

FROM THE
AMARANTHINE UNIVERSE

Tales from the Island
Six Short Stories
By Joleene Naylor



Author's Note: This is a collection of six short stories that cover the space between *Heart of the Raven* and *Children of Shadows* in the *Amaranthine* vampire series. They may or may not make sense to those who have not read the *Amaranthine* series, and may contain spoilers.

<http://www.joleenenaylor.com>

Joleene@joleenenaylor.com

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You never know what you'll find in the shadows.....



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Tales from the Island: A Prequel to Children of Shadows



This is a collection of six short stories that fit between the Amaranthine novels *Heart of the Raven* and *Children of Shadows*.

They are meant as a supplement to the series may or may not make sense if you have not read the accompanying novels. They may also contain spoilers.

After five novels of bloodshed and terror, Katelina finally gets her island vacation, but it's not all she expected. How can it be when her companions are vampires? Get ready for book 6 of the Amaranthine series, *Children of Shadows*, with these tasty bites. What happens on a vampire vacation, stays on a vampire vacation.

Includes:

Micah: Micah is ready for some fun in the sand, but he's not so excited about the ocean. The dark waters stir memories from his past that he'd rather forget.

Torina: Torina is ready for a vacation in the sand. But can she find peace on the tropical island, or will worries catch up to her under the swaying palms?

Oren: Haunted by ghosts of the past, Oren's vacation is more torture than pleasure. But perhaps it's time he let some of his old agonies go and tried to shape the life he has left.

Sadihra: Sadihra wants to return to the elite Scharfrichter force, but Wolfe has one condition. Can she accept it, or will their renewed relationship fall apart?

Loren: Loren seems to be the only one who understands what beach vacation means, or so he thinks until he and Micah stumble on Torina and a surprise friend.

Verchiel: It's just a lazy day for Verchiel in the hot tub. Though his efforts at making friends go awry, he refuses to be deterred, much to the chagrin of his fellow vacationers.

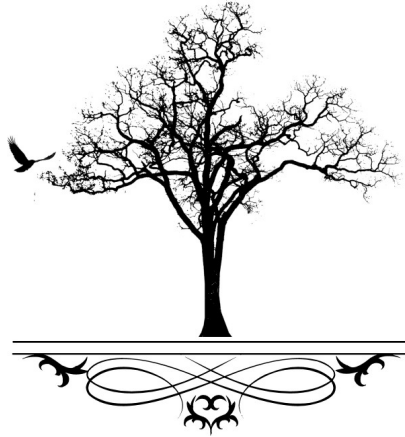
BONUS:

Chapter One of *Children of Shadows*



Thanks to Michele Taylor for her keen eye.





Day 1: Micah

Micah got off the boat and paused to light a cigarette. He inhaled the deep, familiar flavor and let his eyes roam the scene before him. A dark sky spread overhead, dotted with a million pinpoints of light and punctuated with a large yellow moon. He stood on a wooden dock that stretched up to land lush with greenery; palm trees and lots of tropical flowers he didn't know the names of. To the left a sandy beach bent around the curve of the island, and in the center of the whole damn rock stood two giant jungle huts on steroids. Made of gray driftwood and roofed in grass, it looked like the kind of place that native girls in grass skirts and no tops would hang out.

"Oh yeah. I'm gonna like it here."

He hefted his bag up his shoulder and followed the parade down the dock. He wasn't excited about some of the company on this trip but he could put up with it for a free tropical island. Even if half of them were Executioners. The damn vampire police were no better than the human pigs; always overstepping bounds and waving authority around like some kind of flag. Some day the sons of bitches would all get what was coming to them.

He spat at the thought and caught up to Loren. The curly haired teen stood on the edge of a wooden sidewalk, staring around with excited brown eyes. Just like him to get over excited, like he was six instead of sixteen. Though, since the kid was a vampire, he was even older than that.

He clapped the boy on the back with enough force to jolt him. "You gonna stand there all night or what?"

"Man, can you believe it?" Loren whispered. "That's a real palm tree!"

Micah snickered. "You gonna kiss it or can we get on with this?"

"Yeah, sorry." The teen gave the tree one last look and then trudged towards the houses. "I can't believe Wolfe arranged all this."

