

Chapter Fourteen

Whisper in the Shadows

Her whole body was tense. The cement floor beneath her was freezing, the chill seeping through the coat and the robe. Her eyes were dry now, almost painfully so. She had kept the tears at bay so she could better see and be prepared for him. Deep inside, she knew this cat and mouse game was only delaying her suffering. She knew she couldn't hide from him for long. And yet there was an overwhelming desire to keep hidden for as long as possible; survival instincts forced her to stay unseen and not surrender.

She was scared though. More so than she had ever been because now she knew what the consequences would be for her disobedience. She knew Aimeric now. What he was like, what he was capable of. His only reason for walking among the living was to torture and make miserable the lives around him.

Her heart betrayed her; he could probably already hear it pulsing at twice—or even three times—its normal speed. She imagined him lurking in the darkness, sniffing the ground and the trees like a bloodthirsty animal. Searching for her. Hunting.

As if on Aimeric's side and desiring to bring terror, the wind came up and played with the nearby tree branches, acting as a puppet master with the trees as its dolls. It pulled invisible strings and guided the trees to claw the side of the garage with their bony fingers. They scratched at the one small window on the eastern wall. The wind howled over the creaky roof.

She had been lucky to find this shelter. After fleeing the ferry, she came across the old Victorian house with the garage behind it. She had first tried knocking on the door of the house but no one was home and the windows and doors were all locked. She then ran around to the garage and found it was out-of-date with an old door that slid open and was secured with a padlock. Out of breath and fingers trembling, she had searched all around the building, looking under bricks and plant pots for a spare key. She then found it under a large rock in the garden on the side of the garage, relief spreading through her for only a second. She had run inside the building and shut the door, scrambling to the northwestern corner and huddling against the wall with her knees brought up to her chest and her chin resting on them.

Now she sat in mostly darkness. Only a small bit of light came through the window from the moon that wasn't yet blanketed by the oncoming storm.

She clenched her teeth to keep them from chattering. It took all the willpower she had to steady her breaths that fought to come out in terrified gasps.

At the sound of the wind, her heart beat even faster. Her fingers clutched at the flannel over her knees. The old man's coat had helped keep some of the cold off her but she still trembled. Part of that was fear though.

The large door was closed but it had been impossible for her to lock it from the inside. She kept her eyes on it, wide and searching. It seemed to open a little and she held her breath. It must have just been the wind because it didn't move any more.

Something out of the corner of her eye caught her attention. She moved her head half an inch to the left, to the window, and had to cover her mouth to stop a loud gasp from escaping. She ducked back and pressed herself against the wall, hoping the heavy shelf hanging above would help to conceal her.

Outside stood a silhouette. She could tell by the long hair and the way he carried himself with arrogance that it was Aimeric. He had his back to her, sniffing the air. If he turned around and peered in through the window he would surely see her.

There was an attic in the garage and the ladder leading up to it was only a few feet from her.

Should she risk it? What would be the greater risk? To stay there and hope he wouldn't turn around or risk the thirty seconds it would take to get out of his sight before he could turn?

Coming to a quick decision, she scrambled on her hands and knees to the ladder. She was quiet, not breathing, and careful not to hit any of the tools or other accessories housed by the garage.

The ladder was nailed to the wall about three feet from the floor and had only seven steps. Without glancing over her shoulder, Aralyn climbed the ladder with silent haste. The entry to the attic was only a hole cut in the floor. It was difficult, but she managed to pull herself up and slide the rest of the way onto the second floor. It smelled of damp wood and mold. The air was also thick with the scent of distant rain. It was even darker up here than the lower level. As her eyes adjusted, she could barely make out the shapes of falling apart boxes and old paint cans beneath a slanting ceiling.

She scooted away from the square cutout in the floor and then rose to stand. She tiptoed across the floor, walking backwards so she could keep watch on the entrance.

It was only a second later that she felt the air grow colder on the left side of her face. Cold fingers touched her hair and then ran down her cheek. She jumped, feeling the tiny hairs on the back of her neck rise. Her heart accelerated once more. She started to run, but he grabbed her from behind, pulling her hard against his cold chest.

"Did you really think you could escape?" He twisted her around to face him. His fingers dug into her arms.

"Let me go, please," she cried, hiding her face in her shoulder. Then, without thinking and realizing it wouldn't do any good, she raised her head and yelled, "Help!"

"You can cry as loudly as you want but no one will hear you, and even if they do, they cannot stop me," Aimeric said.

She looked at him for only a second, seeing the rage that consumed him. His lips were stretched tight across his teeth, the tips of his small fangs barely protruding. His eyes were colder than usual, some dark, twisted humor shining in them. When he continued speaking, she turned her head again, not wanting to look at his frightening face.

"Do you remember your promise? We both agreed it was unbreakable and yet here you are, trying to escape me."

"You lied to me; you said you would let him go," she whispered.

"I did let that poor excuse of a vampire go."

"You killed him."

"Is death not a release?" he asked, amused.

She considered that a moment and then bravely looked at him again. "Then kill me too; release me."

"Your mortal body will die, but it will not be a release. You will belong to me for eternity." He moved a strand of her eye that had fallen in her eyes. "You will soon forget he even existed, I will make sure of that."

She shook her head. "I won't forget. He'll be with me in everything I do. Even when you take me to your bed, he'll be with me there." She grimaced, waiting for him to slap her,

threaten her, whatever else. She knew she had crossed the line, but what else could he do to her?

He was gentle though. Even more terrifying. His shoulders quivered as he chuckled to himself. He touched her cheek again and she flinched.

“Is that so?” he said.

She didn’t say anything.

“You know, Aralyn, I was going to hunt you most of the night, just to see you tremble, just to smell the fear in your blood. But when I saw you climbing up that ladder, my dead heart seemed to palpitate and I couldn’t bear the thought of being away from you any longer.” He smiled down at her: a cold, sadistic grin. “That’s because you are mine. And whether you know it or not, you desire only me. Now come.”

He picked her up and the world seemed to spin around her for several long minutes. She closed her eyes until she felt they had stopped. When she opened them again, she saw they were back in the basement, standing at the top of the stairs. The familiar stench gagged her after having been out in the fresh air for so long. She covered her nose and mouth as Aimeric set her down. He then pulled her along, down the steps. His fingers painfully gripped her arm. They felt like thick, dull needles prodding her flesh. His anger was obvious in the quick steps he was taking. She stumbled a few times and would have fallen if he hadn’t have been holding her so tightly.

Eyes welling with tears, Aralyn held her breath. Her insides twisted at the sight of the familiar torture chamber as Aimeric kicked open the door. A flash of Virgil’s sufferings. The girl with spikes through her hands, and the boy with the bloodied torso. The restrained breath forced its way through her lips. She cried out one desperate, “please,” but he ignored her. Her wrist felt like it was going to shatter under his grip.

He flung her forward into the wall and she felt his hard chest against her back, keeping her in place while his hands secured her own in the shackles on the wall. These were tight, no slack; she wasn’t able to move. Cold stone pressed against her left cheek, which was wet with fresh tears. She stared at the prisoners.

“I have something special planned this time.” His voice was hard and sarcastic; nothing like it had been only a few minutes before. “Just for you, darling. I don’t want you getting confused anymore; you must always remember that you belong to me.”

Aralyn didn’t even try and respond or plea for her suffering to be spared. It wouldn’t make a difference anyway and, to be honest, she wanted him to torture her. She wanted him to make her bleed so that hopefully he would go too far and accidentally kill her.

She heard him walk to the fireplace on the other side of the room and then the sound of him arranging several logs in the pit. After a few moments she heard the crackling of a fire. Then a clanging metal sound. He was soon behind her again and he picked up a pair of large scissors from the surgeon’s table. She grit her teeth and closed her eyes, waiting for the pain that would be inflicted.

He cut away the coat, starting at the wrist of the sleeves and going up around her shoulders until the material fell away from her back. The scissors then sliced through the robe, cutting away a large hole in the back, exposing her flesh to the chilly, dank air.

What had he planned for her this time? Maybe she would get the whip. She took a deep breath to prepare for the sting.

He ran the tips of his fingers over the small of her back, sending shivers all over her body. Fear. She kept her face pressed against the wall, taking a small bit of comfort in the feel of it against her cheek.

Several minutes passed with him touching her thoughtfully. It was mostly quiet; the only thing she heard was the crackle of the growing fire and a few stifled coughs from the prisoners.

“Aralyn, my love, don’t consider this punishment,” Aimeric finally said softly. He left her hanging on that sentence as he went back to the fireplace. Something briefly scraped across the floor as he picked it up. A few seconds later his lips were at her ear and then his cool breath hissed against her cheek, “Think of it as art.”

The pain was searing.

White hot.

Blinding.

He held it there for several long seconds. Darkness clouded her eyes. Her fingernails dug into her palm, drawing blood. But that pain wasn’t felt. All she was aware of was the red hot iron on the small of her back where Aimeric’s fingers had been moments before. At first she gasped and then she screamed through clenched teeth. Her legs went weak. She moved her head to the side, scraping her forehead on the wall after seeming to lose control of her nerves for as long as the rod was pressed against her flesh. The shackles around her wrists were all that kept her from sinking to the floor.

Finally, Aimeric let the iron shaft drop to the floor and she could breathe for just a second. Quick gasps. Sweat clung to her face. The air hit the burn but it didn’t soothe the pain. It added a stabbing sting to it. Short breaths. Deep breaths hurt.

She wanted to curse at him. Scream. But by now she knew better.

His fingers curled into her hair and he laid his head against the side of her face.

“You shouldn’t have done it, Aralyn. But now, now I hope you understand just how important it is that you never give yourself to anyone but me. Promise me.”

In between her shallow gasps and tears she whispered, “I promise.” Tears stung her eyes.

He kissed her cheek in approval and then left her there in the basement. The door clanged shut. His retreating footsteps made her cry harder. With him gone, she didn’t have to hold back her pain. Always, she was afraid of making him angrier by crying too loudly.

When she scraped her head it was because she had barely been able to turn it the other way. She now faced the fireplace and could feel the prisoners’ eyes on her but they dared not speak. Aimeric had probably given them a warning glare as he left.

The pain didn’t leave but after several minutes she got used to it and was able to breathe normally again. Exhausted from the hurt and crying and lack of sleep, she started to close her heavy eyes.

But the door opened.

Her muscles tightened, tense with panic, and her eyes flew open again. She couldn’t see anything but the wall next to her but she knew by the tension in the room—swelling from the prison cells—that Aimeric had returned.

He came up beside her, carrying a jar of burn ointment.

“It has lidocaine so it will ease some of the discomfort you’re probably feeling.”

Had she not known his temper she would have scoffed at what he said; she was feeling more than discomfort. Jumping slightly when he started to rub the balm over the burn, she closed her eyes again, clenching her teeth at the pain. As his fingers circled the cool gel over her skin she gained enough courage to ask, “Why me?”

“I claimed you a long time ago. After I first saw you, and smelled your blood in that car.”

“It was you that night,” she whispered, only just now realizing it. She had been too confused before to comprehend that the reason Aimeric’s eyes bothered her so much was because they were the ones she had seen a year ago in the car with her.

He nodded. “I watched you every night after that; the way you walked, the way you combed your hair. The way you cried for your mother and sister. I followed you when you would leave your house after getting into an argument with your father. I knew from that first night that I wanted you; you had eyes the color I had never seen on a human before, your flesh soft, pale as snow. You were human and yet the most beautiful creature I had ever laid eyes on. Your beauty is unnatural and shouldn’t be wasted in humanity. And your blood...” He leaned over and finished by breathing in the scent that flowed beneath the flesh of her neck before continuing. “However, your intelligence is lacking but hopefully my branding you will take care of that.”

She cringed as he secured large gauze over the wound, using medical tape to hold it in place. The pain only subsided a little.

“Why did you wait so long to bring me here? It’s been a year,” she asked quietly.

“I was finished playing with you,” he said in a simple voice as he moved her to a new pair of shackles. These ones gave her room to sit on the floor and move around.

“You require further punishment.” He went back to his normal tone. “Perhaps after spending a few days down here you’ll learn to appreciate the bed I have to offer you upstairs.” He tossed an old brown blanket at her feet and left.

The chains weighed heavy on her arms so she sank to the floor, moving slowly so as not to further irritate her latest pain. It was very uncomfortable. She couldn’t lean against the wall without being in an awkward position and aggravating the burn. But leaning forward wouldn’t permit her to sleep. Finally, she was able to get semi-comfortable by leaning sideways against the wall and resting her head on the stone.

The fire was already starting to die out, losing grasp on its low abundance of fuel. Rats scurried above in the rafters, kicking small pieces of dust down to the floor on their hunt for food. The prisoners who weren’t already asleep were settling down, still not attempting to make eye contact with Aralyn.

A brush of wind attacked the ground level window on the western wall, startling her momentarily. The burn throbbed; jumping pain that came in short intervals. Aimeric hadn’t given her anything other than the blanket to wrap around her shoulders to shelter her from the dank cold. She still had the robe on, but it gave little warmth considering it had the hole in the back and the material was thin. The concrete floor was cold and the farthest one could be from comfort but she would rather be down here than upstairs, forced to lie with her enemy. To her, in this world of darkness, blood, and torture, the basement was Heaven

Wiping her eyes first, forgetting the blood crusting on her palms in the shape of half moons from her fingernails, she tightened the blanket and let sleep overtake her.

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