

Turning to You



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An Ariel Espenosa Short Story

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Prologue

"I feel like I've been locked up tight
For a century of lonely nights
Waiting for someone to release me"
Christina Aguilera
"Genie In a Bottle"

Spending the amount of time that I did at my sire's business meant that I usually picked up on most of what was happening in Nashville.

Secrets. The city had a great deal of them.

I've live here as a vampire for ten years with my sire, Vanessa Allen, and the others of my clan. The Daughters of Cacophony were known for our singing. We had the ability to turn the tides of war or to move even the toughest of men with our voices and our bloodline in the city went back longer then most knew.

I keep mostly to myself and to my music. Besides my sisters, there were few I considered a friend. Nathan Cruz was one. He was of the Clan Ventrue, the businessmen of our kind who were constantly wielding multi-million dollar deals and traveling in leer jets. Nathan was a Tennessee native, unlike myself, and he helped his sire, Nez Smith, run a pair of nightclubs in Nashville, Crash and Burn.

We met a several months ago when we were part of a small group of Kindred who helped our current Prince, Tristan d'Castilla, take control of the city. Before that we'd been ruled by Brenna Steel, a member of my own clan who was a terrible Prince that needed to be deposed.

Tristan came from Europe and brought his 'family' with him. His mortal brother, Mateo, was a member of Clan Toreador and Tristan's Seneschal in the city. Their sister, Serena, was Tristan's ghoul and took care of his household.

Lachlan Nash was a close friend of Tristan's and part of his inner circle of advisors. The man was *powerful*... that was the best way to describe him. I never wanted to cross him, or meet him in a back alley. There was something about him that made me want to step lightly when I was near him.

Then there was Sebastian.

Sebastian Ritter was Tristan's vampire childe. He was the first of the group to come to the city and I fell half in love with him from the start. Sebastian was... in a word, perfect. Lately whenever I saw him, he'd been a little different. Almost flirty. But I was sure that was just him being nice to me.

Sebastian was Tristan's Sheriff, the one who dispensed the Prince's justice and kept the city safe for our kind. He was a natural leader and so many of the vampires in Nashville

respected him. He had a ghoul named Raleigh that I'd only seen a few times and had never been introduced to, but he was as beautiful as Sebastian. They were a well matched pair.

Lastly there was the Nosferatu, Duncan Masters. Sebastian first met Duncan in St. Louis when Sebastian was there with his sire in the mid 1970s. Duncan had been extended the invitation to come to Nashville with the d'Castilla group and unfortunately for him, he came with them.

That would be his final undoing...

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A few months after all the dust had finally settled from Tristan's takeover, I was working with Duncan on a special album. When he first arrived in the city he'd come off as being a really nice guy, but I was beginning to think that wasn't the truth.

I overheard him on the phone in his office one night when I stopped by to ask him something about the track I'd been working on. From what I could gather from his end of the conversation, Duncan wasn't pleased with whom he was talking to. I didn't mean to listen in, but I heard Duncan threaten the person, saying something about either they did what he wanted or he would make sure their entire family paid the price. I left the office without him knowing I'd even been there, leery now of someone I'd considered a friend.

Rumors started to circulate.

Rumors linked Joan, Sebastian's adopted childe, to Duncan. It was said that she was unnaturally attached to Duncan, especially given that Sebastian was her sire.

A lesser rumor said that Duncan also had some sort of influence over Regina, his Primogen. This one seemed especially unbelievable because a vampire didn't reach the level of Primogen without having a great deal of power. I had to believe that there was no way Duncan could have something to hold over her in the short amount of time he'd been in the city.

The rumor that bothered me the most involved Duncan's relationship with Sebastian. I heard that the two men were lovers. I found it hard to believe, but I probably wasn't the best one to ask if it involved anything negative about Sebastian. I couldn't imagine him being with another man, probably because that meant that I would never have him myself.

I also heard that Sebastian had been seen being overly accommodating to Duncan's wishes. Normally I would dismiss rumors like that, but I also heard that Sebastian had come down very hard on, Tor Kelson, one of the Gangrel in the city, for a minor infraction. I found Sebastian's punishment odd because it was so out of character for him, especially since Tor had been in the city far longer than I had and had never been known for any other infractions. I began to get suspicious when I remembered that Duncan didn't like Tor and I couldn't help but wonder if Tor had been the one on the other end of the phone conversation I'd overheard. My suspicions grew when one of my sisters told me that she'd witnessed Duncan discussing how pleased he was with Tor's punishment.

All these rumors got me to thinking. As a vampire, I knew what a blood bond was. We fed our blood to humans and it gave them special abilities that made them an asset to us. These humans stopped aging and they became our servants, someone who could handle our daytime tasks and protect us while we slept.

The blood also made them more inclined to do as we said. It was a good way to make sure that our servants stayed loyal to us, but the effect was also bad because the bond worked when one vampire drank the blood of another. This was taboo in our society because a vampire who was no longer able to make his own decisions without the influence of another vampire was seen as weak and untrustworthy.

This was especially bad for someone like Sebastian. As Sheriff, he had to make decisions that were in the best interest of us all, but behaving out of character was a clear sign of a blood bond and one that even I couldn't overlook. I thought about going to Vanessa to ask her opinion, but I was afraid that she would think my interest in Sebastian was making me see things that weren't there. I knew that wasn't the case.

I started to watch and listen more carefully when it came to both Sebastian and Duncan. I was visiting Nathan at Burn one night and I saw Duncan there, talking to Ben Carter, one of the Tremere. I found them an odd pairing because Ben was known as a bad seed in town due to his attempt to get one of the female Brujah ghouls for himself. I filed the piece of information away and when I found out later that Ben got off light for an attack on the girl, I had to admit to myself that my suspicions may be correct.

I went to my sire with what I'd seen and heard and told her that I feared the Sheriff was blood bound to Duncan. I was very careful in how I presented what I thought and to my relief Vanessa thought there was credence to it. She suggested that we go to the Prince.

I was surprised to learn that Tristan had his own suspicions. He thanked us for coming to him and told us that he needed proof before he could make any moves against Duncan. He was willing to put some of his people on the matter, but he didn't want to tip the man off so he had to move carefully. He asked if I would be willing to reestablish contact with the Duncan and I agreed without giving it any thought.

I would do anything for Sebastian, even if Duncan scared me.



Chapter 1 – Reporting In

“Can you see it in my eyes
Every glance, every smile
Must give me away”

Christina Aguilera
“Obvious”

During the next week and a half I saw Duncan three times. After each visit I’d reported to Tristan, but so far nothing much of note had happened. Until tonight.

I’d been in Duncan’s apartment just thirty minutes prior and now one of Tristan’s house ghouls was ushering me into his office where Lachlan, Sebastian and Mateo were meeting with him. All four men stood when I entered, but I only had eyes for one of them and it wasn’t Tristan.

I put a smile on my face and forced my gaze to the Prince. “If now isn’t a good time, my Prince, I can come back later,” I told him as I tried not allow my gaze back to Sebastian.

“Nonsense,” he said with a smile. “We were just finishing up here.”

Sebastian looked surprised by Tristan’s comment, but he hid it quickly. “Yes. I hope all is well with you, Ariel,” he said, coming to stand close to me.

“It is, thank you,” I answered, watching him closely as I always did. “And you?”

He smiled that heart-melting smile. “All is well,” he replied, his blue eyes twinkling.

Tristan was speaking to Mateo and Lachlan so Sebastian and I were able to talk without interruption for a few moments. I felt like an inexperienced girl, but I drank in any attention from Sebastian like a sponge and tried to not look like a fool in front of him.

“I’m not keeping you from anything, am I?” I asked him. “It’s been a while since you stopped by The Masquerade last. Vanessa was wondering if something had happened to keep you away.”

There was a hint of regret on his face. “Trouble has stayed away from The Masquerade of late, but that is not true of other places in the city. My duties have kept me occupied elsewhere.”

“I’m sorry to hear that you’ve been so busy. Perhaps you can stop by when things aren’t so crazy,” I told him.

“Perhaps Vanessa wasn’t the only one to miss me?” he asked softly.

I looked down, afraid that he would see just how much I’d missed him. “You know that I always enjoy your company as well, Sebastian,” I said quietly.

“And I yours,” he replied in a low voice. “When will you be taking the stage again? Raleigh has talked of coming to hear you sing.”

I thought of Sebastian's ghou. He was good looking and just as charming as Sebastian from what I'd heard. And he wanted to hear me sing. If he came then surely Sebastian would as well.

"I... I'm not sure. Mmm... Let me know when you're available and I can try to make something happen," I told him, thinking that I sounded ridiculous and wincing inwardly.

Sebastian smiled sweetly. "I'd like that. I'll have to check my schedule."

Before I realized what I was doing, I reached out to put a hand on his arm. "Sounds good. Let me know."

"Perhaps--" he was cut off by the sound of his phone ringing. He pulled it out and looked at the screen as I pulled my hand back. "Excuse me," he said before stepping away.

I watched him move away to take the call and noticed that Lachlan was eyeing Sebastian as well. Tristan had moved to stand next to me and was leaning in close.

"Making plans?" Tristan asked with a smile, looking like he was happy at the prospect of me spending time with his childe.

"He just wanted to know when I'll be singing again, my Prince," I answered quickly. I knew that Sebastian was way out of my league. I was a Daughter and one that was low in the ranks of the clan at that. There was no way Sebastian would ever see me as anything remotely romantic. He liked my singing, that was all.

"That is something I would not mind experiencing either," Tristan replied.

Lachlan joined us, still watching Sebastian closely, but the other man was intent on his conversation. I was watching him, too. That was what I always did and I was surprised when he glanced my way and caught me looking. He winked and I quickly turned back to Tristan.

"You're too kind, my Prince," I said quickly, rejoining our conversation. "But I would be honored for you to hear me sing. Let me know a time that suits and I would be happy to oblige."

"Perhaps when this is over," he replied softly, glancing toward his childe. "When we have something to celebrate."

My gaze followed his and I saw that Sebastian was frowning now. I wondered who he was talking to and what the other person was saying. Was it Duncan?