"Don't think he had much choice." Micah blew a cloud of smoke and then clamped the cigarette firmly between his teeth. "It's the only way Jorick would agree to go back to Germany with him. He's a fucking asshole, but you gotta admit Jorick could take Wolfe in a heartbeat, and the Schar-friggin-what's-it knows that."

Loren nodded enthusiastically. "Oh yeah, Jorick could kick his ass easy, even if he is one of Munich's Executioners." He frowned. "What's with the funny name, anyway?"

"What? The Scar-friggy-what's-it? It's German you muppet. They're from fucking Germany. Of course they don't use English." He cuffed the kid's ear affectionately. "Damn. You shoulda stayed in school longer."

"It wasn't my fault. It's kinda hard to go to school when you burn up in the sun."

“Yeah, yeah, excuses, excuses.”

The first house had large sliding doors that were open and about a million windows. A pair of short, tawny skinned humans stood in front of it, hands clasped before them, and welcoming smiles on their faces. The woman was a little plump, but hell, there wasn't nothin' wrong with some meat.

He gave her a lascivious fanged grin; the grin of a vampire on the make. She didn't recoil, but she didn't look receptive either, only polite.

“Welcome to the island,” she said when everyone was gathered. “My name is Maria. This is the first house and that is the second,” she motioned to the other island mansion, as if it needed explanation. “There are six bedrooms in each, and you may choose your own. There are many windows, but you need not worry. Before the sun rises they are all covered.” She motioned to a large shed, as if that held some kind of answer. “The kitchen is stocked for both vampires and humans.” Her eyes lingered on the pair of mortals they'd dragged with them. “Should you need anything please ask myself or Henry.” She motioned to her male companion, who gave a half bow. The way the sounds rolled off her tongue seemed to say that those weren't their real names, but what did it matter?

“There are others on the island who can also assist you,” she added. “Now, you'd like to get settled in?”

“Yes, thank you,” Wolfe said. He took his girlfriend's arm; a short, plump blonde who was also one of the damned German police, and led her towards the first house.

That was enough for Micah. “Come on, pipsqueak. I ain't sleepin' with no Guild dogs if I don't have to.” He strode towards the creatively named second house, Loren on his heels.

The inside was as themed as the out. Large airy rooms were decorated with seashells, drift wood and lots of white curtains and throw pillows. He picked the room at the end of the hall, complete with a double bed draped with mosquito netting and a balcony that looked out towards a rocky cove.

He threw his bag on the bench and rubbed his hands together. What had that chick said about a kitchen?

The kitchen and dining room were in the first house, which seemed more than a little inconvenient. Worse, he wasn't the only one who'd thought of food. Verchiel, an Executioner with bright red, crayon colored hair, leaned against the counter, chatting up the tiny kitchen assistant. The woman giggled and her tanned cheeks flushed pink at something the vampire had said.

“Ah fuck, what are you doin' in here?” Micah asked.

Verchiel held up a glass of crimson liquid: blood. “Just having a drink.”

“Yeah, well take your drink somewhere else, huh?”

Verchiel seemed to suddenly disappear and reappear next to Micah. He wasn't sure if the Executioner's speed was supposed to be an intimidation tactic, but he wasn't intimidated. With one good punch he could send the wiry twerp through the wall.

“Look here,” Verchiel said cheerfully. “You don't like me and I... well, what do you say we call a truce, hmmm? We're on vacation and what's the point in spending it fighting? There'll be plenty of that after we leave.”

“You're damn right I don't like you or any of your fuckin' friends.” Micah stopped to consider the Executioner's offer. As much as he'd like to ram his head in the garbage disposal and watch the brains fly, he wouldn't mind a real vacation. Ever since he'd gotten mixed up in Oren's war he'd had to keep one eye forward and one behind. It would be nice to enjoy the sand and the surf and all the other tropical crap without having to watch his back. “Fine. A truce it is. But you break it and I break you.”

Verchiel held up his hand. “Oh, I have no intention of it. I have more entertaining activities planned.”

“Yeah, I bet.”

As if on cue, Jorick and his human Katelina walked through the door. Jorick was tall, dark and brooding, the kind of vampire you could put in a movie and sell as a smoldering romantic lead; hero complex and all. His human, on the other hand, was pretty much average. She had long blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail and wore a pair of shorts and a tank top. Her figure wasn't bad, but she was no super

model. Under different circumstances Micah'd do her, but she wasn't worth fighting Jorick over, not when there was plenty of other p-

"Hello, Kately!" Verchiel trilled. "Looking for a snack?"

"That's not my name," she said and turned towards the refrigerator. The tiny island server hurried to intercept her.

"She says that a lot," Micah thought. Personally he preferred to call her Lunch, mainly because it pissed off her vampire on a leash.

Verchiel downed the last of his glass. "You know, you might as well give it up. That's what I'm always going to call you. It's so much better than Katelina. Don't you think so, Jorick?"

Jorick growled low in his throat and gave the redhead a dark, dangerous look. Micah could read the warning in his eyes and it was a bloody one. Maybe they'd get some entertainment before the trip was through.

Loren chatted amiably with the dark vampire, and Micah got them each a glass of blood. Then he led the teen through the glass doors and out onto a patio overlooking the ocean. He dropped into a rattan chair and lit a cigarette. The smoke spiraled upwards to disappear in the star strewn night, like a thread of silver. It made him think of another night before he'd turned into this. He could almost smell the bike shop; tires, oil, sawdust. Lo Dog, his so-called friend, stood in the doorway, using every inch of his six foot seven bulk to be intimidating. "You take that money, Micah?"

"Fuck no. I wouldn't steal shit off you. I'm not the one who fuckin' needs cash."

Dog took a menacing step closer. "What the fuck's that 'sposed to mean?"

"Why don't you ask Trick about that?"

Lo Dog's face twisted into something almost inhuman and he was suddenly in Micah's face. "What the fuck you sayin'?"

Micah stared right back, his chin lifted to meet a pair of angry flashing eyes. "You know what the fuck I mean. Kid's got a serious habit and that shit ain't cheap."

Dog growled low in his throat and pushed his face into Micah's. "Watch what the fuck you say about my son, boy."

"Sorry, but I ain't scared a' you, Dog." As if to prove it he pulled out a cigarette and lit it inches from the furious man's nose. "You can go throw your weight around somewhere else."

He didn't see the punch until it sent him flying into the wall. He'd lost the scuffle and his job, but most of all, his friend. As he stormed off on his bike he told himself that Dog was an asshole and not worth it, but later, when he'd sat on the roadside, watching the cigarette smoke curl up into the sky-

Loren's voice jerked Micah back from his reverie. "Jorick sure hates Verchiel."

"Huh?" It took him a moment to focus on the present. "Oh. Yeah, you can't blame him."

"Why?"

Micah choked on the smoke. "Boy, you seriously need an education. How about the way he's always smoozing all over Lunch?"

"Nah, he's not. He's just being friendly, like an older brother or something."

Micah snorted. "Maybe if this was Flowers in the Attic."

"No. I think everyone takes him too seriously. I think he's just teasing her and Jorick."

"If that's true he ought to know better. That jack ass can't take a joke." Micah had his own opinion of what the redhead was up to, and it gelled with Jorick's. The thought that he agreed with him was enough to make him spit. "I wouldn't put it past that clown to try and turn her."

"Verchiel?" Loren looked shocked. "Why would he do that?"

"Just to be a pain. But I'll give him, someone ought to do it soon. It's not like she's goin' anywhere, and leavin' her human is a pain in the ass."

"Jorick will get around to it," Loren said disinterestedly.

"Maybe. But he'll just let her stay a pussy princess. Truth is she's got some potential. She's a blood thirsty little bitch under all those layers of nicey-nice fluff crap. She just needs a real master to train her right."

Loren grinned. "Like who? You?"

He hadn't considered it before, but it seemed as good an idea as any. "Yeah, why not? When I got done with her she'd be a real vampire, none of this damsel in distress bullshit Jorick likes."

Loren broke into laughter. "Jorick would kill you!"

"Fuck, I ain't scared of him. I'm just not sure I could put up with her whining while I whipped her into shape."

Loren rolled his eyes and then looked hopefully to the palm trees. "Are we going to the beach?"

"Yeah, let me finish my snack, huh? Not like there's much worth rushin' down there for."

"Torina bought a bikini!"

Micah sat up straight. "When?"

"When we were waiting for the boat and everyone went shopping. She bought the tiniest bikini they had." His eyes glowed as he doubtless imagined the curvaceous, busty vampiress wearing what amounted to a handkerchief.

"Kid, you had me at bikini." Micah downed the last of his glass and threw his cigarette over the patio railing. "What are we waiting for?"

Micah tugged at his baggy swim trunks and frowned. "These look fuckin' gay."

"They look fine," Loren said, though he was focused on the surf.

"Bullshit. And there's nowhere to put my fuckin' smokes."

Loren grabbed the pack from his hand and tossed it on a nearby beach chair. "They'll be fine there."

"Whoa! What are you doin'? You don't mess with the smokes. We're on an island. Not like there's a 7-11 around here to get more if I run out."

"You've got two cartons. That's enough." Loren skipped to the nearest palm tree and looked up it. "Think this would be hard to climb?"

"How the hell should I know? You're the monkey."

Loren grinned and took a running start. In a few quick grabs he disappeared among the palm fronds.

"There any coconuts up there?"

"Nah. Just bugs." The teen made a sound like spitting something out and Micah snickered. The boy dropped back to the sand and landed in a crouch. "I bet there's coconuts somewhere."

"You knock yourself out looking for them. I'm gonna have a cigarette."

Loren climbed to his feet and grabbed Micah's arm. "You can smoke later, you chimney. Let's go for a swim!"

Micah dug his heels into the sand. "Hey, hey. I thought we were here to check out Torina's tits. No one said anything about swimming."

"She's not here yet, so might as well do something while we wait. The ocean's not that much different than a swimming pool. That's where I learned to swim at. Ashton took me out when I was a kid and dropped me off a rock. Mom was pissed."

"Yeah, yeah, I bet." Micah batted the teen's hand away. "You go ahead, but I ain't up for no swimming."

Loren gave an exasperated sigh and turned his full attention on his friend. "Why not?" And then comprehension dawned in his dark eyes. "You don't know how to swim!"

"I never fucking said that."

"But it's true!" The kid gave a whoop of delight. "You don't know how to swim! Ha!" Micah growled low and Loren sobered. "I could teach you. It's easy."

"No thanks. I heard how you and your brother learned. Think I'll stick to the beach." He retreated towards the beach chair.

"It's not like you can drown!"

"All the same, I'm stayin' right here." He sat down on the chair and planted his feet firmly in the sand. "You go for it."

Loren argued a little bit and then surrendered. “Whatever, grandpa!” Then he skittered to the water, laughing.

“Grandpa, huh?” Micah muttered. “I ought to show that pipsqueak...” He trailed off and leaned back. His eyes strayed to the stars again and he thought of another night and the cold, sucking water. It wasn’t like him to give up, but he’d just had enough. How much shit should one man put up with? Better to go out in a blaze of glory – or a splash as the case was. He revved the bike and tore down the pier. The railing at the end broke against him like matchsticks that shattered his ribs and he splashed into the swirling night water. There was a moment of struggling panic, and then the drugs and booze pumping through his veins overwhelmed even that. He stared up at those stars, choking on salt water, and then he’d gone under and there was only the black and the cold.

Until he woke up on the beach, choking and screaming, that son of a bitch bent over him. The fangs were like something from a cartoon and the blood was the wrong color in the moonlight. Micah swung and his fist connected with the guy’s face, but he didn’t fight back, just threw back his head and laughed like a costumed lunatic.

“You were strong, but now you’re stronger. If you still want to die wait for the sunrise.”

Then he stood and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Micah pulled himself up on his elbows and coughed out a mouthful of sea water. He had a string of obscenities ready, but they were strangled off in a groan of anguish. Fire burned through his veins and he rolled into a ball of agony. When the pain receded the guy was gone and he was alone, lying on the beach, soaked to the skin with a mouth full of blood.

“*The fangs comin’ in,*” he thought to himself and pushed the memories away. He’d never seen that vampire again. He still didn’t know who he was, or why he’d done it; why had he pulled him out of the water? Why had he changed him? What was the fuckin’ point?

“*Maybe he was just bored - or maybe he had a fucking screw loose.*” That seemed more likely.

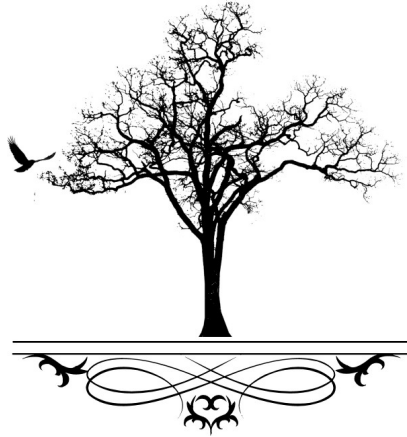
Loren crashed out of the water carrying something. He waved to Micah, then spied Jorick and his human farther down the beach and hurried towards them with his prize.

There was more of that six year old behavior. Ah well, let him believe there was still magic in the world. Better than knowing the truth. The world was nothing but sucking darkness and friends who were only friends when it was convenient, and one day it all got to be too much and you just let the blackness suck you down.

“And then you come up kicking’ and screamin’ and bust some guy in the face.”

With a chortle, Micah lit another cigarette.





Day 2: Torina

Torina slipped into the emerald green bikini and studied the effect in the full length mirror. She frowned and pulled at the top, as if she could physically force her ample breasts to sit higher. She'd spent more than two hundred years trying to get them to cooperate and they still refused.

She turned this way and that, nodding in approval at some things and frowning at others. A voice from long ago came back to her, "If men find you pleasing you will never need to worry. Happy is the woman who looks to these things."

The words sounded wise, but her mother had been wrong. No matter how pleasing you were there was always something to worry about. Hunger, thirst, loneliness.

"My stupid brother."

As if conjured from her thoughts she saw him through the window. He took a seat on the brightly lit patio and gazed towards the ocean. A short woman wrapped in a kimono hurried after him and took a chair. She held yards of blue fabric in her lap and, as Torina watched, she turned to her embroidery.

Things stirred in the back of Torina's memory. Quilting parties. Embroidering a handkerchief for her father. The sounds of giggling women and tiny stitches in neat rows. The memories were disjointed and hazy, too old to be important, and she brushed them aside.

She headed downstairs and outside. The tropical night was warm. A sea breeze caressed her skin and rustled the palm trees. A pair of grass roofed mansions sat in the center of the island, home to the group of vacationers, and she left her own for the one with a kitchen. Why they'd only put amenities in one house had not been explained, but it was an inconvenience.

She paused suddenly at the sliding glass doors and scented something in the wind that would taste better than canned blood. Even if they put an umbrella in it.

Torina turned towards the trees and plunged into the foliage. She wound her way up the dark hillside until she came to a clearing at the top. The mortal stood, hands clasped behind his back and eyes on the sky above, unaware of her presence. He wasn't particularly attractive, though he wasn't ugly. He had dark hair, cropped close, and ginger skin. His shoulders were broad and spoke of manual labor, and she imagined his chest would be muscled, but it wasn't his body she was interested in, only his blood. She could smell it coursing through his veins, singing for her taste.

And why shouldn't she sample him? He was one of the humans that peppered the island with the sole purpose of making the vampires' stay comfortable.

She took a purposefully noisy step. He spun around, eyes wide. Fright rose and fell in them, masked quickly under servitude.

He bowed. "Madam, how may I be of service?"

She walked towards him slowly, swaying her hips in a calculated rhythm. "There's no need to be so formal. It's just you and me here."

He looked up. His face flushed and he dropped his eyes again. "What can I do for you?" She stopped before him and lifted his chin with her finger. "I can think of lots of things, can't you?"

He gulped, his eyes locked in her deep emerald gaze. Her smile was slow, seductive, satisfied, like a spider with a particularly tasty bug.

That's what he is.

Torina wiped her mouth and left him lying dazed in the grass, staring at the stars. She picked her way down the hill and swerved towards the beach, pausing at the edge of the trees. Several of her vacation companions were already there, including Micah, a bald specimen with a goatee and tribal tattoo down one side of his face. He lounged on a beach chair, dressed in a pair of patterned swim trunks and a white tank top that hugged his well-muscled chest. A cigarette hung from his lips, and he motioned to someone she couldn't see.

She gave her breasts a final, fruitless lift and plunged out into the open, making a point to draw Micah's attention. The bald vampire gave a low, crude whistle and she struck a pose for him. He swung up from his beach chair and headed towards her, hands extended. