had done after she left him, he was repulsed by his actions. He was shocked by the depths of his depravity, shocked by his fervent need to lose himself in blood, sex, and death in order to try and forget her. He had never experienced that ravenous hunger and brutality that had encompassed him. It had ensnared him within a web of death that had done little to ease the tortured pain residing within his soul.

A pain that she had inflicted and only she had eased. And he had come to realize that it would only ever be her that could pull him from that dark place. A place he had entered a few times today, slaughtering and killing anyone that had posed any kind of threat to her life. She could pull him back from the brink of madness; she gave him some kind of control over himself. But it was a control that was unraveling rapidly.

He knew that, he could feel it within the marrow of his bones. She would be his undoing, as he would be hers.

She was everything to him; she was his light in a world that had been black before her. In a world that he had not seen for so long before her. She could not stay human, and he was not sure that he could change her. He'd heard of it being done before, but had never witnessed it, and had never attempted such a feat himself. It was dangerous, many did not survive.

He was determined that she would.

"Braith." Ashby was watching him wearily, his eyes narrowed and distrustful. Yet, there was something in his eyes, something almost knowing. Braith stopped pacing, tilting his

head as he studied his enemy. "What have you gotten yourself into?"

Braith strode toward the window. He pulled the curtain back, peering out on the lightening day. He didn't expect Jack to make it today, but perhaps by nightfall. "Have you forsaken your right to the throne?"

He turned as the young girl gasped in shock. He had tightened her bonds, making it almost impossible for her to move. Arianna's soft pleas had saved the woman's life; it would not take much for him to change his mind though. "You are the prince?" she inquired in awe.

"I am no prince," Braith growled at her.

The girl's eyes were wide, fearful. She squiggled against her tight ropes, struggling to break free. Arianna watched her in wide eyed fascination, but he could see the deep turmoil churning behind her eyes. She didn't like what he'd done to the girl, but she didn't protest it either. She seemed resigned to the fact that the woman would remain tied tightly, she was not resigned to this situation though as her eyes came wearily back to him.

"So the son has turned his back on his father. Caleb must be thrilled," Ashby purred. "What must Jericho think?" Braith remained silent; Ashby would learn soon enough that Jericho had abandoned his place in the palace long before Braith had. "The palace streets will run red with blood if Caleb ever ascends the throne."

Braith snorted in disgust as he shook his head at Ashby. "Do you really think my father is ready to hand over his rule?"

"I think that Caleb will try to take it from him, when he is ready to."

"You may be right."

"It will be horrific and violent."

"It will," Braith agreed.

Frustration flashed across Ashby's handsome features. "You know what will happen with Caleb in charge Braith. You know what he will do. This pretty little thing that you've brought in here, you know what Caleb would do to her!"

"He'll have to find her first."

Ashby's eyes widened, he climbed slowly to his feet. Stepping forward, he came up against the tight bonds wrapped around him. "Braith, this is Caleb we are talking about. He will raze every town in order to find you, in order to make sure that you do not come back and try to reclaim your birthright. You think your father is a sadistic son of a bitch, he has nothing on Caleb."

"I know my family Ashby," Braith hissed.

Ashby shook his head. For the first time, true fear flickered through his bright green eyes. "You have no idea of the stain that rests on their souls," Ashby said softly. "Of their cruelty and immorality."

"And you do?" Braith inquired.

Ashby was silent for a long moment. He turned slowly toward Arianna. "We didn't turn against your family because mine was hoping to take over, because we wanted the power, or because we cared about the humans." Arianna glared at Ashby. "We wanted nothing of power Braith, you know that. We were an easy going lot, all of us. Power was never our goal; fun was all that we ever wanted, freedom, no restraints. It was not power we sought Braith, it was not to save the human race."

Braith folded his arms firmly over his chest, leaning back on his heels as he studied his brother-in-law with disdain. "Then what did you want?" he demanded.

"Peace Braith, we simply sought peace. Things were well enough before the war. So what if vampires did not wander about in public. Who cared that we had to keep our identities secret? Not me, not my family, not you. It's not as if we didn't have fun, not as if we didn't take whatever we wanted, whenever we wanted it anyway. Why upset the balance? Why take a chance that it could all go wrong? That it could be even worse afterward?

"And it was worse afterward. For everyone. We were relegated to these positions that none of us wanted. You had always been the prince amongst our people, but you know you never wanted it, and until the war you never thought seriously about what it meant. Do you think I wanted to marry that bitch sister of yours? Natasha could suck the fun and life out of the happiest fellow. Which, I was until that time."

Braith was not surprised to find Arianna enrapt by what Ashby was saying. She was leaning slightly forward, her hands clasped tightly before her, her mouth parted as she listened intently. He wanted very much to remove her from this room, and Ashby's poison, but he knew that she would not go. Besides, Ashby was right; Natasha was cold, hateful, and almost as twisted as Caleb himself. And though Ashby was fun loving, and more than enjoyed his share of blood, he had never relished in the death as so many members of Braith's family did. As Braith himself had.

"We did not want power Braith, we only wanted to be free. I only wanted to be free. Apparently you have decided the same or else you wouldn't be here."

Braith did want the same thing, but he wanted Arianna to be free even more. He wanted her to experience a world that she had ever known, one that was safe and secure. One where she did not have to fear his father and brother, one where she did not have to fear him. "Will they be coming here Braith?" Ashby asked softly.

"I don't know," he admitted.

Ashby jerked against his ties, lurching slightly forward. "You cannot leave me here if they

do! I am sorry for what was done to you, I always did like you; you know that. You were an unwanted casualty Braith; you were not the intended victim. Your father was."

"That is supposed to make things better?" Braith growled.

"You care nothing for the man either," Ashby snarled. "I lived within those walls, I knew you from a young age; I know what that bastard did to you! I know what you endured at his hands!"

Arianna turned slowly toward him, she was still abnormally pale, and there was an emptiness in her eyes that shook him. Though he had not completely kept the abuse he had taken from his father from her, he had not elaborated upon it either. She did not need to know about that horror on top of all of the others she had endured. "Braith?"

He shook his head; he was not going to go into details about it, not now. "They are going to come here?" the vampire girl croaked. When no one answered, she lurched forward, a terrified scream erupting from her. She ripped and jerked against her bonds, her head whipping back and forth as she continued to scream wildly. Arianna recoiled in horror, the woman was wild, crazed, her fangs had extended, and her eyes were a violent shade of red.

The woman could very well get free if she continued on this way, and she was going to go after Arianna if she did. "Don't!" Arianna cried launching to her feet as Braith strode toward the crazed vampire. She stumbled forward, unnaturally clumsy as her foot got caught up on the corner of the table before her. Ashby launched at her, pulling her back as the girl took a swipe that missed her by inches.

Red flooded Braith's vision, fury ripped through him. He grabbed hold of the girl, shoving her roughly back against the wall. Terror widened Ashby's eyes as Braith charged at him. Using Arianna as a shield, Ashby thrust her before him. His hand wrapped swiftly around her throat, pulling her head back as he clamped down on her. A bellow of rage erupted from Braith, he stalked toward Ashby, determined to destroy the man that held the only person Braith cared about anymore.

Ashby did not make a move to hurt her, but he did keep himself planted firmly behind her. Braith could not get at him without hurting Arianna. Frustration filled him; he could feel the swelling rise of bloodlust tearing through him. "I'm not a fool Braith, I'm not going to kill her unless you force me too," Ashby said softly, barely poking his head out from behind Arianna's back. "I just want to talk reasonably, and you need to listen."

Arianna tilted her chin, her eyes blazed with pride. There was no fear in the firm set of her jaw, but it was apparent that she was irritated at having been snagged and used as a shield. She tried to shrug Ashby's grasp off of her, but he would not let go. "You don't have to manhandle me!" she snapped.

His hand eased its grip on her throat, for a moment amusement flashed through his bright eyes. But beneath the amusement, Braith could see his fear. And he had every

right to be afraid; Braith was going to kill him for even daring to touch her. "Well aren't you the little spitfire," Ashby whispered.

Arianna turned her head to glare at him, Braith did not miss the fact that her hands fisted at her sides. "Arianna don't," he warned, frightened that she might try something reckless. It's who she was after all. Her bright eyes came back to him, they simmered with anger. "Give her back to me and we can talk."

"I know that look in your eyes Braith," Ashby said softly. "I know what you'll do to me if I release her. Just stay calm and everything will be ok."

Braith took another step toward them, Ashby took one back. He pressed against the wall, keeping Arianna before him. "Ashby..."

"I just want out of this alive Braith. That is all. I've become content with this simple life; it is not a bad existence. I only want to keep it."

"If they come here..."

"I don't intend to stay here Braith, I'm not an idiot."

"If that were true then you never would have touched her." Ashby's hand tightened briefly on Arianna, causing her to jerk slightly as her eyes widened. "Don't!" Braith snarled.

Ashby's grip eased on her. "I just want your word that you will not hunt me; that you will let me leave here, alive."

"You have it."

Ashby hesitated, his hand shook slightly. "I'll need more than you just saying it Braith. Once I release her..."

"Then what do you want?" Braith demanded, panic tearing at his insides. His fingers itched to get a hold of her, itched to get her away from Ashby's grasp.

"I want her word."

"Excuse me?" Braith asked in surprise.

"I won't let Braith hurt you," Arianna breathed. "Is that what you want? Is that what you need to hear?"

Braith balked at such a thought. Arianna held more power over him than anyone he had ever met, but if he truly wanted to do something she could not stop him, could she? The thought was ridiculous to him, but even more ridiculous was the stunning realization that it might be true. "You seem like a nice enough girl, I believe you when you say that, but do you really think you could stop him?" Ashby asked softly.

"I don't understand what you expect from me then," she retorted, her annoyance surging to the forefront again.

Ashby poked his head out from around her again; he turned her face slowly toward him. Braith took another step forward, terror hammering through him. "Don't." He was stricken by the fear and desperation that rattled through his voice. If Ashby wanted Arianna dead, she would be dead before Braith could reach them. He was shaken, the monster inside of him was clawing to break free, while the man inside of him wanted to fall to his knees and beg Ashby to give her back to him unharmed. He had never been this rattled and terrified before. "Just give her back to me Ashby, I won't hurt you. Just give her back."

Ashby's gaze came slowly back to him. "Is the king's son actually begging? For a girl, for a human girl no less?"

Fury spurted through him; he struggled to keep it under control. "Why are you taunting him when you know you are going to give me back?" Arianna asked softly.

"And how do you know that?" Ashby inquired.

"Because you would have killed me already if you weren't, and you said it yourself, all you want from life is fun and pleasure. You may like your women and blood, but you do not like death. And if you do kill me your life is over anyway."

Ashby was silent for a long moment; his finger stroked her face briefly as he studied her. "You are a strange girl," he informed her.

She managed a small smile. "So I've been told."

Ashby actually snorted with laughter. "Oh, I am sure you have."

Though they seemed to be enjoying themselves, Braith was not. "Are you two done!?" he snapped.

"Let me go," Arianna told him.

Ashby hesitated for a moment, and then he nodded and released her. Braith lurched forward, seizing hold of her as he ripped her away. He realized that he was handling her worse than Ashby had, but he couldn't seem to control himself. He was shaking as he enveloped her, wrapping his arms around her, holding her tight against him. He wanted to crush her to him, wanted to drag her from here and shelter her from everyone and everything. If it weren't for the fact that he knew they could not run forever, he would do just that, but there would be no escape. There would only ever be the fight if things were not changed; he was beginning to realize that now.

"You can only see around her." Braith lifted his head from Arianna's neck, trying to ignore the fierce beat of her blood as it pumped through her veins. Trying to ignore the sweet smell that rose out of her, ensnaring him in its delicious depths. Ashby was watching them in disbelief, his eyes wide and amazed. "I didn't see the signs when you first arrived, but I see it now."

"See what signs?" Braith growled curious as to how Ashby had guessed at the source of his vision. "How do you know anything about what is between us?"

Ashby leaned back in his bonds, his attention turned slowly back to Arianna, there was a gleam of admiration in his bright gaze. "She's your bloodlink."

"She's what?" Braith snarled.

Arianna looked completely confused; her eyes were stormy and lost. "I thought it was something that only happened between vampires, but apparently I was wrong. I've never heard of it happening with a human before though. Very strange."

Ashby's voice was filled with awe; he seemed completely stunned by his revelation. Whatever that revelation was. Braith was just as lost as Arianna appeared to be. "What are you talking about?" Arianna demanded.

"Well of course you wouldn't know, but Braith..." Ashby's voice trailed off, his eyebrows drew sharply together. "No, you wouldn't know either, would you?"

"Ashby I swear I'll rip out your throat just because you're annoying me," Braith snarled, swiftly losing his patience.

But Ashby was too busy laughing and shaking his head to take Braith's threat as seriously as he should. "Oh Braith you are in even worse trouble than I'd suspected. It's not just your family you need to protect her from, it's also you."

"What the hell do you mean!?" he all but roared at the infuriating man.

"He means that the royal offspring is royally screwed." Braith froze as the new voice drifted quietly through the house. A voice that was hauntingly familiar. He cradled Arianna's head gently against him as he turned slowly toward the woman standing in the doorway. He had not heard her arrive, did not know how long she had been standing there for, or even where she had come from. He cursed himself for such a blunder.

He blamed his rapidly unraveling control on this fact, but he hated himself for it. Arianna could have been hurt, she could have been killed. And all because he had let his guard down.

His shock at seeing her appear in the doorway was swiftly replaced with his disbelief that she was even here. What the hell was going on? "Melinda."

She smiled softly, her gaze lingering over Arianna for a long moment before turning slowly back to him. "Hello brother."

CHAPTER 14

Aria couldn't help it; she felt her mouth drop in shock and disbelief. Her fingers curled into Braith's hard back. He pulled her back, pushing her toward the main door. The door the woman had not appeared in. In fact the strange woman, Braith's sister, had appeared at the door to the other rooms. The ones that Aria knew there was no other entrance into, or at least she had thought there was no other entrance into them.

Apparently she had been greatly mistaken.

Aria couldn't take her eyes off of the beautiful woman across from them. She was watching them intently, her stunning grey eyes bright in the light of the room. Her golden hair tumbled about her shoulders, spilling down to her knees. Though she didn't seem to resemble any of her brothers, Melinda did resemble the sister that Aria had met in the palace, Natasha, Ashby's wife.

"I'm not going to hurt her Braith."

"What the hell are you doing here Melinda?" Braith snarled.

Melinda moved slowly into the room. Her gaze darted briefly to Ashby. Braith may be confused by his sister's presence here, but Arianna knew what had brought her. Or who. Braith released her suddenly, pushing her behind him. "Come on Braith, who do you think killed the guards? Who do you think found out the password to relay to the palace? Did you really believe that Ashby was able to do that all by himself?"

"I am very talented," Ashby replied smiling as the beautiful blond stopped beside him.

She quirked a dark eyebrow, her eyes sparkled merrily up at him. "Not that talented love," she assured him.

"Where have you been minx?"

"Well, in case you haven't heard, there's been a huge upset amongst the palace walls. No one seems to know where the prince has gone. Our father is in the process of tearing the town, and the woods, apart in the search for his missing son. The one who mysteriously disappeared from the forest. It seems he is blaming the rebels for this affront."

Aria gasped, her hand flew to her mouth as nausea rushed swiftly up her throat as she took a swift step forward. "No," she breathed.

Those people. Her friends, her family, they were all being punished because of her and Braith. She didn't want to think about what was being done to them, but she couldn't get

her mind off of the consuming knowledge that they were suffering because of her. Braith squeezed her arm gently, but it did nothing to soothe her.

"Well imagine that," Ashby said darkly.

Melinda's smile faded, she reached out to stroke Ashby's face. "Did he hurt you?"

Ashby shrugged, but there was nothing carefree about his demeanor now. "Just my pride. You going to untie me?"

Melinda planted her hands on her hips as she surveyed him with interest. "I think I might like you this way."

"You would."

Though Aria was lost in dismay, she could feel the heat creeping rapidly up her face as their conversation and looks turned sexual. "Don't," Braith warned when Melinda reached for the ropes restraining Ashby.

"Braith," Melinda said plaintively, her demeanor changing rapidly as pure despair blazed from her.

"Do not untie him Melinda," Braith replied forcefully.

"He won't hurt her."

"No, apparently you were always the true traitor amongst us. If you make one more move to untie him, believe me it won't be Arianna that will have to worry about getting hurt."

Ashby straightened, his eyes flashed briefly red as his lips curled in a snarl at the threat. He did not lunge against the ropes, did not make a move though as he eyed Braith for the first time with anger. Melinda touched Ashby's arm briefly before folding her hands before her. Though she appeared demure, Arianna knew that it was only an act. She had often used the same conduct in the palace when she was trying to appear far more docile than she was. It hadn't fooled Braith then, it would not fool him now.

"You don't understand," Melinda said softly.

"That you and Ashby conspired to overthrow father, and blinded me in the process. Yes Melinda, I realize that now, and I do understand it. Even if I don't understand the motive behind it."

For the first time Melinda looked truly desperate and frightened as she glanced anxiously at Arianna. "If it was her..."

"You don't know her!" Braith snarled.

Melinda tilted her chin up, her jaw clenched tight as her eyes narrowed in fury. "You are right I don't know her, but I do know that if she was in danger then you would do

whatever it took to save her.”

“Neither of you were ever in danger inside the palace.”

Melinda glanced longingly at Ashby; her heart was in her eyes as she gazed at him. “I was married to Natasha, Braith,” Ashby said softly. “We were in danger.”

“So you were having an affair and feared for your lives?” Braith’s body was fairly vibrating with the anger rattling through him. Aria wanted to soothe him, wanted to ease his betrayal and hurt, but she didn’t think there was much she could do in this situation. If it was her, and William or Daniel had betrayed her in such a way, she didn’t think she would ever be able to get over that.

“No, there was no affair. From the moment that we met, there was no longer a Natasha. There was no longer any other woman. It was just us, and if anyone else had known that, if your family had known that, they would have done everything they could to destroy what was between us.”

Braith appeared doubtful as he raked them both with scathing glances. Melinda’s eyes were fervent, desperate as she looked briefly at Aria before focusing her full attention on her brother once more. “Do you really think you could have married Lilith?” she whispered forlornly. “And even if you did manage to force yourself to marry her, do you think you could have lain with her, exchanged blood with her?” Aria hadn’t known who Lilith was until that description. At those words her stomach twisted, and Braith looked nearly as repulsed as she felt.

“I didn’t think so. If you could, then you would still be in the palace, still be preparing for your wedding. In fact, I’ve noticed that for the past week you didn’t return to your parade of blood slaves, and women. I didn’t put two and two together until you disappeared into the forest. But then, how was I to know that you had found your escaped little blood slave again, and that you were once again using her to nourish you?”

“I’m not a blood slave!” Aria retorted sharply, growing highly annoyed by the fact that she was still thought of as piece of property.

Melinda raised a haughty eyebrow at her, but there was a gleam of admiration in her eyes. “She’s a feisty one,” Ashby said softly.

Melinda managed a wan smile as she folded her arms over her chest. “I see that.”

“I don’t use her,” Braith grated.

“You feed from her, do you not?”

“That is not using her,” he snarled.

Melinda rolled her eyes; she tapped her foot impatiently on the ground. “I understand that she is willing, or I assume she is.”

"Of course I am," Aria told her.

"Why?"

"Excuse me?" Aria asked in surprise, startled by the question.

"Why are you willing? You are a human; you are a rebel, why would you give yourself to my brother like that? Why did you give yourself over to what I am certain you considered your greatest enemy when you brought into that palace?"

Aria looked up at Braith, captivated by his masculine beauty, and the tender soul that he only revealed to her. She thought of him on his knees before her, humbled by her, his heart and soul bared for her to take, or to turn away. She thought of all of his gentleness, the care and protection he had always offered to her, even when he had owned her. He was wonderful, he was everything, and he was hers.

"Because I love him," she whispered. "I always will."

"How sweet," the girl vampire drawled, drawing fierce looks from everyone else in the room. She glowered at them but remained wisely silent.

Melinda was silent, her grey eyes as cold as steel. "Can you believe it?" Ashby inquired softly.

"No," Melinda responded.

"I don't care what you believe! It's the truth!" Arianna snapped at her.

Melinda's mouth twisted into a smile, Ashby chuckled annoyingly. Aria took a frustrated step forward, but Braith pushed her swiftly back. "Stay back," he growled in warning.

"I believe you love him, I truly do," Melinda soothed. "I just can't believe that it has happened to Braith, of all vampires. Mr. Duty, Mr. Responsibility, Mr. Walk A Straight Line has succumbed to the darkest side of himself."

"Like hell," Braith grated. Aria was surprised to realize that his fangs had extended. His anger and frustration was rapidly unraveling the firm control, and restraint he exhibited over himself around others.

Melinda quirked an eyebrow, she shifted slightly, her head tipping to the side as she rested a hand on her hip. "Like hell Braith? Like hell? Are you forgetting that I live in that damned palace too? Are you forgetting that I was there after she escaped with Jericho? It was a bloodbath Braith; you were a one vampire destroyer, one that made even Caleb and father proud. They thought you were finally becoming like them, and in all honesty Braith, so did I. I never suspected that you might actually care for the girl. I thought you were reacting in such a way because your pride had been wounded. If I had known the truth I would have tried to explain it to you, but I don't think you would have listened to me anyway. Especially not while you were immersed in the gluttony of blood and death you had engrossed yourself in."

Aria swallowed heavily, her fingers curled around Braith's massive arm, digging into the hard muscles cording it. He was trembling; his self-loathing evident as he glared hard at his sister. Melinda painted a vivid picture of what he had been like after she'd fled, and though Aria knew it all, she still hated to hear it.

"I'm not like that," Braith hissed.

"Maybe not normally, and most definitely not before you met her." Melinda took a small step forward, her gaze pinning Braith sharply. Even Aria was surprised by the force of that steely stare. "I'm fairly certain that if I even made one threatening move toward her, you would kill me, sister or not."

Aria waited for Braith to protest that statement; of course he wouldn't kill his own sister. But Aria found herself waiting until she finally turned her attention back to him. "Braith?" She finally inquired, stunned by the fact that he had not responded yet.

He seemed hesitant to answer, and then when he did, he didn't sound all that convincing. "I wouldn't kill you."

"You would if you had to. You would if it became necessary to ensure her survival."

"No, he wouldn't," Aria insisted.

"Is that true Braith, you wouldn't?" Melinda demanded, her eyes narrowed, her jaw tight. "Are you going to stand here and lie in front of her, to her?"

He was silent for a long moment, Aria's heart pumped laboriously. Her soul ached with hurt for him, for her, for the sister staring so fiercely at her brother. "I won't lie to her," Braith grated. "Yes, I would kill you if it meant her life."

Aria inhaled sharply, she could hardly breathe through the shock rocking her. "Braith?"

"Don't be so shocked," Melinda told her. "I would try to kill him too, if it came to Ashby. We can't help it, you are his bloodlink; Ashby is mine. We don't have a choice, if you were a vampire you would understand the need, the driving force that propels us to make sure that they are safe, and kept with us. You would also understand the fact that your humanity tests every boundary of his control. I saw what happened in that palace, what he did. You were still alive then, if you were to die..." Her eyes grew briefly distant, she shuddered slightly. "If you were to die then it would be as if hell itself had unleashed its fury upon this earth. No one would be safe."

Braith was trembling with barely leashed power. Aria rubbed his arm lightly, trying to soothe him, but she wasn't getting through. It wasn't his sister's words so much that were upsetting him; it was the fact that she had mentioned Aria's death. "Braith..."

"She's not going to die," he said simply, lost to the haze of emotions clouding him.

"Not for a long time," Aria assured him.

“Ever,” he growled.

The room was silent, stunned by the low spoken word. Aria’s heart hammered, she knew that he wanted her to change, but to do so... To do so would be to become everything she had ever feared, hated, and fought against. To do so would be turn against her own kind, her own family. Her chest ached, tears burned her eyes.

“Braith,” she breathed.

He turned slowly toward her, his arm was shaking even more; the muscles within it were trembling in her grasp. “You know how dangerous that is,” Ashby said softly.

But Aria was fairly certain that Braith had not heard him. His attention was focused upon her, his entire being was connected to hers, linked with hers. She could become a vampire and stay with her family; they would forgive her eventually, maybe. She would also be a strong ally for them; Braith would be a powerhouse on their side. She could become a vampire and stay with him forever. She could give him this, if it was what he so desperately needed. She could give him this, because he would give her anything that he could.

He had not chosen whatever was happening to him, to them. He did not want to hurt her, did not want to feel like this. Braith prided himself on control, on stability, and self reliance. He prided himself on the fact that he was powerful, yet understanding. Since she had left the palace though, he had been none of those things. He had become angry, unstable, and the murderous monster he despised his father and brother for. Melinda and Ashby understood what was going on, and perhaps if Braith did he would be a little more stable, but right now his confusion over his wild emotions was only adding to his volatility.

“Arianna?” his voice, so deep and beautiful was ragged with feeling.

“It will be ok,” she promised fervently. His eyes, hard and desperate, softened. In their bright depths she saw his pain and confusion, but she also saw his need, his desire; his love. “We can do this, we can do anything.”

“It’s not that simple,” Ashby said softly. “Braith knows that. You aren’t a vampire, that’s why I am so surprised this has happened to him with you. It’s never happened with a human before, never.”

“I think you need to tell me exactly what is happening here,” Braith said coldly.

“Can I untie him first?” Melinda inquired.

“No.”

Anger flared through her steely gaze, her hands fisted at her sides in futility. They may be siblings, but it would not be an equal fight. Braith was older, stronger; he radiated a depth of power that Melinda did not seem to possess. “Imagine if it was her that was tied up; imagine how you would feel then Braith!” she pleaded.

"It's not her, and it never will be."

"Braith!" Melinda's frustration was mounting; her eyes were growing darker, redder. Her emotions were swinging wildly toward the breaking point.

"Easy love," Ashby said softly. "It's ok, I'm fine. Braith doesn't know how to tie someone up all that well anyway." His eyes were gleaming with amusement, but Aria could sense the tension beneath his lighthearted façade. The last thing he wanted was to see Melinda try and fight her way through her brother.

Melinda remained wary; she leaned over and placed a soft kiss upon Ashby's mouth. Aria pitied them, she wanted to let Ashby go, wanted them to be able to hold each other. She couldn't imagine being kept from Braith. Yet there were two of them, separately they were not much of a threat to Braith, together they would be.

"Let your brother know what is going on, maybe then he won't look like he wants to go on a rampage and slaughter us all," Ashby urged.

Aria stepped closer to Braith; she needed to feel more of him, needed to touch more of him. She had a feeling she wasn't going to entirely like what Melinda and Ashby had to tell them. He wrapped his arm around her waist. His body was cooler than hers, but heat still flooded through her as her chest was brought up tight against his side. His hand stroked briefly over her, his eyes burned into hers for a long moment.

"Have you ever heard the term bloodlink?" Melinda inquired softly, breaking into their moment.

Braith turned reluctantly away from her, his hand tightened briefly on her stomach. "No, I haven't."

"Neither had I," Melinda admitted. "Until I met Ashby." Her gaze traveled slowly to him, she reached out a delicate hand, clasping hold of his outstretched one. They fit well together; they seemed to take relief from the feel of one another as their fingers stroked each other. "And then the whole world was completely right, and so completely wrong."

"I was already married to Natasha," Ashby continued.

Melinda's face scrunched up, anger and disgust flitted briefly over her delicate features. "If you recall, I was with mother when their wedding occurred. I was too young to stay behind when father banished her; he did not want the responsibility of having to take care of me. It wasn't until she was killed that I was allowed back into the palace."

"I had been married to Natasha for five years at that point," Ashby said softly.

"I remember," Braith interjected coldly.

Ashby grinned at him. "We used to have fun in those days. Before the war, when everything was still easy. You were the reigning heir and I was a vampire with a title, money, women, and a wife that cared as little for me as I did for her. Ok, well the wife

part may have sucked, but mostly avoided each other. All we needed was to conceive a son in order to make your father happy, and then we wouldn't have to be with each other again. It just wasn't working for us."

Melinda's eyes had grown darker; her face was as stormy as a tumultuous sea. It was more than apparent that she did not want to hear about Ashby with her sister. Ashby brought Melinda's hand to his mouth, kissing her softly as he sought to ease her tension. "Then the war broke out, mom was killed, and I was sent back to the palace," Melinda said tersely.

"Your father was always greedy, always wanted more. He just never banked on so many vampires being content with their way of life. He never even considered the fact that some of the other powerful families might not want to go along with him. And he never expected that I would want out of my marriage from one sister, because I had lost my soul completely to the other one."

They stared at each other for a long moment before Ashby turned his attention back to them. "A bloodlink is something that happens between vampires, and apparently with humans also. It happened to my parents; that is how I knew about it, and what the signs of it were. Most vampires believe it is a myth because it is so rare, but I knew that it was true, I just never thought it would happen to me. My parents were fortunate enough to find each other, and not have any obstacles in their way. Unfortunately we weren't, and neither are you.

"My parents saw the war as a chance to escape the tyrannical rule of your father; I saw it as a chance to break free of my wife. A chance to start anew, and build a better life with Melinda. I took that chance. You were caught in the crossfire Braith, but I really didn't mean for you to get hurt. As retribution for our mutiny my family was killed, but your father thought this was a better punishment for me."

"Thankfully," Melinda breathed.

"What exactly is a bloodlink?" Aria inquired.

"It's a deep and instant connection between vampires. Our blood calls to each other, it needs each other. We grow stronger off of it, feed off of it. The connection is instantaneous, as Braith well knows, and it is unbreakable. It will eat you alive if you're kept from each other, something else that Braith seems to have discovered."

"Stronger," Aria mulled.

"Of course dear," Ashby purred. "It's why Braith can see again, but I'm guessing it's only when you are near."

"What?" Melinda gasped, her eyes widening, her mouth dropping. "Braith?"

Braith was silent for a moment; the tension in him was growing by the second. "Yes, I can see when she is near. What about the two of you?"

Aria swallowed nervously. Braith could see, and it was a miracle, but could they also perform miracles? Had she completely misjudged this situation, was Braith weaker than them? She glanced between Melinda and Ashby, and then turned slowly back to Braith. No, it was obvious who the strongest was, but if Ashby were to get free...

Melinda was frowning intently. "Ashby..."

"I know love."

"Melinda, you may be my sister but if you don't tell me I will rip his throat out," Braith growled.

Aria shuddered, her hands tightened on Braith's arm. She wanted to promise that she would never let that happen, the last thing she wanted was to ruin their love, but if there was any chance they might hurt Braith, she was not going to say anything. It was better that they were afraid of Braith, if that was the case. Melinda's eyes widened in horror, she took a step closer to Ashby.

"We don't have anything like that Braith. We're stronger because we have each other; we're stronger because the bond between us has made us stronger. We feed off of each other, which is something that most vampires will not allow to happen, our blood helps to enhance our power and speed. As a united front we will prevail over a lone vampire, and death is the only thing that will divide us. But you..."

"You are different," Ashby finished for her. "Maybe because she is human, maybe because you are the prince apparent, the first born, and your blood is more powerful than your siblings but you've had a stronger reaction to the link than any I've ever heard of."

"You've actually had a physical strengthening reaction," Melinda said softly.

"Imagine if she becomes a vampire?"

"Is it possible?"

Aria frowned at the two of them, startled by the intense conversation that suddenly became just between the two of them. "I don't know," Ashby admitted. "But I think they have more than a bloodlink. I think they may have an even stronger bond."

"You may be right," Melinda agreed. "For him to get his eyesight back like that. So strange."

"It is," Ashby confirmed.

Aria sensed Braith's mounting aggravation. She wished to soothe him, but she was growing just as frustrated by the couple as he was. "Enough!" he snapped, causing Melinda to jump slightly. "Enough, the both of you, enough. If you are so close, then why is there another vampire here?"

They both frowned in confusion then their gaze drifted slowly to the girl who had stayed

utterly silent, though she was listening raptly to them. "Oh her," Melinda replied, giggling softly. Ashby brought her hand up to his chest, holding it tight with his. Aria could feel Braith's rapidly unraveling composure. They didn't know what they were messing with right now, didn't know that he was close to losing all control. Aria knew though. She had seen him in the woods with those vampires. She had seen what he was capable of, the punishment and death he could deal out so swiftly and without remorse.

"Melinda," Aria reprimanded softly.

The smile slipped from Melinda's, her eyes widened slightly as she finally focused on Braith again. "She's just a girl from town; they knew that I would be coming back soon."

"How?" Braith growled. "And why would she come here?"

"I manage to sneak out of the palace more often than you know. As the youngest and most ineffective child, no one ever pays attention to my comings and goings. I bring back blood slaves with me when I can, in order to keep the people in the area quiet about the fact that there are no guards anymore. She is here in the hopes of returning to town with whatever I have managed to smuggle out."

"Why?" Braith demanded.

"To keep Ashby safe of course. I killed the guard's years ago, but Ashby could not escape. There was nowhere for us to go. Every village knows who Ashby is, father made certain of that, and the reward on him is large enough for any starving vamp to hand Ashby over, no matter how much they may hate father. But only one person, or one family, could get that reward not the entire village. And no matter what, there was no guarantee that father would actually give them the money. I bought the loyalty of the people closest to here by promising them a steady supply of blood if they kept their mouths shut. It was more than father could promise all of them. She came to see if her dinner had arrived."

Aria bowed her head beneath the implication of those words, nausea twisted through her. She was certain she was going to be sick. Her people had been used to buy silence; their lives had been freely traded away as if they meant nothing. "Awful," she breathed.

"Life is not roses and sunshine dear," Melinda retorted, her grey eyes as hard as steel as they focused sharply on Aria. A chill crept down Aria's spine, she found herself unable to hold Melinda's cold gaze. "And I would do anything to keep Ashby alive, just as I am assuming you would do the same for Braith."

Aria bit on her bottom lip, she couldn't look at any of them. She would do anything for Braith, but to freely trade lives for his, she didn't think she could do that. But then, she was human, and they were not. They thought little of her species; humans were beneath them, they did not care what happened to them. And Aria knew she would freely trade a vampire life for his, she was certain of that.

"There are things that need to be done in order to secure the bond between bloodlinks," Ashby explained.

Braith squeezed her hand gently. He was trying to soothe and comfort her, but Aria could not shake the horror and fear rolling through her. This was not her world, she did not belong in this place of blood and death and strange bloodlinks that allowed the blind to see. What the hell was she doing here? How did she get involved in all of this?

But the answer to those questions was standing before her, willing to die for her, as he used his body to block her from whatever attack might come their way. Her heart swelled, tears burned her eyes. She did not belong in this world, but she realized now that she would never be leaving it again. She hadn't realized at the time, but when she'd chosen to leave the woods with Braith, she had sealed her fate. There was no turning back, and even though she was frightened by the uncertainty of their future, she was willing to endure the hardships that were still to come.

"And those are?" Braith inquired.

"Exchange of blood, sex," Ashby continued. Aria's face burned, it was all she could do to keep standing before them. "But those are vampire interactions. With this, I'm assuming that the change will also be necessary."

"And if she doesn't survive it?" Melinda asked.

"Then I doubt any of us will," Ashby muttered.

Aria finally managed to lift her head to stare at them. "I'm not going to die," she told them.

Ashby and Melinda leveled her with identical looks of hopelessness. "Most do not survive the change. The human body is too frail; it simply cannot take it. If you stay human it is certain that one day you will die. And Braith will go crazy from it."

"And that's only if you are willing to become a vampire," Melinda elaborated.

Braith turned toward her, she could feel the full force of his gaze upon her, but she couldn't find the words to answer his unspoken question. Was she willing to become a vampire? Was she willing to live in that world? Was she willing to die? Willing to drink blood and feed from her people? She lifted her gaze to Braith, she could feel the tears burning in her eyes, but they did not slip free. He was so strong, so powerful, and wise. He was ancient compared to her, a near God in his world. She was a fighter, and she was strong, but he could snap her bones with a flick of his wrist. And yet, as he looked upon her, she could see the weakness in his gaze, the uncertainty and need that blazed from him, and made him just as weak as she was.

She did that to him, she was doing it to him, and she hated herself for it. She touched his face lightly, loving the feel of his hardness beneath her hand, loving the stroke of his stubble against her fingertips. He awed her, and inspired her in so many ways. "You humble me also," she whispered.

A low groan escaped him; he lifted her as if she weighed no more than a feather, pulling

her tight against him. His hands were in her hair, his lips against her cheek and ear. "It will not be so Arianna," he whispered. She pulled slightly back to stare at him questioningly. "I will not take the risk of killing you. I will not be the one that kills you."

Aria frowned at him; she bent her forehead to his. "I will survive it."

"There is no guarantee. I will not risk it."

"But I will die no matter what!"

He managed a wan, halfhearted smile. "Then I will just have to make sure it is not for a very long time."

"I will grow old."

"You will grow even more beautiful. And when you are gone, I will follow you."

Tears spilled down her cheeks. She was far more accepting of her own death than she was of his. But then again, she had expected to die every day since she was old enough to realize what death was. "No Braith. No. I see the way you are now, what you said earlier..."

"I was wrong," he said firmly. "It was a moment of weakness, it won't happen again. I will not do that to you."

His eyes were beautiful, bright as he watched her, smiled at her, and loved her. He kissed her lightly, his mouth warm and hard against hers. For a moment Aria allowed herself to forget there were other people in the room. For a moment there was only the two of them, and none of the pressure. For a moment, just a small fraction of a second, there was total joy, total happiness, and true wonder in a world that often lacked such things.

And then Braith was pulling away and the world was once again intruding upon them. Aria wrapped her arms around his neck, dropping her head to his shoulder she buried her face in his neck, wanting to keep the world at bay for a little longer. He continued to hold her tight, but she knew his attention was not solely focused upon her anymore. As prince, as the future ruler of his world, and hers, he had other matters to attend to. But for right now she just wanted to hold him, just wanted to feel safe, and loved.

CHAPTER 15

Arianna was finally asleep, but it had only been a matter of time before exhaustion won out over her stubborn nature. She had fought against it for a long time before succumbing to the needs of her body. She was curled up on the couch, her head in his lap, her hand curled around his thigh. Achingly sweet, she appeared exceptionally young to him. Then again, she was exceptionally young compared to him.

He trailed his hand across her silken hair, running it lightly through his fingers. Melinda was watching him with interest, but she did not protest the fact that Braith still refused to untie Ashby. She may be his sister, but he was not going to be outnumbered by them. Not when Arianna's life was on the line.

Ashby sat beside her, his arm wrapped around her shoulders. Though there was tension in his eyes, his posture remained casual, and he retained his mischievous air. "I never suspected anything between you two," Braith said softly.

"There was a lot going on at the time." Melinda's gaze drifted toward Arianna. "I never suspected anything between the two of you either, but then I never thought you were capable of love. Especially not with a human, especially not with your blood slave. Though I was curious as to why you had finally taken one. Now I know why."

Braith didn't take offense to her words. He hadn't thought he was capable of love either. He cared for his brother Jericho; he even cared for Melinda, though he had never known her as well as Caleb or Natasha. Even when Melinda had returned to the palace, she had remained mostly distant from her other siblings, aloof. However, she hadn't really known them, as she'd spent her first twenty seven out of thirty years in exile, with their mother.

The war had been raging in full force by the time Melinda returned, Braith had only seen Melinda a handful of times before his vision was lost. Though she had continued to mature over time, most of her growing had been completed before he was blinded; she had not changed much since then. Even after he had lost his sight, he had only come into contact with her once a month, if even. He'd assumed that she did the same things as Natasha. That she wandered about the palace, enjoying the luxuries, and thriving on the blood.

Apparently she had actually been escaping into the wilderness to nourish and spend time with her lover. Melinda had always seemed so sweet and young to him. Apparently her picturesque face and quiet demeanor hid a far stronger personality than he had ever suspected.

"Why did you keep returning to the palace? Why didn't you just stay here?"

"Someone had to bring back the slaves. Someone had to keep the locals around here quiet. Someone had to make sure they did not send out new guards, and when they did, we had to be prepared to take care of them. Someone had to spy, to see if there would ever be a chance that we could escape together and finally be free."

Braith nodded, slightly impressed by his sisters cunning, daring, and skill. He was also slightly put off by her manipulation and cold admission about her deceptions. He made a mental note not to trust her, he didn't think she was inherently cruel, but it was more than obvious she would do anything to keep Ashby safe, and Braith was certain that Ashby would do the same thing for her. Neither of them was going to leave his sight until Jack arrived. It was the only way he would feel marginally better about Arianna's safety.

Arianna stirred slightly, her hand tightened on his thigh. "You know that you don't have a prayer of keeping her human," Ashby said softly.

"I won't change her."

"You may not want to change her, you may think that you can keep yourself from doing so, but we all know the truth here Braith. You think you can go the next five, ten, fifty years risking her life, and watching her die?"

"If I have too."

Ashby shook his head; he leaned back against the wall. The young vampire girl remained silent; she had offered no further protests to her restraints. She was sullen, resigned to remaining tied for a long time. "You're only in the beginning stages of this Braith." Ashby folded his hands before him as he stared fiercely at Braith. "Do you think it's going to get easier as the years go on? It grows and intensifies; the bond between you will become something so intense that it will take everything you have to get through one second without her. You asked me earlier who I was expecting; do you think it was this girl?" He gestured sharply at the young vampire girl.

"No, I thought it was Melinda at the door. Do you know how hard it is to see her go back there? I hate myself every time she leaves here, every time she returns to that depraved hell hole. If there was ever a time she didn't return from there, I would be there in a heartbeat, killing everyone in my way until they finally took me down. I would welcome the death they would finally deliver to me. She's human Braith; you will live with her mortality every second of your life together. You won't be able to handle it, I can promise you that."

Braith glowered at him. "I'm stronger than you."

Ashby snorted softly as he sat back. "Bull. You're physically stronger than all of us, but you are by far the weakest amongst us right now. Your Achilles heel is lying on your lap, and if any of your enemies gets a hold of her, they will control you completely. If they kill her, you are done for. Smarten up Braith. Yes, you are stronger with her in your life, but

you are also far weaker. Especially if she stays human.”

“I don’t have much of a choice on that front.”

“Keep her human until you figure out what you want to do. Though, I’m beginning to suspect that might be taking your father down, am I right?”

Melinda’s eyes widened, her delicate mouth parted. “No,” she breathed.

Ashby squeezed her hand tighter as his bright eyes gleamed with an eager light. “Yes love, I believe that Braith has finally realized that there is something more important than duty, honor, and obedience. Right?”

“I will not kill my father,” he grated.

“No, I’m not even sure if you could. At least not by yourself, but you do have the advantage of not being blind anymore, and I’m assuming he doesn’t know.”

“He doesn’t,” Melinda confirmed when Braith didn’t.

Ashby nodded, his fingers twirled idly, Braith could see the gears churning within his devious mind. “You wouldn’t kill Caleb either. But if you could take them down, overthrow their rule, wrest control from them, you would. If you can get enough help to do it. It’s why you came here.”

Braith had forgotten how perceptive Ashby was. It was annoying the hell out of him right now. “You’re hoping that I may still have ties to the rebellious families that fought with mine and somehow managed to avoid capture. You’re hoping that I may know some vampires that might be willing to help you. You wouldn’t be here for any other reason than that, and the only reason you would want to know those things, was if you wanted to oust the king. Am I wrong Braith?”

Braith turned his attention to the window. He would not deny Ashby’s words, nor would he confirm them. He hadn’t left the palace with the intent of ousting his father from power. He hadn’t gone after Arianna in those caverns because he had decided that he was going to fight, he hadn’t pulled her free of there with the intention of one day claiming the throne (he still wasn’t sure he would do that, it depended on Arianna). He had just wanted to get her somewhere safe; to people that might be able to shelter her, and to try and live a life with her. But somewhere along the way he had realized that there was nowhere safe for her, and no one that could protect her, except for him. And if he was going to keep her safe, then his father would have to be removed from rule. A new power, and a new world system, would have to be established.

“This will be interesting, a civil war,” Ashby pondered. “A civil war, within the most powerful regime to ever take control of us. A war between the murderous, vicious father, and the son who hates him. Imagine the consequences of such a thing, imagine the horror.”

Braith stiffened as he turned slowly back to them. Relief radiated from Melinda, hope and

desire gleamed in her eyes. "Or imagine the wonder of it," she whispered. "Imagine the freedom that would come if such a tyrannical, ruthless rule could be broken."

"Is it your love for Ashby that has so turned you against our father?" Braith inquired.

She tilted her head as she quirked a dark eyebrow at him. In that moment it struck him how very much she looked like their mother. He had never thought much of it; he hadn't really thought much of his mother, as he had been taken from her at a young age. His father hadn't wanted him to spend too much time with a woman he was afraid might coddle Braith, and weaken him. The same thing had happened with Caleb and Jericho. He wasn't sure when Natasha had been taken away, and Melinda had still been a toddler when their mother was banished from the castle.

The woman had done nothing to deserve being banished, she had given the king five children. Though Braith speculated that his mother probably would have been content to just have him, his father had not been. His mother had been banished simply because the king had decided that it would be more convenient for him to no longer have a wife living under the same roof as his mistresses. He cared nothing for the youngest child that would be leaving with the woman.

"No Braith, that isn't the reason. I have always hated him."

"I did not realize that."

"You wouldn't." Braith stared hard at her for a moment, but Melinda did not back down from him. "You were in your own world Braith. You were the prince, the future king; you thought nothing of the young sister who suddenly reappeared in your home. And once you lost your sight I was even further from your mind, from everyone's mind. No one noticed when I disappeared for a day or two, sometimes even a week at a time. I am a nonentity in that place, I always have been, and that is just fine by me. You had it far worse than I ever did, even with my early life outside of the palace walls. I understood my circumstances were far better than the scrutiny, and constant cloud of hatred and disappointment you had to live under. You were never going to be the monster that father wanted you to be. No matter how badly he treated you, no matter how often he beat you.

"Caleb should have been first born."

"It would have made things easier, and father happier," Braith agreed without sorrow.

"Caleb may be harder to overthrow than father. If he doesn't already, he soon will know that he is the new heir apparent. He won't give that up easily, and the things he will do with that power..."

Melinda shuddered; her hand tightened on Ashby's, who looked just as disgusted as Melinda. Even the vampire girl was watching them with wide eyed horror. What Caleb would do with that power would make everything his father had done seem petty and small. Blood would spill freely through the palace streets. Debauchery and death would

rule.

"How were you able to survive the day that mother was killed?" Braith inquired. He had never asked before, never even thought to, or even given much thought to the fact that his sister had survived the slaughter that claimed their mother.

Melinda closed her eyes, her hands fisted in her lap. Pain flickered briefly across her features as her lip trembled briefly. Ashby rested his hand on her shoulder, squeezing it reassuringly. "Isn't that obvious?" Braith tensed, he hadn't realized that Arianna had awakened until she spoke. Her hand tightened upon his thigh, and then she sat slowly up. Her eyes were slightly swollen with sleep, but they were dark and swirling with pain. Her question hung in the air; she waited expectantly for him to say something.

"No," he admitted, feeling as if he were somehow disappointing her by not knowing the answer.

Her eyes were soft, understanding, but the sadness within them grew as she rested her small hand lightly upon his face. However, the sorrow was not for herself, or even for Melinda, it was for him. Braith was stunned by the grief he saw there, he did not understand it. Did not see why she sought to comfort him right now. "Your mother sacrificed herself for Melinda."

Braith started, he frowned at Arianna as he seized hold of her hand, pulling it away from his cheek. "How could you possibly know that?" he demanded.

Her full mouth was tremulous, tears burned in her beautiful sapphire eyes. "Because it is how William and I survived."

Braith was taken aback, his hand tightened on hers. He turned toward Melinda, surprised to find his sister watching Arianna with compassion, and understanding. "Is that true?" he demanded. "Did our mother sacrifice herself for you?"

"Yes," Melinda confirmed.

Braith sat silently for a long moment, trying to digest this information. He had not really known his mother; she had been kind to him during their brief time together. He had not known what life had been like for her within the palace, or outside of it.

"Why would she do that?"

It was not Melinda that answered, but Arianna. "Love. Simple, unconditional love."

He watched Arianna, saw the need in her eyes, the burning desire for him to understand. And he did understand. He understood the kind of love that she was talking about, understood what it was to die for someone because he would die for her. Two months ago, before he had met her, he never would have understood, never would have fathomed doing such a thing for someone else. Now there was nothing that could stop him from saving her life.

"I understand," he assured her. Her smile was tremulous, a single tear slipped free. He wiped it gently away. "What happened?"

Arianna shied away from him, her eyes darkened, darted away, then slid slowly back to him. Her jaw clenched, her chin jutted proudly out. "Our father thought it would be best to hide us, not in the forest, but in a home. He felt if we were out of the woods, if we were living an almost normal life we would be safe, and we would blend in. We lived there for about a year, and then one day the troops came to raid the village for prisoners and victims.

"My father had built a small room for all of us to hide in just in case this ever happened. It was a panic room of sorts I guess, there was food, air, water to survive for days. We could have stayed in there until the soldiers left, until my father came back. We could have all stayed in that room."

Arianna's dark eyebrows drew tightly together. Her lips were pursed, the horror was etched onto her features, pain swelled within her beautiful eyes. "But you didn't?"

She focused on him, blinking slightly as she seemed to recall that he was there. As she seemed to come back to the present, and leave the horror of her past behind. "No, we did not." Her tone was clipped, harsh, her voice ragged.

"Why?"

She licked her lips, her forehead furrowed; she appeared confused by this question. "I didn't understand that at the time either. She put William and I in that room, told us to be quiet, told us to stay quiet no matter what happened, no matter what we heard, and then she closed the door."

Braith took hold of her hand as she shuddered. "And what did you do?"

She looked helplessly at him. "Nothing, we did nothing. There was nothing that we could do. We were four years old, we were terrified, and we didn't know how to get out of that damn room. We tried, but we couldn't find the way out, and then they came into that house. We sat in a corner, and we held each other, and we cried. We did what our mother wanted us to do, and we listened in silence as they tortured and killed her. The entire time she swore that we had gone out with our father, that we were not present."

He didn't think she was aware of the tears sliding silently down her cheeks. He didn't think she was aware of anything outside of the past that she seemed to be trapped within. A past, and horror, he would have done anything to take from her, said anything to make her feel better, but there was nothing that he could say. There was no way to right her past, no way to ease her pain; all he could do was give her a better future.

He pulled her close, caressing the nape of her neck as he lightly kissed her forehead. She grasped each of his forearms tightly, clinging to him as if he were a life raft in the sea of her agony. "There was nothing else you could have done," he said softly.

A small smile curved Arianna's mouth, but there was no humor in it. "That may be true, but I'll never believe it."

He closed his eyes, savoring in the amazing scent of her. She engulfed him, filled him, she eased every awful thing inside of him. He trusted that he did the same for her. "Why didn't she go in the room?" Ashby asked softly.

"Because then they would have torn the house apart looking for them, ripped it to shreds until they were finally found. She sacrificed herself, she allowed them to torture her until they were satisfied that her children really weren't there. Right?" Melinda asked softly.

Arianna nodded. "Yes. I believe that is why."

Braith thought about the woman that had given life to Arianna, the one that had helped create it, and in the end saved it. He gave a silent thanks to her, wishing that he could have thanked her in person. Wishing that he could have met her. But he supposed that the proud, brave, giving, and strong person before him was exactly as her mother had been.

"Is that what your mother did?" Arianna asked softly.

"I was older, not quite a child anymore, barely a teen when they came," Melinda confirmed. "My mother managed to get us upstairs before they invaded our house. She pulled us into one of the backrooms, and using furniture she blocked the door to the best of her ability. She helped me out the window, pushing me down the small roof before helping me slip over the side. She promised me that she would follow before I dropped to the ground. Instead, she scurried back up the roof, slid the window shut, and locked it. By then I could hear them breaking down the door, shoving the furniture aside to get at her. She tried to fight them off in order to buy me more time to escape.

"I wanted to go back in, wanted to go after her. But I was stopped by four of the servants we had. Mother had always been good to them; she had always treated them with respect and kindness. She had taught me to do the same, and over the years we become more like a family. I was young, and though they were not strong vampires, the four of them overwhelmed me. They pulled me back, led me away, forced me through the woods, and away from that awful place. One of them went back the next day for mother's body.

"We buried her in the woods beneath her favorite willow, and marked her grave with a simple stone."

Arianna held tight to Braith's hands, she sought to soothe him by stroking her thumbs slowly over his hands. He was sorry that Melinda had suffered through such a loss; sorry she'd had to witness it. He hated the fact that his mother had been killed in such a way, that she had known only terror at the end. But there was something that Melinda said that had ensnared his attention.

"You didn't come back to the palace until you were in your twenties."

Melinda frowned at him. "I know."

"Then you weren't a young teen when she died."

"I was fourteen when she was killed Braith."

A strange tension was growing inside of him. He had never asked Melinda her story, had never thought much about it. Their mother, a woman he had barely seen in the eight hundred years before her death, hadn't meant much to him. But, she had still been his mother, and Melinda was still his sister. He wanted answers, and he wanted them now.

"Where were you all those years Melinda?" he grated out. Arianna shifted nervously, she sensed his rising anger, his escalating tension and ire.

Melinda swallowed nervously, Ashby's hand tightened on hers as he patted it reassuringly. "It's ok Melinda, tell him."

"Tell me what?" When she continued to stay silent, he rose slowly to his feet. "Tell me what?" he hissed.

"Braith, give her time," Arianna urged.

"Were you with the rebels? Did they capture you after you buried her?" he demanded.

"The rebels?" Melinda inquired her confusion evident.

"The rebels that killed her," he snarled impatiently.

Melinda bit on her lip, Arianna rose slowly to her feet beside him. He could hear the fierce beat of her heart; she was already looking at him in wide eyed, knowing horror. Her hand began to tremble within his. "I never said that she was killed by rebels Braith," Melinda whispered.

Something stirred at the far edges of his mind; something dark and sinister began to make its way through him. Braith straightened his shoulders, taking strength in Arianna's presence at his side. "Then who?" he demanded.

Melinda's lip was trembling; Ashby had risen to his feet. Ashby stepped forward, placing his body in front of Melinda's, but Braith had no intention of going after his sister. It was the last thing in the world that he was going to do. "They were father's men Braith. It was father's guards that came into that house. It was father that had her killed. I didn't return to the palace until I was accidentally discovered ten years later. I never wanted to return, I hated the man, and I was certain he would kill me too."

Braith was frozen, he couldn't move through the shock that gripped him. "Where were you all that time?" Arianna asked softly.

"Hiding with our servants. It was dumb luck that I was caught, that I was forced back to that hellhole. They had presumed me dead, though the guards had been honest with father and told them that they had not seen me. They assumed that I had either died

before the raid, or that I had been somewhere else and died later; they felt it unlikely that I was able to survive, and stay hidden, on my own. I was in a village that had been deemed a possible traitorous threat when it was raided, my servants, my family was killed. If Jericho hadn't been with them I probably would have been killed also, but even after all our years apart, he recognized me."

"Blood knows blood," Braith said softly. Arianna shuddered.

"He's the reason I'm still alive."

"Does he know what happened to our mother?"

Melinda swallowed heavily, Ashby was becoming edgier. "I hid it from him at first, but when he wanted to bring me back to the palace I refused to go. I was afraid of father, of what he would do to me. I became hysterical when he insisted that I was to return, when he tried to force me back I spilled the story in my panic. I told him why I could not return. He is the only other one that knows.

"He told me to tell father that I had seen nothing the day our mother was killed; that the servants had taken me out shopping that day, and only found mother's body that night. I was to tell them that I hadn't returned to the palace because I was uncertain of how to get there, and fearful of wandering too far from the only home I'd ever known. He told me to keep quiet no matter what, but that he had to take me back. The other guards had seen me; there was no way that he could let me go without looking suspicious. Father would continue to hunt me until I was uncovered again, and he would probably kill me when he did find me. But if I went back on my own I would be able to keep my knowledge of events quiet. No matter how angry and resentful I was I had no choice but to return. All I could do was hope to escape one day."

"Jack knew about this," Braith grated. "The whole time."

"Jack?" Ashby asked in surprise.

"Jericho," Arianna answered when Braith remained silent. He was furious. Furious that his father had done this, furious that his siblings had kept him in the dark for so long, furious that he had stood by his father's side, and been a pawn in all of their lies and treacheries for so long. He understood their reasons why they hadn't told him, but he wanted to throttle them all for their duplicity. It would not continue any longer. He may not be his father's heir anymore, but he was still a prince, he was still the next in line. He would rule. He would set right all of the wrongs that he had so blindly followed. "When Jericho came to live with us in the forest, he changed his name to Jack. It's what we know him as."

"It's who he is," Braith grated. Arianna glanced up at him in surprise, her eyes wide, her mouth parted slightly. Her hands were firm in his grasp, warm, and oh so very fragile. "It's who he's been since he encountered Melinda. It was only six years ago that he was able to break free and officially become Jack, officially allow that other side of him to

come out. He left that palace with no intention of ever coming back again.”

The betrayal was knifing, and far deeper than he had ever expected it to be. When Jack had taken Arianna, Braith had known that Jack had changed, that he was not the brother he had known, but Jack had not been that brother for far longer than Braith had ever suspected. Arianna leaned against him; she released his hand to wrap her arm around his waist, holding him closer to her. Her forehead rested against his chest, he could feel her aching hurt and knew that it was for him. He wanted to be resentful of her sympathy, but he couldn't be, not when she was so wonderfully good at easing his hurt.

“Why didn't you tell me?” he demanded.

“Because we were trying to keep you safe. No matter how little you knew our mother, your sense of duty, your sense of responsibility, your sense of honor would have driven you to go after father, and he would have killed you. We wanted to wait, to bide our time until we thought that there might actually be a chance to take father down.”

“And you believe that time is now?”

Melinda's grey eyes flickered, sadness crept slowly into them. “You are a powerful ally, but no, I didn't think this was the right time. None of us did. But it's been thrust upon us at this point, and I don't think there is any way to change the flow of this tide. Not anymore.”

“Were you ever going to tell me?”

“One day. We weren't entirely sure when, we were just waiting for the right moment. None of us expected you to fall in love with a human, your blood slave, and to have her be one of the prominent figures of the resistance no less. How could any of us have seen that coming?”

Braith was silent for a long moment. He took strength in Arianna's presence, and unwavering love and loyalty, but it could not ease the betrayal festering inside of him. He had thought that Caleb and Natasha were the deceitful and manipulative ones, apparently he was wrong. It seemed they were all dark and twisted in their own ways; they had all held and kept their secrets from each other.

“What a wonderful and trusting family we are,” he drawled sarcastically.

“We were only trying to keep everyone as safe as possible,” Melinda said softly. “If father had known anything...” Her voice trailed off, horror filled her gaze as she shook her head. “Awful, it would have been awful.”

Braith silently agreed, but he wasn't willing to concede anything to her yet. In fact, he didn't want to speak to her at all right now. “Your father used the war as an excuse to kill your mother, and probably Melinda, but why?” Arianna asked quietly.

“Because he didn't use the war as an excuse to kill our mother, he used it as an excuse to start the war.” Arianna jumped slightly in surprise, but Braith had sensed Jack's steady

approach a few minutes ago.

Braith turned slowly toward his brother as he pushed Arianna gently toward the wall. He could not stop his instinctual urge to protect her from the people that had entered the room. Even before she uttered the word dad, he knew immediately which one of the hardened, disbelieving, angry men was her father.

And the man was mad enough to kill.

CHAPTER 16

Aria tried to take a step toward her father, but Braith held her tight. The muscles in his ridged arms clamped against her, the hard muscles of his body rippled beneath his clothes. She had not missed the fact that Braith had turned her, putting her in a more secure position, using his body to defend hers.

But there was no need for him to protect her. This was her father, her family. And as she watched William and Daniel slipped into the room behind Jack and her father. "It's ok Braith," she whispered.

"Wait," he hissed; his voice low and commanding. She frowned at him, but did not fight against his hold. He was thrown off balance right now; he needed her with him in order to keep himself steady. Otherwise he might hurt someone in this room, someone she cared about, someone he cared about.

"You told him everything?" Jack asked softly.

Melinda nodded; she stepped closer to Ashby as she eyed Aria's family wearily. Melinda didn't trust her own kind, and it was more than apparent she didn't trust humans either. Especially rebel humans. "Can I untie him now?" she inquired of Braith, her voice wavering slightly. He remained unmoving, his eyes dark and intense. "We can't take you down Braith; all of us combined probably couldn't take you down."

"He knows that, and that's not what he's worried about. That's never what he's worried about anymore," Jack said softly.

"Then what!?" Melinda demanded, her composure beginning to unravel. She was frustrated, angry that Ashby was still being restrained. "What Braith, what do you want!?"

Jack's gaze came slowly to Aria, she frowned fiercely back at him. "He can protect himself, but if one of us, just one gets by him..."

"You don't have to fear my family Braith, they won't hurt me," Aria said softly, reassuringly. She ran her hands up and down his arms, looking to soothe him. "And you don't have to fear yours."

"Don't I?"

She shook her head, standing on tiptoe she pulled him down to her to make sure that he could hear her, but no one else could. "If they wanted to hurt you they would have done so by now. They may have kept things from you, but even you admit you were in the wrong place at the wrong time when you were blinded. None of them meant for you to be

hurt, in fact they've been trying to protect you for a long time. Anyone of them could have killed you in that palace if they had really wanted to. Jack could have hurt me in the forest, rather than giving me back to you."

"I'm not risking your life," he growled.

"You won't be," she promised. "Just let her untie Ashby, Braith. I couldn't stand to see you like that either. They haven't earned your trust Braith, not yet, but you haven't earned theirs either."

His jaw clenched, a muscle jumped in his cheek. For a brief moment his arms tightened on her, and then, ever so slowly, his grip relaxed. "Untie him," he ordered briskly. "But I will kill you both if you come anywhere near her."

Melinda stared at Aria for a long moment, her eyes wide with surprise and thanks. Then she turned swiftly to Ashby, her fingers flew deftly over the knots. Aria refused to look at her family; she could feel their shocked, horrified gazes; she didn't have to see them. Ashby's hands came forward; he rubbed his wrists together as Melinda untied his ankles.

As the last of the ropes fell away, they embraced tightly, clinging to one another. Aria's heart went out to them, her hands clenched tighter on Braith. She needed him so much, needed his embrace and touch and security. She wanted to run from here with him, and her family, but she had a feeling that wasn't going to happen for a very long time, if ever. There was something changing inside of Braith, something evolving and growing within him that frightened her. She wanted to cling to him, to never let him go. She wanted to stay grounded with him forever, but it wasn't going to happen. Not if whatever was going on inside of him was any indication.

She'd been well aware of the fact that he'd had no solid plan for them when they'd fled those caves. He had a plan now, or at least he had some idea of what he intended to do. The only problem was that his plan was going to terrify her, and it was going to leave her out, of that much she was certain.

"Aria?"

She turned slowly toward her family, trying hard to keep her tears, and fear, at bay. Her father was watching them intently, his head turned slightly to the side as he inspected her. He was normally clean shaven, but he had a couple days worth of growth shadowing his strong jaw. His hair was dark auburn like hers, and William's, but recently it had started to become streaked with strands of white that also shadowed his beard. His eyes were a bright, piercing green that had never failed to pin her to the spot and make her squirm. Time had etched lines around his eyes and mouth, but he was still a handsome man. Especially when he smiled, which wasn't very often, and certainly wasn't now.

She wanted to go to him, to all of them, but Braith's tension was too high. "I'm ok dad, really."

She offered him a tremulous smile that did nothing to soothe the tension humming

through him. His gaze traveled slowly to Braith. Hatred simmered in his gaze, but there was also confusion and disbelief. "This is the prince?" he inquired.

Aria rested her hand on Braith's chest, trying to soothe the anger she felt rapidly building in him. She knew it was not going to be easy, but her family would have to learn to trust him as they had learned to trust Jack. And Braith was going to have to learn to trust someone besides her.

"One of them," Braith replied in a low growl. "The youngest one is standing in front of you."

Her father's eyes darted briefly to Jack, but he didn't acknowledge Braith's words. "You're the one that claimed my daughter as a blood slave; you're the one that took her this time also."

"Yes."

Fury flashed across her father's face. William and Daniel's eyes widened, but they did not radiate the hatred her father did. "You held her, you tortured her..."

"I have told you many times that I was not tortured in there!" Aria interrupted sharply.

"I saw the bite marks!" her father snapped.

Aria blinked in surprise. Her hands tightened on Braith's arms, not to comfort him this time, but because she needed his strength. "Everything I gave, I gave willingly," she said softly, truthfully.

"Like hell!"

It was not her father that exploded with those two words, but Max. Aria hadn't realized he was just outside the doorway behind her father, Daniel, and William. He shoved his way forward now, pushing roughly past them as he shouldered his way into the room. Aria's eyes widened in surprise, she had never seen him look so wild, so crazed, and so completely out of control. His blue eyes were wild in his head, his hair in disarray. Braith stiffened, pushing her back as Max charged at them.

Jack leapt forward, snagging hold of Max's arm as Braith released a snarl that caused even her heart to leap in terror. Max swung on Jack, catching him hard beneath his chin and knocking him back a small step. Jack was far stronger than Max, but he had not expected the punch as he was knocked off balance by it. Not only had he not expected the first punch, but he sure as hell hadn't expected the one two combination that Max laid on him next.

Daniel and William were lunging at Max, but he had already shaken off Jack and was charging back at them. "You're lying!" he accused, his shoulders stiff as he barreled toward them. "He's twisted you! You're lying!"

Daniel, William, and Jack continued after him, but they were never going to stop him in

time. Neither was Ashby as he pulled Melinda swiftly out of the way before lunging forward to make a failed grab at Max. Braith released her, pushing her behind him as he used his body to block her from Max's attack. Terror hammered through Aria, this could not happen, she could not allow this to happen. Max was out of his mind; he had been tortured and used as a blood slave, he had been twisted and wounded in ways that she could never begin to imagine. Max did not understand her love for Braith because he was convinced that Braith had done the same things to her.

"Wait! Stop!" she gasped in horror.

Braith tried to push her farther back but she ducked, dodging his arm as he tried to snag hold of her. She thrust herself forward, throwing herself in between Max and Braith. Unfortunately she hadn't seen what it was that Max wielded in his hand until it was too late. His arm was already flung forward, the metal blade whipped through the air even as she rose to her full height.

Braith's hand shot out in front of her. The blade slammed into his palm, driving through flesh and bone before bursting out the other side. Aria stared at it in horror. It was only a mere inch from the center of her forehead, exactly where Braith's heart was behind her. Though the metal blade would not have killed Braith, it would have wounded him and knocked him back enough for Max to get to him, for Max to try and use the wooden stake he now wielded.

Aria's heart lumbered painfully in her chest. She stared at the awful weapon, the one that would have killed her; the one that was still embedded in Braith's hand. It had to hurt, but he showed no sign of that as he reached around her, grabbed hold of the blade and ripped it swiftly out. It sliced through; the scrape of metal on bone was loud in the room that had become deathly silent.

Blood trailed down Braith's hand, plopping loudly onto the wooden floor. Aria swallowed heavily, terrified at what was to come, terrified of what Braith's reaction would be. She could feel the fury radiating from him; feel the deadly tension that vibrated from him. He was so wound up that she didn't think she'd be able to stop him from killing Max. No one moved, no one even breathed.

Even Max, horrified by the fact that he had nearly killed her, seemed to have regained some control over himself. Braith, not surprisingly, was the first to react. He fisted his hand, twisting it before him. Aria was horrified by the blood that spilled freely from the large wound. She reached for him, but he seized hold of her hand, his touch surprisingly gentle for the pain he had to be suffering.

"Braith."

Aria could hear the nervous tension and worry in Jack's voice. She understood it completely, though she could not see Braith's face, she could feel the murderous intent thrumming through him. Max took a small step back; Aria knew that what he was seeing had to be terrifying. Though he was large, temperamental, and fierce, Braith had always

been relatively gentle and kind with her. She knew that was not who he was though. It was who he was with her, but with others, and to others, he could be cruel, brutal, and lethal.

It was the lethal part that she was most frightened of right now.

Aria turned, she needed to see him, needed to know what he was thinking. His eyes were fierce on Max, a violent shade of red that caused Aria's knees to tremble. His fangs had extended, but they did not drop over his bottom lip. Instead, they were clamped behind his full mouth. His jaw was clenched tight, a muscle jumped high in his cheek.

He was terrifying, and deadly. "Braith, please," she whispered tremulously. His eyes flickered to her, but there was no softening in his features. "He didn't know what he was doing."

"He could have killed you," Braith grated.

"I wasn't going for her," Max retorted.

"Max, shut up!" Jack snarled.

"Well I wasn't."

Jack lunged forward; he seized hold of Max's arm, ripping him swiftly back. "You are an idiot."

"Let go of me!" Max snapped. "I'm going to kill him!"

Jack was struggling to get Max under control, Braith was a tightly wound bowstring behind her. Aria's head was spinning, the confusion in the room was mind numbing. Her father was grasping for Max, terror and anger etched into the lines of his face. "That's enough Maxwell!" her father commanded sharply.

But even her father, a man that had helped to raise Max, a man that Max highly respected and listened too, could not pierce the fury that surrounded him. He continued to struggle, his face florid with anger; a vein throbbed in his forehead. "He's corrupted her! He's made her a traitor, a disgrace to her own people, and he needs to die for his perversity!"

Aria recoiled from his words, feeling as if she had been slapped, feeling as if she was the one that had been stabbed. Pain sliced deeply through her. For the first time she realized that Max would never forgive her for this. She had lost him forever. "You bitch!"

Aria gasped, but it was not Max's words that caused her reaction, but the sudden explosion of motion from behind her. She barely saw Braith, and she most certainly did not hear him, as he sped across the room. Jack didn't have time to react, her father had one hand on Max's arm, but he was not strong enough to stop Braith from ripping Max swiftly away. Jack lunged gracefully forward, but it was too late. Braith was already spinning Max away from the others; he slammed Max against the wall with enough force

that the entire room shook and the wall splintered.

Melinda gasped; her hand flew to her mouth. Ashby swept swiftly past her as Braith pulled back and slammed Max against the wall again. Ashby and Jack grasped hold of Braith's shoulders, but Aria knew they were nothing more than annoying gnats against him. "I don't care what the hell was done to you!" Braith roared his face twisted in a mask of fury the likes of which Aria had never seen before. "You hurt her, you talk to her, you so much as look at her again and I'll rip your freaking throat out! You'll be dead before you even knew what happened, do you understand me you little shit!?"

His hand tightened on Max's throat, he lifted him off the ground and smashed him against the wall again. Aria was afraid the building was going to collapse as it rocked on the stilt foundations. Max's eyes bulged, his fingers clawed at Braith's hand as his feet began to kick against the wall. "Braith!" Jack hissed, pulling uselessly at Braith's arm. "Let go! Damn it Braith, let go!"

Aria's stunned stupor vanished. If she didn't do something, Braith was going to kill Max now. "Arianna!" Melinda cried as Aria ran toward Braith.

"Stop! Don't Braith! Please let him go!" She shoved her way past Ashby. Grabbing hold of Braith's arm, the one pinning Max to the wall, she gave a hard tug on it. It was like trying to bend iron; he hardly even noticed that she was there. "Braith!" she hissed.

Bracing her legs on the wall, she pulled hard on his rock hard arm. "He's my friend!" she cried in frustration and terror. "Stop it, don't hurt him!"

Braith released Max so suddenly that Aria accidentally shoved herself off the wall. She flew backward, losing her grasp on his arm as she tumbled backward. Braith spun suddenly, his arms swooping around her, catching her before she could hit the floor. Max dropped like a weight, hitting the ground with a loud thump.

Aria gazed up at Braith in stunned disbelief. He had been so quick, so fast in catching her, and so gentle as he cradled her with a tenderness that robbed her of her breath. The red faded from his eyes, his fangs swiftly retreated as he looked lovingly upon her. He ignored the rest of them as he turned away, striding with her across the room. The vampire girl was watching them in surprise, but there was a keen interest in her gaze that slightly unnerved Aria.

She peeped around Braith's massive shoulder. Jack and Ashby were helping Max to his feet, he was rubbing his throat; the imprint of Braith's hand was clearly visible upon it. "I would stay quiet if you want to live!" Jack hissed at him when Max opened his mouth to say something more. "She won't be able to stop him again."

Aria ducked back away, she looked up at Braith. She had never been afraid of him, hell she had even slapped him once, but she was truly terrified for anyone that he felt was a threat to her. For the first time she realized the true depth of his desire to protect her. He had let Max go this time, but he would not do it again. Melinda studied them, her eyes

wide, her gaze disbelieving as she turned slowly toward Braith, and then Ashby.

Aria saw the silent communication that passed between them, the intensity of their stares, and their worry. "Put me down Braith," she said softly.

He slipped her easily from his arms, balancing her lightly upon her feet. "Are you ok?" he inquired softly, pushing her hair gently back from her face as he studied her intently.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," she assured him hastily. She grasped hold of his wounded hand, pulling it before her. He kept it fisted, but at her gentle prodding he slowly unfolded it. She gaped at him in wonder, her mouth dropping as she fumbled rapidly with his hand. Blood still marred his skin, but there was no wound there. Not anymore. She stared in awe, unable to believe that what she was seeing was real. It was there, she knew a wound had been there but there wasn't even one scratch upon his flesh anymore. His hand curled around hers, he pulled her close for a brisk, firm kiss on her forehead.

"It's ok Arianna, I hardly felt a thing."

She gazed up at him, her mouth parted, stunned by the rate in which the wound had vanished. She knew that vampires were able to heal rapidly, but this was something not only stunning and amazing, but also slightly unnerving. She couldn't stop the shiver of fear that ran down her spine. "Braith?"

He kissed her again, his fingers lingering on the back of her neck. "I'm good."

She squeezed his hand tightly, wishing that they could go somewhere, wishing that they could be alone for just a few moments to recoup. Unfortunately, that was not possible right now. He turned away from her, and though he did not try and block her from everyone again, he kept his hand on the wall by her head, and his other hand lightly on her waist. She was well aware of the fact that he had kept himself in a better position to stop her if she tried to jump forward again.

She wanted to chafe against the invisible restraints he had placed on her, wanted to chafe against his protective urges (she could take care of herself after all), but she knew that it would only irritate him more. Braith had to think that he was in control right now, even if he wasn't. Max was still in the grip of Ashby and Jack, but he wasn't trying to fight them anymore. He was simply staring at her and Braith as if they had just sprouted two heads, jumped on a table, and started dancing a jig while singing at the top of their lungs. Aria understood his reaction, if it had been anyone else from their camp, she would have felt the same way. But it wasn't anyone else, it was her, and she knew that what she felt for Braith was real, it was genuine, and it was so good and pure that it made them both stronger and better.

"It appears that we have a lot to discuss."

Aria looked across the room, trying hard to keep up the appearance of strength and courage, but her father was staring at her in a way that made her feel like a child all over again. She wanted to go to him, she wanted to hug him, she wanted to be his little girl

for just one more minute, but she knew she could never be his little girl again. She wanted to apologize, wanted to tell her father that she had never wanted any of this, but she couldn't. It was true that the last thing she had wanted was to fall in love with a vampire, but she wouldn't change any of it. Not one damn thing about what had happened between her and Braith.

"Yes," she agreed softly.

CHAPTER 17

"Our mother's family was nearly as powerful as our father's. They were married over a thousand years ago, the world was different then. Just as it was different a hundred years ago, before the war started. At the time of their marriage, superstition ruled, witches were burned, and our kind was relegated to the shadows. Our father always chafed against that, but he knew that to try and come out during those times would only result in death. So he waited. He bided his time, and he married our mother so that he would have more power, and more allies, for when the war broke out.

"And yes, I think that he planned on starting it even back then," Jack said swiftly, cutting off Braith's question before he could ask it. "I think he planned it for even longer than that. He stayed with our mother, continued to have children with her. He had to keep up the pretense that he cared for her a little more than the rest of the nobles cared for their spouses, had to treat her well if he was going to keep her family as an ally.

"There was no king at this time, but a conglomerate of nobles that ran the underworld, dealt out the rules, and meted out punishments rapidly, and with imaginative, disgusting flare. The nobles had grouped together to wrest control, and murder, the previous king. Before then the underworld had been nothing but a series of civil wars that had started to decimate the more powerful families as each king was swiftly brought down. Upon ousting the last king, it was decided to rule as group in order to keep the inner slaughter somewhat under control.

"Our father had to find a way to wrest control from them if he was going to become the single, most powerful figure again."

"Damn!" Braith hissed.

Aria was staring wide eyed at Jack as he spoke. Though Braith seemed to have figured out where this was going, she still wasn't quite sure. Her hand shook in Braith's as he enfolded both of his around hers. She could feel an awful trembling working its way through her, but she could not stop it. "If you remember father was never cruel to mother, at least not publicly, and I have no idea what went on behind closed doors. He did take you from her, but no one blamed him for not wanting his son to go soft by staying with his mother. They all understood that. So when he did turn on her, when he did accuse her of unfaithfulness no one questioned it, everyone believed him."

Aria was beginning to shake; she could feel it all the way down to the tips of her toes. She knew little of what the world had been like before the war. She'd heard stories of a world where humans ruled, there were libraries and schools, and homes and buildings

that reached the sky. She had thought that most of it was a myth, stories filtered through the generations to entertain children, and to give people something to fight for. But listening to Jack, she had a feeling that there was so much more that she didn't know, and that she would never see.

No one seemed to know what had really started the war that left the human population decimated, starving, and just barely clinging to survival but she was beginning to realize that it was something that she had never even begun to fathom. Braith's fingers stroked over her hand, trying to soothe her, but she didn't think she would ever be soothed again.

"For hundreds of years he bided his time, until he felt that the situation was becoming one that he could control, manipulate, and use to his advantage."

"And then he exiled her," Braith said softly.

"Yes."

"And then he had her killed in order to light the spark that started the war."

"Her family wanted revenge; they blamed the humans who had been set up to take the fall for her murder. Father was able to take control of the situation, manipulating everyone to his way. He may have exiled her under the pretenses of faithlessness, but it was still his wife, and it was still his daughter that had been so ruthlessly slaughtered."

Arai gasped softly, her gaze turned slowly toward Melinda. The beautiful woman was standing proudly, her chin raised defiantly. She showed no sign that the fact her father had expected her to be killed in the raid hurt her, but Aria knew it did. No matter how much time had passed, no matter how much she despised the father that had helped create her, Aria knew that it still hurt her. The small flicker in her dove colored eyes revealed this.

"They allowed him to seize the power and rule that father had always wanted," Braith said softly.

"And once he took it there was no stopping him," Melinda murmured.

Aria shuddered, the night was warm, but she was suddenly freezing cold. Her bones were numb; she was barely able to stand anymore. She could feel the shock radiating from Braith; feel the dawning realization at the depths of his father's treachery. "How long have you known this?" he inquired softly.

Jack shifted; he looked slightly uncomfortable by the amount of anger radiating from Braith. "For certain, about sixty years. It took me awhile to gather all the pieces of the story, and to actually believe it. I hate the man, there's never been any love between us, but even I didn't want to believe that he would have our mother killed for his own desires."

Braith closed his eyes for a moment. Aria ached for him, she ached to soothe and comfort him, but this was not the time, and it was not the place. Later, when they were alone,

she would try and take some of his hurt from him, but she wasn't certain that even she could help ease this treachery and loss.

"Your family is even more screwed up than ours," William said softly.

Jack cocked an eyebrow at him; a sad smile curved his mouth. "And you haven't had the pleasure of meeting Caleb or Natasha yet."

William nodded slowly; his gaze wandered to Aria. "What did you get yourself into now sis?"

Aria managed a wan smile; William was trying to sound light, but even his normal jovial tone fell short in this horrendous mess. She wanted to go to William, to hug him and the rest of her family. However, Braith wasn't ready to let her go just yet. "Braith." She gently stroked his hard arm, looking to comfort him, looking to get him to relax slightly. It did not seem to be working.

"You know everything now Braith, you know what was done, and you know what we believe. The question now is; what are you going to do?" Jack asked quietly.

Braith looked slowly toward her; his beautiful eyes were aglow in the dim room. The green in them was bright, sharp in contrast to the hard grey. There was something in his gaze, something so wounded and yet so strong that she felt her insides melt. His eyes caressed her face, stroking lovingly over her, but the steel rod of strength, of determination within his eyes left her cold with dread. "Braith," she breathed.

"I'm going to keep you safe."

She managed a small nod. "I know you will. I have absolute faith in that Braith."

His eyes flickered slightly, she saw the brief moment of fear and doubt that flickered through his eyes. "No matter what, Arianna, I am going to keep you safe."

She swallowed heavily; her heart was lumbering painfully in her chest. "It's a brutal war to wage," she whispered. A war that he had not experienced in a hundred years; a war that she had only lived through the horrendous consequences of.

"It is. The results of the last war need to be set right though."

"People will follow you Braith," Jack encouraged.

Aria shot him a dark, withering look. She knew what Braith intended, knew that she could not stop him, but Jack did not need to make him feel as if he had to do it, because he didn't. She would stand by him no matter what he decided, no matter what he wanted to do. Even if he decided he wanted to run from here; that he wanted to grab hold of her and never look back. That may not be her choice, but she would support it because she supported him. It would not be her that witnessed the worst of the coming violence, it would not be her that went against her own family; she would not force him into that position.

"Will they Jack?" Braith inquired dryly.

Jack swallowed heavily as Braith leveled him with a fierce stare. "Yes. I think you may be as strong as father now." Jack looked slowly toward her. Braith stiffened; he stepped slightly in front of her. "Maybe even stronger. Many will look to you for leadership, especially the vampires on the outskirts, especially the ones starving under father's regime."

"And the people will follow the human," Braith said coldly. Aria shivered at his harsh, brutal tone. "Isn't that right Jack?"

He nodded, swallowing heavily. "They will."

"Why do I feel as if I have been manipulated into this?" he grated.

"As if anyone could have expected you to fall in love with your blood slave," Melinda retorted.

"I am not a blood slave!" Arianna snapped.

"Maybe not anymore, but you were. It's how all of this started after all."

Aria glared at her. "No one saw that coming," Jack agreed, trying to placate everyone with his soft tone.

"I don't think they will follow a vampire who fell for their blood slave," Braith said softly, squeezing Aria's hand reassuringly when he said the words blood slave. "In fact, I imagine most of them will be disgusted by it."

"That is one thing we will have to keep secret," Jack agreed. Anger and hurt bloomed through Aria's chest but she tilted her chin defiantly. She would have to stay strong, she would have to accept that fact if they were going to succeed. And for any chance of happiness they would have to succeed. "For now it will have to look as if you have formed an alliance with the humans and as if you are going to bring the peace and security to the vampire race that father promised but was unable to provide. The humans will follow as long as they are assured safety and security, which we will give them. When this is all over..."

"When this is all over, the two of us will be going somewhere safe. When this is all over, we will be left alone," Braith interrupted sharply.

Jack was hesitant; Aria could barely look at her family. They were staring at her with a mixture of confusion and fear that made her ache for them. "They'll follow you Braith," Melinda whispered.

His hand tightened on Aria, he kept her slightly behind him still, unwilling to expose her to anything he might consider a threat. "And they'll follow Jack after, and the humans will continue to follow one of them." Braith waved a hand lazily at her father and brothers.

"Yes, fine. We can work it all out later on," Jack assured him quickly. Ashby looked about to protest, but Melinda rested a hand on his arm and shook her head subtly. Aria understood that look, understood what it meant. Braith might want to believe that they would be free if they somehow managed to succeed, but they all understood what Braith was trying desperately to deny. The two of them would never be free. "First things first though."

"Father has to come out of power, and Caleb needs to be neutralized," Braith said softly.

Aria squeezed his arm; she really wanted to go to her family. He glanced down at her, the hard lines of his face smoothing out as he smiled at her. She smiled back before slipping swiftly past him toward her family. She was timid; frightened of the reaction she would get from them. It was William that stepped forward first, hugging her tightly against him. She sighed contentedly, embracing her twin tightly as Daniel and her father came forward.

Relief and love filled her. It was a long, savage road they all had ahead of them, but they could do this together. With the love of her family, with the love of Braith, she could get through anything.

She knew that the coming war was inevitable. Her gaze drifted slowly back to Braith. She could not resist him. Releasing her family, she rejoined him, wrapping her arms around his waist as she buried her head in his chest. The coming war was inevitable; she would be giving up everything to help wage it, including Braith. She was acutely aware of the fact that when all of this was over, there would be little left for them. It was him that had to rule, they all saw that already, even if he didn't. And as a human, she would have no place by his side.

But she couldn't think about that now, there was a war to fight first.