I glanced at the Prince, then at Lachlan before dropping my voice. "Have you noticed anything new?"

Tristan returned my concerned expression and smiled sadly. "A few things. We will talk more of it in a moment."

I stole another glance at Sebastian. "Yes, my Prince," I said almost absently. I was so worried about Sebastian and I could tell that Tristan was too. I knew I would do whatever I could to make things right.

Silence hung between Tristan, Lachlan and myself as we pretended to not catch any of what Sebastian was saying, but his tone was too low to hear anything. He looked more relaxed now, as if he was happier with the way the conversation was going. He was almost smiling as he hung up. He glanced up at the three of us, and his expression faded into something less easy to read as he came over to rejoin us.

"My apologies, sire, Lachlan, Ariel," he said. "I've a few things I need to follow up on this evening before it grows too late."

"Of course, my childe," Tristan replied. "We will speak more of this tomorrow night."

I saw regret in Sebastian's blue eyes when he looked at me again, but he buried it quickly. He turned to his sire and gave him a half bow. "Tomorrow night, then." He looked to me and gave me a sad smile. "It was good to see you again, Ariel."

"Good to see you, Sebastian," I told him, trying to keep regret from my voice. "Don't be a stranger."

He dipped in a slight bow, then murmured one more, "My Prince" toward Tristan, and headed out; seemingly unaware that everyone was watching him go.

Silence hung for a long moment before Lachlan turned toward Tristan. "He is gone."

My eyes lingered a bit longer on the door and I didn't try to hide my worry now. I turned to face Tristan and waited for his questions to begin.

Tristan gestured for me to sit down and looked at Lachlan.

"Masters," Lachlan answered the Prince's silent question as I took a seat. "Sebastian seemed reluctant, but Duncan was firm."

Lachlan had to be referring to the person Sebastian was talking to on the phone. My heart sank at the thought of Sebastian taking direction from someone like a lapdog. That shouldn't happen to him. He was better than that.

The other men sat and the Prince turned his attention to me. "What news have you?"

"I've just come from Duncan's," I informed them. "If anything I'm even more concerned than I was before."

Tristan's expression was grave. "Tell me."

I told him what I'd observed. Joan had been at Duncan's apartment as well during this last visit and the first thing that stuck me was how enamored she was with the man. She'd catered to Duncan's every whim and practically sat at his heels like a dog. It had been difficult for me to watch because no woman should ever be that subservient to any man.

Like my other recent visits, Duncan had offered me blood. So far he had never drunk blood in front of me, but tonight Joan had. And she was eager for it, almost like a junky that wanted the good stuff and very disappointed that when she didn't get it, though she hid that from Duncan.

Normally offering another Kindred sustenance was a normal thing for my kind and that in and of itself wasn't a bad thing. But when he had approached me about spending more time with Duncan, Tristan had warned me to not drink anything that the other man offered me. So far I'd been able to decline without offence, but Duncan was beginning to act cooler toward me and I didn't know how much longer I'd be able to decline.

He was in fact becoming more insistent. I was sure that he was catching on to my renewed presence in his life and I was starting to think that he wanted me under this thrall as well. The thought scared me, but I had to get closer to him to help Sebastian.

"I can smell it, my Prince, and it is very enticing," I told him. "I want it very much and if it weren't for your warnings I would drink it. It's not human. It smells Kindred."

"You have smelled Kindred blood before, childe. Has it ever affected you this way?"

I shook my head. "No, my Prince."

"Interesting. Lachlan?" Tristan said.

"It is possible to ingest some mind altering or addictive substances when feeding from a mortal, my Prince," Lachlan replied, "but those substances do not pass on when the blood is taken from the Kindred who has ingested the blood. While those things can be placed in blood before offering it to another, it will not have any affect on those who ingest it." Lachlan hesitated. "I have heard of some Kindred whose blood is addictive in and of itself."

Tristan thought a moment. "Camarilla Kindred?"

"No, my Prince. The individuals I'd heard of were from independent clans. Ravnos, Setite."

"Joan drinks this kind of blood often," I informed them. "She seems... disappointed when she doesn't get it. After hearing this I can't help but wonder if that is the case here."

"If it is Kindred blood," Lachlan said carefully, "she is surely blood bound. Add an addiction on top of that bond, and her Domitor owns her, body and soul."

"Duncan Masters is not the kind to play second fiddle," Tristan said thoughtfully. "If he is handing out Kindred blood, there is no doubt he is the Domitor."

"We have to stop him, my Prince," I urged him. "Tell me what to do and I gladly will." Sebastian couldn't be allowed to be controlled by the man any longer.

"We have people watching Masters," Tristan soothed me. "If he has done this to Joan, he has surely done this to Sebastian. The sheriff and his assistant in thrall to one who is surely not of the Nosferatu," he added thoughtfully. "But what clan is he?"

"If I could but get a sample of the blood, my Prince," Lachlan began.

"It is too risky," Tristan replied. "I would not risk any of my people to prove what clan he belongs to when in the end it does not matter. Once he has been dealt with you may test all of the blood in his stores."

"Yes, my Prince," Lachlan replied.

"What would you have me do?" I asked Tristan. If it were up to me I would call for Duncan's death with no further questions asked. Sebastian could not be left under that man's control. My body was rigid with the need for action.

"There is no way to tell who else in the city is under his thrall," Tristan said thoughtfully.

"Perhaps we should talk with Raleigh," Mateo suggested, speaking for the first time. "He may be able to help us gather the information we need."

"Or he could betray our cause to his master," Lachlan pointed out.

"Perhaps if you approached him and said that co-operation would be in Sebastian's best interest. Then Raleigh would be more disposed to work with you," I suggested to Tristan. "I don't know the man, but as his master's sire you would want what's best for Sebastian. Surely that would motivate Raleigh."

"Raleigh contacted Rose Brehmer earlier today," Tristan informed me. "He believes that Masters holds some sort of hold over Sebastian. He asked for help in proving it."

I was relieved to learn that the Prince seemed to know more about the situation than what I'd been able to provide. I was relieved that others had caught on to Duncan and for the moment I decided to wait and see what happened.

"Perhaps you are right, Ariel," Mateo said after a moment. "It's clear that Raleigh has been motivated by his master's behavior. He would likely help us."

"Unfortunately, we do not have proof of wrongdoing on Masters' part," Tristan replied.

"We do have proof of wrongdoing," Lachlan added softly.

"If he is held in thrall, I would not blame him for it," Tristan stated firmly.

"I know that you have some tough decisions to make," I told Tristan. "But I would ask that you not assume any wrong doing on Sebastian's part without speaking to him, my Prince. He would never betray you. I know this in my heart. Don't hurt him."

Tristan looked at me sadly. "If my son is indeed held thrall by Duncan, there is no telling how deep his betrayal runs. I do know, however, that any betrayal performed under a bond of blood is not of his free will. I would call for Duncan's head now, if I had hard evidence of what we suspect, but there is not enough. I am Prince, but I must be able to defend my decisions, else I am a poor Prince."

I understood his position and for the moment I had to bend to his wishes so I bowed my head in subjugation.

His face softened. "If it is in my power, I will see Sebastian come out of this in one piece," he promised softly.

I nodded. "What would you have me to now, my Prince?"

He thought for a moment, then said, "It is foolish to continue to put you at risk, and he is too smart to catch head on. There is no further need for you to try and get close to Duncan. We will look for other ways to gain information. I may yet call upon you, my dear, but for now, I think, you may return to your life. If Sebastian does call you to meet, you will tell me, yes?"

"Of course, my Prince," I told him. "I can be helpful with this. Just give me a task and I will do it."

"I have every faith in your abilities, my dear," he said with a smile. "I look forward to hearing you sing when we are through with this mess."

I was being dismissed. There was nothing more for me to do but bow my head and pray that he would call on me if there was another task he felt I could perform come about. "Call on me for anything you wish of me, my Prince."

"Of course, Ariel. And please pass along my regards to your sire."

"Of course," I said as I rose to my feet and prepared to leave. I had no intention of letting this end here, but I would have to figure out another way to be involved. Sebastian was too important to me to not be.



Chapter 2 – Back In the Game

“Now I see
If I wear a mask
I can fool the world
But I cannot fool my heart”
Christina Aguilera
“Reflection”

The next night I was at The Masquerade trying to work on a new song, but my mind was distracted by what was going on with Sebastian. I hadn't heard anything more from Tristan and I was trying to not get antsy about it. It hadn't even been twenty-four hours since I'd last talked to him and I knew that I had to be patient.

I noticed a tall, good-looking man approach the bar. He was wearing one of the generic black masks that were provided at the front counter to anyone who didn't bring one of their own, but I was pretty sure that I'd seen him somewhere before. I just didn't recall where.

There was something about him. He wasn't a vampire, but there was something... he wasn't human.

His dishwater blonde hair hung curly and loose to his shoulders and his physique was perfect, lean muscled arms and legs that spoke volumes of the amount of physical activity he must be used to. His black t-shirt and jeans were clean, but not designer, and he was catching the eye of many of those around him, male and female alike. Where had I seen him?

He spoke to Diego, the bartender, and was soon holding a beer bottle and leaning back against the bar, scanning the crowd. Since the band wasn't due to start playing for another hour, the place wasn't packed yet and I didn't have to strain to watch him. I was sitting at a table with a few members of my clan, including my sire, but their conversation drifted away as I watched a female member of the Clan Tremere in a scarlet velvet mask approach the man.

Katie Tran was like most of the members of her clan in the city. They tended to stay away from politics, secluded from the others of our kind. If I had to guess, I would have to say that she was probably stalking the tall man, hoping for a quick snack in the bathroom and I would be lying if I didn't agree that he looked as if he would taste good.

Tall, Blonde and Handsome smiled at Katie and I found myself humming the melody to an old Willie Nelson song, something I wasn't even aware I knew. Why couldn't I remember where I'd seen him? *He's certainly tall enough*, I thought to myself, knowing that I'd be lucky to reach his shoulder if I stood next to him.

I leaned over to Vanessa and asked, “See that man over by the bar?”

Vanessa looked in that direction and smiled. "He is handsome, from what I can see," she said after a moment, then looked back to me with a teasing glint in her eyes. "Are you finally looking for company?"

She always teased me because I spent so much time alone, working on my music and little else. But I liked what I did and I made a tidy sum selling my songs. Not that I needed much. I was comfortable where I was. Part of me didn't want to admit to anyone, especially Vanessa, that if I couldn't be with Sebastian Ritter then I didn't want to be with anyone else. God, I was pathetic.

"I'm in company now," I replied with a slight chuckle. "Good company. But I could use a drink. I'm going to see Diego, can I get you anything?"

Vanessa shook her head ruefully as I got to my feet. "Someday you will see the need for more company than that of your sire and her friends, my dear. Go, get your drink. And say hello to the pretty boy at the bar, while you are at it. It may do you some good."

I didn't reply to her comments, just tucked my journal under my arm and headed over toward the bar. Katie had her finger on the man's bicep now and he was shrugging at something she'd said. I maintained a comfortable distance between the pair and myself, but I couldn't help but want to listen in on their conversation.

"Perhaps you would be inclined to perform for an audience of one?" Katie was saying to him as I reached the bar.

Diego made eye contact and I knew he would have a glass of blood for me soon as I turned my head a little to watch Katie and the tall man. Would she get him in the bathroom for a taste?

The man laughed out loud. "I'm not sure that's a good idea, Miss...?"

She laughed. "We left our identities at the door, remember? And I think it would be a very good idea for a solo performance."

I couldn't help rolling my eyes at her sad attempt at a hook up because I could tell that it wasn't working.

The man glanced in my direction and grinned at me before looking back down at Katie. "I'm sorry, I see someone I know. Excuse me."

And to my surprise he headed in my direction. I was still trying to figure out where I knew him from when I felt his hand on my arm.

"Excuse me," he said, his voice gentle and warm.

I looked up at him and smiled. "Hello."

"Are you Ariel Espenosa?"

I felt my eyes narrow behind my mask as I regarded him carefully. "Do I know you?"

"Kiran Michaels," he said with an easy smile that probably charmed most women.

"We have the same agent."

I'd been with Josh Roberts for about three years. He was a good at what he did. Honest. Worked hard for his clients. His wife had died suspiciously a few years ago and now he was raising his young son on his own. Mystery solved. That's how I knew him. I must have passed him when I visited Josh, but there was still something about him. I felt that I'd seen him somewhere else.

"Hi," I said, a little warmer now. "Have you been with Josh long?"

"No, not really," Kiran said, putting his empty bottle on the bar in front of him. "But I really like him."

"Oh good." I pointed over my shoulder toward the bar. "Can I get you a drink?" I was aware that Katie was still watching us speculatively, but I didn't let her bother me. This man was a mysterious distraction from my worries about Sebastian.

Kiran grinned easily. "Sure, that would be cool."

I turned to get Diego's attention and motioned for another beer before turning back to the tall man next to me.

"I hear that you sing here sometimes and that you write," Kiran said, making conversation.

"I do," I replied, wondering how much he really knew about me. There was still something about him that screamed he wasn't your typical mortal guy. "Do you?"

Kiran nodded and smiled. "Yeah."

"We should compare sometime."

"That would be cool." His grin deepened like he really meant that.

Diego set a drink in front of each of us and I was humming something teasing as I started to turn away from the bar to return to my table, but Kiran's voice stopped me. "Did you wanna find a table somewhere and talk shop?"

I stopped, looking back at him over my shoulder. "Sure," I answered with a shrug.

He followed and I glanced around the bar. There were still many empty tables, but Kiran pointed to one near the back wall. It would be quiet back there since there weren't many customers, but I hesitated. I didn't know this guy and there was still something about him... was it smart for me to be alone with him?

Hoping I didn't end up being made a fool of or dead, I agreed and led the way over to the table. After all, Vanessa and the others were still in eyesight and if I called out they could come help me.

We settled into our seats at the table and I made sure that I was sitting so I could see Vanessa. I watched as Kiran eased himself into a comfortable position and suddenly I knew where I'd seen him before. He was one of Sebastian's security guys from The Iron. I wondered what he was doing here.

"So what kind of music do you perform?" I asked him, tucking my feet under my legs as I got comfortable. What was he doing seeking me out?

I saw his gaze fall on my glass and I think he knew what it contained, but to his credit he didn't react. "Um, rock mostly," Kiran replied, taking a drink of his beer. "You?"

I shrugged. "Anything that takes my fancy," I said, my hand resting on the flower-covered book where I wrote my music. I knew that I was humming again and this time not even I knew the tune. Maybe it would be a song about this mysterious individual. He may not be Sebastian, but there was something about him I instinctually liked. It was almost like there was something inherently good about him.

Kiran propped his arms on the table and folded his hands, one on top of the other. "Listen. I have to be honest with you. I came here to talk to you, but not about music, even though I'd really like to hear your stuff at some point."

His admission caused more than a little anxiety and I coiled my body to dart away if I needed. "What are you talking about?" I asked. Was he really a hunter?

His body remained relaxed as he watched me. "I will assume that you know Jesus Ramone and the situation he's in?" he asked.

I nodded my head slowly. This man had to be more than human. You didn't just know as much as he seemed to about my people without somehow being a part of our world. "What does that have to do with me?"

Jesus Ramone was a member of Clan Toreador and recently it had been discovered that he was trafficking children to sick pedophiles. As far as I knew Sebastian had been the one to catch him and Tristan had called a blood hunt on Ramone. His actions put all of us in danger, therefore his life was forfeit.

So far Ramone had eluded Sebastian and his people, but once a blood hunt was called it never went away. Vampires in other cities had to honor it and kill the accused, so Ramone was really living on borrowed time.

Kiran glanced around to make sure that no one was approaching our table before he said, "I've been asked to ask for your help. Do you know why everyone is looking for Jesus?"

I nodded again.

"I have reason to believe that Jose Hermanos is involved in traffickin' those children."

I don't think he could have said anything that would have stunned me more. Well, unless he implicated Sebastian, but I prayed that something like that would never happen. "No," I practically whispered as my gaze dropped to the tabletop. Jose Hermanos was the alias my estranged mortal brother was using here in Nashville. "No, that can't be right. You must be mistaken. Jimmy would never-"

"I know this is comin' from way outta left field," he said, sympathetically. "But this is the kind of shit people don't make up, you have to believe me. Ariel," he prompted and I looked up to meet his gaze. "I was there when multiple children were taken out of a house, away from Jesus. Little boys and girls who had been taken from their families. Who were gonna to be hurt in ways that no adult should ever be treated, much less a child."

The thought of children being molested put my stomach in knots. If my brother was really involved... words couldn't describe the depths of the anger and disappointment I felt at the idea of someone of my blood, my family, being deprived enough to prey on innocent children.

Not that something like that from Jimmy could be completely ruled out. I'd grown up in New York City, a child of a single mom who worked multiple jobs to make sure that my older brother and I had what we needed. Jimmy had fallen into gangs at an early age and soon that was all he thought about.

Then my mom was shot in a drive by when I was eighteen. My entire world was shattered in the space of a second. She'd lingered for months after, sick from some kind of infection that robbed her of her vitality. Jimmy had never come to visit her, no matter how many times I'd tracked him down and begged him. He didn't come to her funeral and that was when I'd finally washed my hands of him.

"I thought he'd changed," I said quietly. I could hear the sorrow in my voice as a mournful dirge started up in my throat. "He had me convinced that he had changed. Jimmy couldn't do something like that, not to kids."

"Ariel," Kiran said, reaching out to touch my fingertips. I could tell that he was leery of touching me. "I witnessed one of Jesus' people giving your brother money. They were talking about another shipment. That means more kids. We have to stop them."

Alarm rose in my entire being. "You're not going to let that happen are you?"

"Not if I can help it."

"What do you want me to do?" I asked. There was no way I could say no. Maybe helping Kiran with this would take my mind off Sebastian.

"What can you tell me about him? What's he doin' with this church?"

I shook my head. "I'm not really sure. I've only been in contact with him for that last couple of months and none of that interaction involved anything really personal."

My brother had surfaced in Nashville as the leader of a church group. The entire thing had smelled fishy to me from the day he turned back up in my life. But I'd had to give him a chance. That's what my mom would have wanted.

"But he's your brother?" he asked.

"Up until last fall I thought he was dead," I admitted, embarrassed about the fact. "I thought he was killed in some gang activity. Then he turned up here in Nashville."

"Where are you from?" Kiran asked.

I cleared my throat, uncomfortable with this subject. "New York. We grew up there. It was just Mom, Jimmy and me." I reached up and adjust my mask in an attempt to buy some time and get my emotions in check. I really wanted to remove it and I had to stop myself from doing so. "Jimmy had started hanging out with the wrong people. One thing led to another and before Mom could stop it he was in too deep." I looked down at my hands on the table. "Then she died."

Kiran looked like he felt bad for making me talk about something so painful, but he was resolute. "What happened?"

"Mom was on her way home from work. It was a case of wrong place, wrong time." I was almost able to hold back the sob that escaped. "Jimmy wasn't around, hadn't really

been there for a long time." I stopped to clear my throat. "He didn't even come to her funeral. I was done with him by then. A few weeks later, rumors started floating around that he was dead, too. Killed in some robbery attempt gone horribly wrong. The cops came around looking for him, but I hadn't seen him in months. Then they stopped coming around to ask," I could hear the misery in my own voice. These were things that I hadn't thought of, much less talked about, in a long time. "I was finally left all alone."

"Then he turned up here?" Kiran asked.

I nodded. "Not long after the new Pr-after some trouble here in the city was over."

"What do you know about the people around him?"

"Nothing," I told him with a shake of my head. "I don't think I've ever met any of them."

Kiran nodded slowly, thinking. "If there's any way you could help with this, would you?"

"Of course." Like he needed to ask at this point. I would do whatever I could to stop my brother and his friends if they were hurting children.

"I need to talk to my contacts to see where to go from here. Is there a number where I can contact you?"

I wanted to question him more about how he'd come to have all this information and I felt my eyes tighten as I watched him. The mask hid most of his face so it was his eyes that I concentrated on. "Who are your contacts?" I asked him.

An easy smile spread on his lips and he leaned back in his chair. "Let's see, how do I put this, darlin'?" he winked at me and just like that I knew I could trust him. It was the strangest thing. "They're folks from... well, from your neck of the woods, if you get what I'm sayin'."

So, he knew what I was. Or thought he did at any rate. I pursed my lips in thought. "And just what do you know about my neck of the woods, Kiran Michaels?"

He chuckled at my question. "Not much, actually. But the folks I know are good. Been good to me."

"There's something about you," I said, studying him, then I bluntly asked. "What are you?"

He grinned again. "I'm not from your neighborhood, darlin', but we're close."

I opened my journal to a blank page and quickly wrote, then ripped the page out. I folded the paper in half and said, "If what you're saying is true, which I can't see why you'd lie about it, you're going to need the influence of the higher tiers of my... people. I can talk to a friend to see if he can be of assistance."

"Oh, who's your friend?"

"Sebastian," I said with a fond smile, wondering if Kiran knew his real boss. Raleigh ran the day to day things The Iron required, but it was Sebastian's business. "He's a good guy. The best. And someone you'd want to have at your back in a fight. Trust me."

Kiran attempted to maintain his smile, but it was obvious something about Sebastian made him nervous. "Let me talk to my people first, before you say anythin' to him," he said, trying to sound calm.

"What am I talking about, that's probably who has you in on this," I realized, feeling like an idiot. "I just remembered where you work."

Kiran sobered slightly, looking around us to make sure that no one was too close before he said, "We suspect that someone close to Mr. Ritter may also be involved."

My body went still at his words. Somehow I knew whom he was referring to and things started to fall into place. "Is Duncan involved with Jimmy?" I choked out. I'd always known that my brother was bad news, getting into bed with someone like Duncan Masters was a whole new level of bad and Kiran's expression wasn't saying no.

"He is, isn't he?" I continued, really outraged for the first time. "I knew it as soon as you said something."

"U-um..." Kiran stammered, trying to put a game face back on and failing. "M-my information said that you were friendly with Duncan Masters."

"I am friendly with Duncan," I said, knowing that I had to maintain my so called friendship with the man until Sebastian was safe. "I guess. I don't know, lately I've been noticing things." Maybe Kiran could be trusted enough to know my secret. Maybe there was evidence here that could help Sebastian, too.

"What kind of things?" he asked.

Now I was the one glancing around to make sure we were still alone. "This might not be the best place to talk. You never know who might be listening. Let's get out of here."

Kiran appeared to be attempting to work something out in his head. "Let me make a call," he said finally, pulling a cell phone out and hitting a few buttons. He didn't leave the table, which surprised me, but I took it to mean that he was showing that he trusted me at least a little.

"Hey, it's me. What's going on?" He listened for a few seconds, then responded, "Good. Real good." He glanced over at me. "I'm still with her and I think I should bring her over."

There was another silence and Kiran added, "Either there or maybe my place if you think that's better."

I felt an eyebrow lift at his suggestion, but Kiran was looking down by then and didn't see it.

"How about Alexander's?" he said into the phone. "There's a room we can use to talk in the back." The person on the other end must have agreed because he was hanging up and slipping the phone back into the front pocket of his jeans. "I've got a place where we can talk that's more secure."

"Where?" I asked, wondering if I should agree if he suggested Alexander's.

"Have you heard of Alexander's?"

I frowned. "Yes," I replied slowly. "Please tell me we're not going to talk to the owner."

He shook my head. "No. It's just a place that no one would expect us to go." He got to his feet. "Ready?"

Well, I had to agree with him. Alexander's was somewhere I wouldn't be known for frequenting. It wasn't that I had anything against the Brujah or anything, but I'd heard stories about the backroom there. I wasn't into group sex.

I contemplated whether I was losing my mind, agreeing to go off with this man I didn't know from Adam. But if Jimmy was involved in harming children then I had to stop him. That didn't mean I had to be stupid either.

"I need to grab my purse," I told Kiran, getting to my feet as well and grabbing my journal. "Follow me." I turned toward the table where Vanessa and the others were still seated, vaguely aware that Kiran came behind me. Once there I retrieved my purse and pointedly told Vanessa I would be back later or that I would call her.



Chapter 3 – Surprises at Alexander's

"Do my best with faith that's never-ending"
Christina Aguilera
"Blessed"

Kiran asked if I wanted to ride to Alexander's with him, but I thought it would be best to have my own mode of transportation and turned him down.

Alexander's looked pretty nice these days. Jax Alexander was not only the bar's owner, but she was also the Primogen of the Clan Brujah and had only returned to Nashville since Tristan took over. There'd been some kind of altercation with the Tremere many years ago and many of her people had fled the city. Now they were all back and the bar was their main hang out. The clientele tended to run a little rough for my tastes, but I'd heard that Jax had implemented many changes since her return.

Since it was a Sunday night, not much seemed to be going on, if the cars in the parking lot were any indication. I followed Kiran inside and didn't pay too much attention to the décor, though I did notice a tall blonde man who'd been sitting at a table near a door marked 'employees only' got to his feet and passed through the door. I continued to follow Kiran as he led the way across the bar floor, straight to the door. Must be that blonde man was who we were meeting up with.

The door led to a backroom of sorts that I'd heard plenty about even though this was the first time I'd been back here. The room held a very large bed in its center that was made up with a dark velvet comforter. There were a great deal of pillows scattered in piles around the room and a small table and chair set against one wall. I moved a few steps into the room and turned to face the blonde man. It only took one good glance for me to know who he was.

"You're Sebastian's gh-" I stopped myself and glanced quickly toward Kiran, wondering just how much the man knew about my kind.

Raleigh nodded. "Yes, ma'am," he said respectfully. "And Kiran knows enough about us to know that's true as well."

I looked between the two men questioningly for a moment, then I stepped further into the room and focussed my attention on Raleigh. "What's going on? The whole truth. Kiran said something about my brother being involved in kidnapping children and giving them to Jesus Ramone, but what does Sebastian have to do with it?"

"*Senorita* Espenosa," Raleigh said with a passable Spanish accent, "it has come to our attention, thanks to Kiran here, that money was passed from one of Jesus' men to one of Jose's men, and there was discussion about Duncan getting a cut. We are," he hesitated, then looked back to me. "I think Masters has some kind of hold over Sebastian," he said bluntly.

I looked between the two men before speaking. "I think you're right, Raleigh, and have told the Pri-Tristan's people the same." I turned my attention back to Raleigh. "I think Duncan blood bound him."

Raleigh's eyes went wide, as if he didn't know a vampire could be blood bound. "I-I," he stammered in frustration. "That would explain a great deal. Do you have any evidence?"

I shook my head. "Only observation. But it was enough for Lachlan to get involved."

"Okay." Raleigh fell silent for a long moment, thinking as he ran his hand through his hair. "Can I ask what else you've noticed about Masters?"

"Have you noticed anything odd about Joan?"

Raleigh thought a long minute. "Do you think she is also blood bound to Duncan?"

I nodded. "I think it's possible."

"Do you know what Senior D'Castilla's opinion is of the matter?" Raleigh asked carefully.

"He's very concerned," I admitted. "Concerned enough that he's alerted his own people to the situation." I glanced at Kiran, who was standing silent near the door, then I moved my gaze back to Raleigh. "Does he know about this new development with the children and my brother's involvement?"

"I spoke with Dillan earlier today," Raleigh said. "I'm sure the information will be passed to Mr. Nash, and then to Senior d'Castilla. " He glanced between Kiran and me before adding, "Do you think this information will be enough to call a blood hunt on Masters?"

"I'm not sure," I told him with a shrug. "I've been trying to spend more time with Duncan, but he's been different with me lately as well."

"Then we must find proof that Masters is involved through the Hermanos with the children," Raleigh said.

"He's very careful," Kiran said, speaking for the first time from the door. "I've only spent one night watchin' him and I can already tell that. I don't think he's gonna give anything up willingly."

"You have people watching him already?" I asked Raleigh, wondering how long he'd had his own suspicions.

"It seemed prudent," Raleigh admitted and I saw how worried he was about his master, which endeared him to me a little. "It is the only way to gather information about him. Although, we had hoped to gather information about your brother, to see if we could gain anything from that direction."

"My brother is a master of lies," I replied bitterly. "But then he has been doing it long enough."

"Look, the whole point of goin' to Ariel in the first place was in the hopes of gettin' her brother to Nash," Kiran pointed out. "I think we still need to try that angle. See what happens there."

"Is that what Lachlan wanted?" I asked Raleigh.

"Dillan tells me that Mr. Nash will welcome any and all information to resolve this situation. He is concerned that the Prince's childe could be compromised in such a manner, and is anxious to have this taken care of." Raleigh was trying to keep this very business like, but I knew he had to be just as worried about Sebastian as I was, probably more. His blue eyes were imploring without showing any weakness. They compelled me to help him.

Like I would say no.

I nodded in complete agreement, aware that I was humming an uncertain melody. "The only thing I worry about is what the rest of my brother's group will do if he's removed from them, especially for an extended length of time."

"Well, if that's the case then we'll just have to be ready to hit fast," Kiran said.

"Evidence is sometimes overrated."

"*Senorita Espenosa*," Raleigh said hesitantly, "if we were to take Masters out, would that return Sebastian to his... right mind?"

"As I understand it," I replied, remembering another person in question I added, "What about Regina?"

"We will have to see how far her involvement goes," Raleigh said thoughtfully. "She may simply be another dupe to Masters."

I nodded again. "I'm willing to try to get my brother to a location where he can be taken, but I think it's a good idea that it be made to look like I wasn't involved in his capture. He's made an attempt to get back into my life and I've let him in to an extent so that could be helpful."

"Maybe they could be put in the same holding area?" Kiran suggested. "He might open up to her."

"You wanna lock them in a room together?" Raleigh asked, clearly not liking the idea as he looked at me to gauge my reaction.

Kiran shook his head. "No, but maybe cells that are close together. Does anything like that exist?"

"Yeah," Raleigh said in a low voice, looking uncomfortable. "It does."

I'd lived in the city for over ten years and in that time I'd heard plenty of rumors of a place like Kiran was suggesting. The Pens. It was supposed to be some sort of subbasement beneath The Iron, but the rumor went if you saw those cells, you didn't come out again. I'd known many of my kind and others who had disappeared there.

I looked at Raleigh sadly. "It's true then?" I asked him in a quiet voice, losing a little of my bravado about volunteering like this. I hadn't heard of anyone being taken there since Tristan took over, but you never really knew about things like that.

Raleigh nodded. "They haven't been used since d'Castilla came to power, but they are still available." He sighed. "The only problem is that Sebastian would normally be the one to authorize their use."

"But since its Lachlan, could he circumvent that?" I asked.

Again he nodded. "He would, or either d'Castilla. Any of them would be able to circumvent Sebastian and ensure he wasn't informed of the situation."

"Well Nash already wants Hermanos brought in," Kiran pointed out. "Is there some damn form that's gotta be filled out in triplicate beforehand?"

I didn't know Kiran, but it was obvious that he was sick of sitting around and Raleigh smiled almost indulgently at him. "No. I'll call Nash for approval, then head to The Iron. You work with *Senorita* Espenosa as to how to lure Jose out. Take a couple of Alexander's people, Spencer and Williams would be happy to help, I'm sure, and they have a van. Take James if you think you need anyone else." He stopped suddenly and looked at me. "If that is acceptable to you, *Senorita* Espenosa."

I appreciated that he thought he needed to defer to me, but I knew that he was far better prepared to handle the situation so I quickly nodded. "So you want this to happen tonight?" I asked, humming a little as I thought how best to get Jimmy to meet me on such short notice.

"The sooner, the better," Raleigh replied firmly. Kiran nodded in agreement.

"I need to call Vanessa and let her know that I will be out of circulation for a few days," I said as I pulled out my cell phone. "That should be long enough. Then I'll call Jimmy to arrange a place to meet."

Once I'd spoken to Vanessa we discussed where I should suggest meeting my brother. Kiran recommended Raz'z Bar and Grill, one of the local bars with no Kindred ties. He liked it because it was relatively small, but popular enough to be well frequented so Jimmy wouldn't be suspicious. Kiran's plan was to grab him and me in the parking lot, so I was going to need to hang out by my car until he got there.

When my brother had first approached me a few weeks ago, wanting to reestablish our relationship, I was, of course, reticent about him. The way he'd treated our mom, the way he hadn't been there when we needed him the most was a very hard thing to put behind me. It was a hard to even contemplate forgiving him.

At first I'd been totally against any kind of reconciliation. Then I'd seen him a couple times and I found myself beginning to wonder if I'd been wrong. Since our last meeting nearly two weeks ago had left me with a feeling of wrongness that I just couldn't fully shake.

With a plan in place, I called the number Jimmy gave me the night I first saw him again after so long apart. Jimmy was over the moon that I'd called and he quickly agreed to meet me at Raz's around eleven. A glance at my watch told me it was close to ten now, that would give us plenty of time to get everything in place.

Raleigh suggested that Kiran ride with the Brujah in the large van one of them owned, while I drove my car. It was also agreed that they would get there ahead of me in case Jimmy arrived first. That way they would already be in position.

The plan was that when I arrived I would park in a spot close to the van, then wait for Jimmy to arrive. I would make small talk, then Kiran and the others would grab us. It sounded simple enough and I knew I had to do this. For Sebastian.

* ~ * ~ *

All of us ended up getting to the bar ahead of Jimmy. I was leaning against the trunk of my car when he came walking up.

"Hello," I said, painting a smile on my face. "How are you?"

"I'm fine, *mija*," he replied. "I'm very happy you called."

"I've been thinking," I said, aware of Kiran's tall form silently moving around the front of the van behind my brother. I was sure that one of the ghouls would be within striking distance of me very soon as well. "Maybe spending time together is a good thing."

Jimmy smiled widely, but happiness didn't quite make it to his eyes. Before he could say anything Kiran was on him, wrapping his arms around Jimmy's torso, locking his arms against his body. Jimmy shouted out as he fought Kiran and I felt rough hands grab me as well. I tried to struggle, knowing that the man who'd grabbed me would make the abduction look real.

I was aware of the van's engine roaring to life as the side door opened, allowing Kiran to force my brother inside before he climbed in behind him. I was pushed in next, followed by my captor. As soon as the door was slammed shut the van took off.

My hands were forced behind my back and roughly tied with a length of rope, then a hood was placed over my head. So far the plan was working.



Chapter 4 – Introducing Jimmy to the Pens

“Hey, boy, don't you know
I've got something going on”
Christina Aguilera
“Come On Over”

Eventually the van came to a stop and we were hauled out of the back and down multiple flights of stairs. I couldn't see anything with the hood firmly in place, but I knew we were being taken to The Pens. I tried not to react when the two men guiding me got a little rough; they were just doing what they'd been told after all. I knew that they were only trying to make it look like I was just as much a prisoner as Jimmy was.

I heard Raleigh's voice talking to someone ahead of me, Kiran maybe, who I was pretty sure was ahead of me with my brother. The lower we went beneath The Iron, the staler the air felt. I tried to not think about all those who'd gone into The Pens and never come back out. That wouldn't happen to me. Tristan wouldn't do that, no matter what my brother had done.

I heard heavy doors open and knew we were in The Pens themselves. I tried not to let the panic I felt in my chest rise to the surface with every step I took. I was ushered into a cell and carefully patted down. My purse and cell phone were taken.

During all this I made sure to voice things like “who are you” and “what do you want” to keep up my act. I didn't expect any answers and got none.

I heard my brother yelling something about God striking someone down and I assumed that he was being searched as well. I couldn't help but notice that he made no effort to ask if I was alright.

Finally I was forced to lie down on a lumpy cot while one of the men whispered, “Sorry.” They untied me, removing my jacket as well and instructing me to not get up until they left. The hood was still in place. I did as I was told.

I heard the door clang closed and I slowly moved to a seated position as I pulled the hood from my head. I was in a cell and it was noticeably cold here, even though I didn't need heat. Jimmy and I were in adjoining cells, the wall that separated us was lined with thick metal bars, as was the walls where the doors were located. The other two looked like thick concrete and I knew that there was no way I could get through them even if I used blood to enhance my vampire strength.

Raleigh, Kiran and the Brujah ghouls were standing in the hallway outside Jimmy's cell, although Raleigh was the only one whose face I could see. The rest still wore the ski masks they'd donned for the abduction.

My brother was getting to his feet and approaching the door. He glanced at me, then turned his attention to the two men. “This is not the path God wants you to be on, my

friends," Jimmy said in a low voice. "It is not too late to repent your sins and walk in the light."

Raleigh snorted in amusement while Kiran and the others remained silent, like bodyguards. "God's not in charge down here, Hermanos," Raleigh told him curtly.

"What do you want with us?" I asked, voice calm as I got to my feet and moved toward the door as well.

Raleigh grinned, then gestured for the ghouls to leave and they headed down the corridor that I assumed was where we'd been brought in though. "I want a lot of things, *Senorita*, and I'll be getting every single one of them," he said before he turned on his heel and headed after the ghouls, Kiran bringing up the rear.

I looked at my brother as a door I couldn't see closed down the corridor. "I don't understand this. Do you know those people? Do you know what do they want?"

Jimmy was still looking at the empty space Kiran and Raleigh had left. "I don't know," he said softly, then he looked around. "Do you know what this place is? Do you know where we are?"

I shook my head, trying to feign fright. "Jimmy, I can't stay here," I whispered back. "Not for long."

He ignored my words as he began to examine the door. "We'll find a way out, *hermana*," he said distracted.

"What are you looking for?"

"A way out," he replied, examining the locking mechanism closely. He wasn't finding what he was looking for and he tested the door, pulling on it. It didn't open.

I started to look around my cell a bit as well for show. "I'm not sure what to look for," I confessed.

"A weak bar, maybe extra space between them you could squeeze through." he looked at me appraisingly, then back at the bars. "Probably not gonna work, though."

As I'd already suspected there weren't any loose bars. The cells had been built to hold a vampire who could use blood to boost their strength after all. Even though The Pens hadn't been used in the time of Tristan's reign, the cells hadn't had time to deteriorate. There was no way we were getting out until we were let out.

After a few minutes, Jimmy swore in Spanish. "This is useless," he continued in the language we'd known since childhood. "What in Gods name do they want with us?" His eyes slid to me and he added, "Have you done something to draw down the wrath of your... people?"

I put on my best outraged face. "No, of course not!"

Jimmy looked around disdainfully. "Well, they weren't shapeshifters. What else would have holding cells capable of keeping a bull elephant from escaping?"

"I don't know them," I insisted, which was kind of true. I didn't know the Brujah ghouls at all and I'd technically only met Raleigh and Kiran tonight.

He muttered something in Spanish that I didn't hear then went to sit on the bed in his cell. I sat as well and waited for the next part of the plan to initiate.

It was almost an hour before anyone came back in and when the door opened it was Lachlan and Kiran who entered. This time Kiran had his hood off and when I saw them I moved away from the door of my cell and back toward the rear, pretending that I was afraid.

Jimmy eyed Lachlan with clear disdain. "Abomination," he spat as Lachlan approached his cell. His gaze then turned to Kiran. "I can help you get away from this filth," he told him. "God can save you; I can show you the way."

Kiran's brow quirked up, his expression hard. "My relationship with Selene is just fine, thank you. Now step back."

Jose looked at him defiantly. "Thou shalt have no other gods before me," he quoted.

Lachlan reached into an inner pocket of his suit jacket and pulled out a small rib bone that was slightly discolored, a very light grey. He handed it to Kiran. "We will need to ensure that he holds this as we question him."

Kiran took the bone. "Fine. Even if I have to make him hold it myself." He then unlocked the door to Jimmy's cell and went in.

Jimmy remained as defiant as ever, refusing to be intimidated by the larger man and didn't step back. His eyes moved between Kiran and Lachlan, his mouth tight and his breathing slow and deep. His mistake was allowing his eyes to linger too long on Lachlan because when they did the vampire said, "Sit down on the cot."

Some of my kind had the ability to make humans do what they wanted. This persuasion usually needed some kind of eye contact to be initiated. It worked and without another word, Jimmy immediately moved to sit on the cot. Once he was seated, his brow creased, looking extremely surprised and he moved to stand.

Kiran had moved into the room as soon as Jimmy started toward the cot and he was right in front of him when he started to rise again. Kiran put his hand on Jimmy's shoulder and held him there. "Stay," he said, sounding as if he were speaking to a disobedient child.

Jimmy struggled for a moment, then apparently decided it wasn't worth the fight and relaxed. "I am but a humble man of God," he told Lachlan. "What could someone of your kind possibly want with me?"

Lachlan smiled coldly. "The truth. If you would hold the bone, please."

Jimmy looked at the bone in Kiran's outstretched hand with disgust. "No."

Kiran and Lachlan exchanged a look and when the vampire nodded the other man forcibly took my brother's hand and put the bone in it. Kiran then wrapped Jimmy's fingers around the bone, then held Jimmy's fist in his. Jimmy stifled a sound and I heard the bones in his hand grind together as he glared at Kiran.

"Are you involved in the kidnapping and sale of underage children in our territory?" Lachlan asked in an even voice.

I made sure to play my part and feigned surprise by gasping out loud as Jimmy began to swear in Spanish, though he didn't answer the question.

"Are you involved in the kidnapping and sale of underage children in our territory?" Lachlan repeated, this time in a harder voice than before.

"No!" Jimmy replied harshly.

"Lie!" a disembodied voice rang out.

Jimmy looked down at the bone, terror plain in his dark eyes. In a strangled voice he said, "Yes." I was almost certain that the word was forced out of him.

I gasped again, this time adding, "No, Jimmy," in a quiet tone and watched as the bone's color turned a little grayer.

"Did you take money from Jesus Ramone or one of his associates in payment for underage children?" Lachlan continued, his voice very hard and cold now.

Jimmy started to struggle, but he couldn't pull his hand away from Kiran.

"Did you take money from the vampire Jesus Ramone or one of his associates in payment for underage children?" Lachlan demanded.

"I am innocent!" Jimmy cried, yet somehow I couldn't even begin to believe him. "Let me go!"

"Lie!" the voice said again.

Through clenched teeth, as if being forced, Jose said, "Yes, I took money from Jesus and his people for the children." The bone went a shade darker gray and Jimmy tried again to pull away, but Kiran's grasp was too strong.

"Is Duncan Masters involved in the kidnapping and sale of underage children to Jesus Ramone?" Lachlan growled.

Here was the heart of the questioning. There was no hesitation this time.

"Yes, yes!" Jimmy gasped. "He came to us, asked us to acquire the children. He wanted a finder's fee, for bringing Ramone to us! He provided the driver, and the vehicle when the children were delivered!"

Lachlan smiled a very cold, frightening smile. This is what we needed. I was ready to drop my ruse, but Lachlan wasn't quite done. "Is Sebastian Ritter involved in the kidnapping and sale of underage children to Jesus Ramone?" Lachlan asked.

"Yes, yes!" Jimmy answered immediately.

"Lie!"

And again, Jimmy spoke as if he were being forced. "No, Sebastian Ritter had nothing to do with the sale of children to Ramone."

Again, the bone darkened until it was now mid gray.

"Ask about Regina," I said from my side of the wall.

"Is the vampire known as Regina involved in the kidnapping and sale of underage children to Jesus Ramone?" Lachlan asked, his voice still hard and cold.

"Who?" Jimmy asked, obviously not recognizing the name. "I don't know any Regina, please, let me go!"

The bone didn't react and Kiran looked at Lachlan. "Is that it?"

Lachlan glanced at the bone, contemplating, then said, "Is the vampire known as Joan Smith involved in the kidnapping and sale of underage children to Jesus Ramone?"

"No," Jimmy replied in a pained voice. "The only vampires involved besides Jesus and his cronies is Duncan Masters."

The bone was still and Lachlan held his hand out to Kiran, obviously wanting the bone returned. Kiran released Jimmy's hand and took the bone from his useless fingers, then handed it to Lachlan. Jimmy shrank back on the cot, moving as far as he could away from Kiran and trying not to look afraid.

Lachlan turned his attention to me. "This human is your blood, *Senorita* Espenosa. Would you like the honor of disposing of him?"

Was he serious? I'd never killed anyone in cold blood before. Jimmy was my brother. Nothing would change that.

"He stopped being my blood the day he walked away," I replied, my voice full of disgust. "But what about the others he lives with? They will question his disappearance."

"They too will be dealt with. Tristan wilnae allow the trafficking of children in his city," Lachlan replied.

I needed a minute to think about what Lachlan had offered so I nodded. "Can I get out now?"

Lachlan looked at Kiran and nodded. The other man then left Jimmy's cell and came to unlock mine, while Lachlan kept an eye on my brother.

Jimmy had moved to the back of the cell. His face said that he was as unsure as I was about whether or not I would take Lachlan up on his offer. I could see the wheels of his mind turning, figuring a way to save his hide. Regardless of my choice, I knew that there was little chance of him making it out of here alive.

Lachlan watched me carefully as I exited my cell and moved to stand in front of Jimmy's. Could I do it? He'd been responsible for the kidnapping of children. Selling them into God only knew what kind of situations. He was despicable. But could I be the one to deal out his sentence?

Kiran lingered behind me, ready to be of assistance, but there wouldn't be any need.

"Mama would be ashamed to know what you've become," I told my brother. I could hear the sadness there. But regardless of his crimes there was no way I could kill him. Yes, he deserved to pay for what he had done, but at the end of the day he was still my brother... the only family I had left. My mom would be heartbroken if I killed him.

I doubted that Jimmy had the same reservations. When I saw the look of disdain in his eyes I was sure of he wouldn't. "Are you going to kill me, *hermana*? Do you really think you can?" he sneered.

Lachlan was standing between the two of us and I looked up at the other vampire, my gaze sad as the sound of a lamenting song came from the back of my throat. "He's right, I can't," I practically whispered after a long silence. "I'm sorry, I... he's the only family I have left."

I felt Kiran's supportive hand on my shoulder and Lachlan nodded, gesturing for both of us to go down the hall as he moved to the door of the cell. "We will take care of it then, lass."

Kiran guided me away from the cell and down the hall to the 'control' room. I heard the snick of the cell door as it closed, but I didn't look back.

As we entered the control room I heard Mateo and Tristan talking in Spanish. One of the Brujah ghouls had stayed and was watching my brother on the monitors, trying to ignore the men's conversation.

"--won't be happy to hear about it afterward," I heard Mateo say.

"If what we suspect is true, he would try to stop it," Tristan replied. "Once it is done, he will understand." Tristan noticed our entrance then. "*Senorita* Espenosa, my condolences. It is a hard thing, to watch a family member go down the wrong path."

I nodded, a little numb from the experience. "Yes, sir. I'm sorry I couldn't deal with him myself. It's just..."

"It's quite alright, *senorita*," he said soothingly. "He will be taken care of, no need to worry yourself."

"As will Masters," Lachlan added in a low voice. "You will call the *caza de sangre*?"

"*Si*," Tristan replied without hesitation. "I will call for the hunt as soon as Sebastian and Miss Smith are placed in seclusion."

"What does that mean?" Kiran asked with a slight frown from near the door.

"We believe that Sebastian will attempt to protect his friend," Tristan explained. "It is best that he and Miss Smith are unable to come to Mr. Master's aid. We will not harm them."

Kiran seemed to understand the necessity and nodded. "This has to do with what Ariel was talkin' 'bout, right?"

"*Si*," Tristan replied. "Once Mr. Masters has been dealt with, their feelings will change. I understand you are interested in joining the hunt?"

"I am," Kiran nodded. "Is someone bringing them in?"

Tristan looked at Lachlan, who nodded and left the room. "Yes," Tristan said. "Raleigh will work with you. There will be many searching for the man, and whoever reaches him first will choose to take him out or bring him in." He regarded Kiran seriously before adding, "I would prefer that he not be brought in."

Kiran's brows lifted slightly in surprise. "I understand. If there's nothin' else I'll go find Raleigh and get this over with."

"What can I do?" I asked, wanting to be of some kind of help.

"You may hunt, if you wish, *senorita*," the Prince told me. "With the *gata*, or with others, if you wish."

I looked at Kiran and gave him a small smile. "I don't think he would want to be slowed down by me."

"You can come with me if you want, darlin'," Kiran said with an easy grin.



Chapter 5 – *Parade de Sangre*

"You don't have to search no more"
Christina Aguilera
"Love For All Seasons"

Billy handed me my things and a few minutes later he, Kiran and myself were headed upstairs to join Raleigh. As soon as he saw us come up, Sebastian's ghoul headed over to talk to us. Billy said he was going to head back to Alexander's and Raleigh shook his hand in thanks.

"I can't thank you two enough for helping to get the evidence," he said sincerely after Billy departed. "Hopefully we can settle this as soon as possible."

"Tristan said I was with you," Kiran told Raleigh. "What's next? Ariel's gonna hang with us."

The other man glanced at me briefly in surprise, then he was all business again. "We need to wait for the word that Sebastian's under wraps," Raleigh told us. "Why don't we head out to meet up with Masters' tail? Be right there when the word comes down it's a go."

Kiran clapped his hand on Raleigh's shoulder, "Man, I love how you think!"

I liked the way Raleigh thought, too. His loyalty to his master was a testament to his character and I found myself wanting to know more about him. "We shouldn't take my car," I told them, trying to be practical. "Duncan will recognize it."

"He'd recognize mine too," Raleigh echoed. "I've got another car we can use."

He led the way outside to where a nondescript black sedan was waiting in the parking lot. The three of us piled inside, Kiran taking shotgun next to Raleigh while I climbed into the backseat. As Raleigh pulled out of the parking lot Kiran asked who was watching Duncan and Raleigh informed him another ghoul was on duty. Anna Montgomery.

I'd heard of Anna. She belonged to one of the Brujah in town, a childe of the Primogen I was almost positive. I'd seen her before and thought that I would recognize her, but I didn't know her.

When we neared the neighborhood where Anna had last reported in from, Raleigh's phone rang. From his end of the conversation I quickly figured out that it was in fact Anna that he was talking to. She'd lost Duncan. When Raleigh finished his conversation I asked where he was when she lost him.

"Not far from here. Keep an eye out for his Jeep," Raleigh replied.

I didn't have to be told twice. I knew that Duncan could be slippery when he wanted to and even knowing he could be just across the street didn't mean that I would be able to detect him, no matter how hard I looked.

Raleigh made another call, this time to Dillan for back up. Apparently Lachlan's ghoul had another detail keeping an eye on Duncan, too, but it didn't take long to learn that they

have lost their prey as well. They told Raleigh that they were hoping to pick up the trail any moment.

Down a side street, Kiran pointed to a car that he recognized as one that belonged to one of my brother's people. It was the same vehicle that he'd seen one that Jesus' cronies pass the money off to that had alerted them to Los Hermanos' involvement in the first place.

"How many groups of your people are in the area?" Kiran asked. "Would it be a good idea to have one of them tail that car just in case?"

"Dillan has three teams currently in the area, with four or five more on the way," Raleigh told us as his fingers were dialing again. He soon had diverted one of those groups to cover the car as we continued our search.

About ten minutes later Kiran spotted Duncan's jeep, but there was no sign of the man. He told Raleigh to pull over as he rolled his window down and started sniffing.

"I can't track him this way," he told us, reaching for the door handle. "I'm gonna shift and see what I can pick up."

Kiran got out of the car, quickly removing his jacket and tossing it and his shoes into the backseat. I'd never been around any werecreatures before Kiran so I had no point of reference for what would happen when he mentioned 'shifting'. He took a deep breath, then closed his eyes and grew larger. His features remained pretty much the same, though it was hard to make them out in the darkness. What I really noticed were the spots that appeared on the fine layer of hair that now covered him. He was very catlike now, with pointed ears and whiskers.

He sniffed the air again, then nodded silently as he turned to look into the car at Raleigh. "I got him," he said, his voice lower and rougher than normal. "Follow me."

"Don't forget we can't attack just yet," Raleigh told him. "Still haven't gotten the word yet."

Kiran nodded in understanding. "We'll follow for now. This way." With that he took off.

Raleigh waited until I slipped into the front seat then we followed. A few of blocks away Kiran veered off to a run down house where a few, very dim lights illuminated the interior on the ground floor. Raleigh stopped the car about a half a block away and we watched as Kiran's large form moved up the front walk.

Raleigh and I couldn't see anything inside the house from where we were parked so we had to wait for Kiran to return. He was back in less than a minute to tell us that Duncan's scent went right to the front door and that there were no other trails leading out any other exits.

"Can you call to see if we can move?" Kiran asked Raleigh.

"They'll call when we can move. We'll just watch, for now." He eyed Kiran with a telling glance. "Unless he tries to get away again."

Kiran nodded in understanding then asked if I wanted to go with him. I nodded quickly, making sure I had my cell phone and my gun before getting out of the car. I went with Kiran in one direction to hunker down in the shadows of the tall hedge that surrounded the yard, while Raleigh found another vantage point to watch the house.

About twenty minutes later, Kiran's phone vibrated in his pocket and he pulled it out, then handed it to me because his fingers were too large to operate it. It was a text from Raleigh that simply read, 'It's a go'. I typed back to ask Raleigh if he was ready to go in.

The return text said, "In three minutes, you and Ariel go in back, I'll go in front."

I showed the screen to Kiran, who read then nodded. I put the phone back in his pocket and we waited the appointed time, then quietly headed toward the back of the house. I had my gun in my hand as I followed Kiran's hulking form and I prayed that I'd be able to hold my own and be useful to the cat/man.

The door was unlocked and we were able to creep inside without making any noise, which surprised me given Kiran's size. The man was incredibly light on his feet. We made

our way through the quiet house and I was glad that we'd had to wait before going in because it had given my eyes the chance to adjust to the dark.

There wasn't much light inside the house, but I could hear the sound of voices from what might be a family room to the left of where we stood. We edged closer and found a large doorway down a short hall that led into the room where light was streaming out. Kiran motioned for me to move toward it and I nodded.

We moved together, Kiran keeping me close to the wall to act as a buffer if we were surprised. The voices were muffled so I couldn't really hear what they were saying just yet, but I was able to ease around the doorjamb enough to see inside the room.

Duncan was sitting in a chair by a fireplace, holding a glass of what looked like blood. Sitting on a couch to his right was a woman I didn't recognize. She was tall, with dark hair and light eyes, and looked to be in her mid thirties.

I wondered who the woman was and I put a hand on Kiran's arm to hold him back a moment so we could listen in on their conversation.

"You're not worried about the blood hunt for Ramone?" the woman said in a low sultry voice.

"They'll destroy him as soon as they find him," Duncan replied, his voice deep and almost amused. "Of course, they'll have to find him first."

"You must be confident that you've hidden him well," she chuckled.

"I haven't hidden him, my dear," he told her. "Ramone left the city earlier this evening. I honestly have no idea where he's gone, though I suggested Europe. It is much easier for a man of his... proclivities to get what he... needs."

I didn't think the woman was a vampire, but I could be wrong, and decided to treat her as if she were until I found out different. "You don't expect me to believe that, do you?" she asked.

"Why not?" he countered, lifting his glass to take a drink. "It is, after all, the truth."

Kiran and I exchanged looks that asked if the other knew who the woman was and we both shook our heads.

As we listened I tried to get a better lay of the room. There was a fireplace on the opposite side of the room from the doorway where Kiran and I were listening, with two smaller windows on either side of it. Duncan was facing toward our right and the woman on a couch had her back to us. Down the hall was another door into the room and I saw movement in the shadows, then realized that Raleigh was hiding low, against the wall on the other side of that doorway. He looked toward us and I knew he saw us when he nodded once.

From the corner of my eye I caught Kiran nod in return, then he was shifting again. To put it plainly, he got freaking huge. His form grew to over nine feet tall and his face took on more cat features. He had to bend over to fit in the hallway and his muscle mass looked as if it had tripled in size. His teeth were sharp and at the end of each finger there was a claw that was at least an inch long.

Before I realized what was happening, Kiran was in motion, bounding across the room to grab Duncan by the throat, his claws sinking into the man's neck. I didn't think, just followed Kiran into the room and watched as the strength of his blow struck the vampire like a brick wall. The sharpness of his claws cut through flesh and bone, and in the blink of an eye I watched as Duncan's head fell to the ground, rolling toward the fireplace, his features forever frozen in surprise.

The woman on the couch screamed as blood from Duncan's now headless body flew in her direction, spraying all over her as she scrambled to her feet. I aimed my gun at her and before I could say anything I heard Raleigh call out from my right. "Do not move, ma'am! Stay where you are!"

I kept my gun pointed toward the woman and glanced at Raleigh to find that he was now entering the room, his weapon trained on the woman as well. There was no reason for both of us to keep an eye on her, so I let my gaze sweep the room for other possible

attackers as Raleigh came to stand in front of the woman. She was still screaming and backing herself into a corner of the room, her eyes transfixed on Kiran.

Kiran reverted back to his human form and Raleigh yelled for the woman to shut up. She quieted, but she didn't make a move to come out of the corner she'd backed herself into and she didn't take her horror filled eyes off Kiran.

"Should I call Tristan?" I asked Raleigh, who had lowered his gun and was now moving toward me.

I glanced at Kiran and saw that his hands were covered in spattered blood. He bent over to wipe them clean on Duncan's shirt and jacket, then dropped to one knee and started searching the body.

Raleigh and I watched him a long moment as he pulled a set of keys, a wallet, jewelry, a pair of guns and a very large knife from Duncan's prone form and lined everything up on the floor next to it.

"Go ahead," Raleigh told me. "Thank you." He then moved over to Kiran to examine what the other man had found while I pulled out my phone.

Mateo answered the phone, telling me that his brother was busy with his child. His words made me worry about Sebastian, but I made myself focus. Sebastian had to be alright now. We saw to that.

I told Mateo that Duncan was dead and that there had been a woman found with him. I gave Mateo the address so a clean up team could be dispatched and he told me that the woman was to be brought back to The Iron for questioning.

* ~ * ~ *

We spent the next few hours searching the house, then supervising the clean up once the team arrived. When we were on our way back to The Iron to report in I found out about Kiran's discoveries. Apparently the knife he'd found on Duncan contained some kind of spirit, one that seemed to want blood and was eager for death. Then while he was in the basement he'd found an entire room filled with spirits of people that had died horrible deaths there.

Raleigh had called in a local mage, Glenn Johnson, who had come over and helped to release the spirits so that they could cross over. All this went on while I was searching other parts of the house.

We concluded that the woman, Anna Lucia Arden, lived there and at first I thought that she was some kind of criminal mastermind. In an upstairs room I found a huge wardrobe and an insane amount of jewelry, including many rings in varying sizes. Then I found a box in a closet that contained an assortment of wallets: men's, women's, all ages. The dates on the driver's licenses went back roughly twenty-five years.

After hearing about what Kiran found I decided that the wallets and the jewelry had probably belonged to all the people who'd died. It was all so sad. I wondered what her association was to Duncan. I doubted it was anything good. Another mystery was the fact that Anna appeared to be in her thirties and if there were disappearances that went back twenty-five years how could she be responsible? These were questions I was sure Tristan and his people would pull out of her in the end.



Chapter 6 – Sebastian's Release

"For a friend, for a love
to keep me safe and warm
I turn to you."

Christina Aguilera
"I Turn to You"

When we returned to The Iron we were told that Sebastian and Joan had known the moment Duncan had died. That's why Tristan had been busy when I'd called right after. The blood bond had been broken.

My heart broke for Sebastian. For both of them actually. I'd never been bonded to anyone myself, but from what I understood it could be a painful experience when a bond was broken. I asked if they are all right.

"They will be, given time," Tristan assured me. "It may take a bit more time for Joan to adjust. She knows the truth now, of who sired her."

"The truth, my Prince?" I asked, not knowing what he was talking about.

"The truth," he repeated. "Sebastian is her sire in truth."

I frowned in disbelief. "Why wouldn't he just ask to embrace her? That doesn't sound like him." It was against our laws to make a vampire without the approval of the Prince of the city. The Sebastian I knew would never have done something like that. It had to have been Duncan's influence.

Before this revelation, it had been believed that a renegade had embraced Joan, a provocation because of what she was. Joan's real name was Charisma Therin and in her old life she'd been the Slayer, chosen to rid the world of beasts from Hell, including Kindred. I could see that taking a Slayer out of the picture would help to ensure the safety of our kind in the city, but if that had been Sebastian's aim he should have worked something out with Tristan first.

"Duncan felt the Slayer had to be taken out of the equation," Tristan explained. "I'm sure he knew I would not have given permission for anyone to embrace her, not even my own child."

"And he pressured Sebastian to go along because of the bond," I said. I recognized that it was hard for me to think any ill thought of him, but I didn't care.

"It is the only reason Sebastian would do such a thing," Tristan agreed. "Joan is very angry at the moment. It will take time for her to forgive him. I'm afraid she will have to remain in the cells for a few nights."

"I could go down and talk to her... if you wish," I offered. Maybe I could see Sebastian as well. I wanted to make sure that he was really okay.

Tristan thought for a moment, then nodded. "Yes, I think that would be a good idea. Perhaps you would be so kind as to do me another favor as well."

"Of course," I said.

"Check on Sebastian. He should be calm enough to release."

I nodded quickly. "Yes, my Prince."

Tristan handed me a solitary key and I bowed quickly then headed downstairs, trying not to move too quickly and show my enthusiasm.

I caught Raleigh's eye and smiled at him on the way. He met my eyes for only a moment, long enough for me to see his worry, before he lowered his gaze again. I feared that he worried Sebastian would be angry with him and I knew if I had a chance I would try to smooth things over between them if I could. Not that Sebastian had a reason to be inclined to care about my opinion, but Raleigh had proven his loyalty to his master and didn't deserve any repercussions for that.

Traversing the stairs to The Pens was another reminder of all those who'd been brought here and hadn't come out alive again. At least Sebastian was being released. I wondered where my brother was. Did he still live? Or had he been sentenced for his involvement with Jesus Ramone?

A ghoul met me and directed me to where Sebastian was being held. As I approached his cell my steps slowed. In this part of The Pens, three of the walls were solid stone and several feet thick. I didn't hear anything from inside, but further down the hall I could hear someone pacing. Probably Joan.

I took a few more steps, craning my neck to see into the cell until I saw Sebastian. He was sitting on the cot against the far wall, looking down at his clasped hands. His hair was wet and it looked like the clothes he was wearing weren't his.

I stopped so he could see me, but remained back from the bars. "S-Sebastian?" I said quietly to get his attention.

He looked up, surprised. Something crossed his face I didn't understand and he glanced around the room before looking back at me as he stood. "Ariel," he said carefully.

"Are you okay?" I asked, taking a step forward. "Tristan sent me down. To check on you."

He smiled sadly. "I don't know about 'okay', but I'm still alive. That's something."

"It is," I told him, looking around his cell. "Tristan sent me to let you out."

Sebastian was clearly surprised by the idea of being released and I had to quickly slide my eyes from him before I was grinning like an idiot.

I saw that there were a few damp spots on the floor and I wanted to wonder why, but didn't let myself. There was no telling what Sebastian had done once he'd learn of Duncan's deceit. Had they hosed him down in order to calm him?

I smiled at him softly, holding up the key so that he could see it. "You don't seem happy to get sprung?" I teased him.

"No, I'm... I'm just surprised. I don't - I thought..." he shook his head and looked away, toward Joan's cell.

"Tristan understands the circumstances," I told him. "I don't believe he holds you responsible for Joan."

He smiled wryly. "He should. I do. God knows she does."

"It was Duncan," I said adamantly. "I will never believe that you would do something like that on your own. Joan will get over it." I watched as his eyes closed and his head lowered and I wanted to touch him so badly, but I knew that I didn't have the right to.

His entire body clenched like he had to hold himself ridged to maintain control. "I stole her life," he said softly. "There is no getting over that."

"You've given her a gift," I told him. "Just like Tristan gave it to you and Vanessa gave it to me." I grabbed onto the bars of the cell and watched him, my eyes imploring. "At the end of the day she's still doing the work she'd done before. Only now she can do it better and she won't end up old and broken in the last days of her life."

He ran a hand over his mouth and after a moment shook his head. "She deserved a choice."

My tone softened. "She did. But what's done is done and you have to pick up the pieces."

Ever since I'd met him I'd thought of Sebastian as some kind of God figure. He'd swept into the city and took control for his sire. It was because of his work on Tristan's behalf that Nashville was a good place for our kind again. I realized that I'd put him on a pedestal, thinking that he could do no wrong. Now I was starting to see him as a man. Not the hero I'd been worshipping from afar. He was a man and he'd made choices. Some good and some bad. He wasn't a God.

Inside his cell Sebastian was looking down again and he sighed. "Yes. I've much to atone for. I was a fool."

"Just don't forget that there are those that care about you Sebastian," I begged him. He couldn't know how much I cared so I quickly added, "Raleigh especially. He was instrumental in making this right."

"Raleigh," he echoed softly, turning away from me. "I was ten times a fool."

"You didn't realize," I said. I desperately wanted to go in that cell, but I couldn't let myself get that close to him. "It's the past. You need to move forward."

"Yes, yes, I supposed I do." He turned around and looked at me, a thorough look that seemed to take in every bit of me, body and soul. "And now I can."

I licked my lips slowly; nervous by how he was looking at me and deep need I had for his attention. I cleared my throat. "A-are... are you ready to leave?"

He looked away briefly and took a deep breath before letting it out slowly. "Tristan is in the audience chamber?" he guessed.

"Yes. He and the others."

He stiffened slightly, but nodded and began walking toward the door of the cell. "I should not keep them waiting."

I nodded and stepped back to slip the key in the lock. Once the door was unlocked I pulled the door open and held it, watching him carefully.

Sebastian approached the door, but hesitated before stepping through, as if he were gathering his courage. Once he was standing next to me in the hallway, he paused to look down at me and I looked up to meet his gaze.

"Thank you, Ariel," he said gently.

"You're welcome," I told him sincerely. *I would do anything for you*, I added silently, breaking eye contact with him so he couldn't read the words in my gaze. "You shouldn't keep the others waiting. I've taken up a great deal of your time already."

He hesitated, looking over my shoulder and down the hall toward Joan's cell.

"Go," I urged him quietly. "I'm going to see her."

Sebastian looked at me again and I could have sworn there was regret in his expression. "Thank you," he said again before he turned to go.

I watched him leave, wishing more than anything that I had the right to stop him. To hold him and tell him that everything would be okay. That wasn't meant to be, though, and once he was out of sight, I shut the door and moved toward Joan's cell.

I could hear her pacing. When she saw me she stopped, looking at me hopefully. "Come to let me out too?" she asked.

I smiled at her and shook my head. "Sorry. I wouldn't mind talking with you, though, if you'd like." I understood that she would be upset by the situation so I started humming, hoping that I might give her some calm with my music.

"I guess not everyone gets a get out of jail free card," she said bitterly before she started pacing again.

"It's not that," I told her. "Tristan thinks you need some time to think."

"Yes, because I really need to focus on the fact that a man I trusted turned me into this, not to mention helped turn me into a slave for Duncan."

Yeah, she was pretty bitter.

"I know you're angry," I said calmly, keeping my voice low and even to soothe her. "And you probably have every right. I don't know what it's like to be in your shoes, Joan, so I'm not going to tell you that everything is going to work out fine." I came closer to the bars, but made sure to keep out of arms reach in case she tried something.

"But let me remind you of something," I continued. "Sebastian was every bit as bound as you were and for a longer time, from what I understand. The guilt that he puts on himself is a much heavier burden than what you could ever push on him. So ask yourself this... do you spend the rest of forever holding grudges and becoming a bitter mess? Or do you pick up the pieces and get to know the real man? Not the one who was influenced by a sociopath?"

"You're right," she growled. "You have no idea what they did to me."

"I don't," I admitted. "But I'm willing to listen if you need someone. You're a good person, Joan. I know we don't know each other well, but I can tell that much." I continued to hum a soothing melody when I wasn't speaking, but so far it didn't seem to be helping.

She gave me a look that spoke volumes. She wasn't ready to talk and I understood that when I agreed to see her. I didn't want to push her. The people she'd trusted the most had betrayed her and the fact that Sebastian had also been in thrall didn't make it right. She needed time and I wanted her to know that I was here for her when she was ready.

I moved toward the brick wall near her cell that marked the foundation of the building and sat down, putting my back against the wall so I could still see her. I started to quietly sing the soothing song I'd been humming. The effects weren't immediate, but gradually her pacing slowed. By the end of the song, she was leaning against the wall just out of arms reach of the bars, relatively close to me. Her head was back against the wall and her eyes were closed.

I stayed with Joan over an hour. We exchanged no other words, but I sang to her all the soothing songs I knew. As the minutes stretched and my voice rose and fell I thought about Sebastian. He and Joan were free of Duncan's influence now. Free to make their own choices. I would always love Sebastian, I knew there was no escaping that and I also knew that I wasn't good enough for him. Would he find someone else in the city now? Could I watch him with another woman?

Then there was Raleigh. His loyalty was a rare trait and I'd liked that I'd gotten the chance to finally get to know him. Something told me that there were some big changes coming. I just didn't know how they would effect me.

The songs I was singing for Joan almost made *me* feel better.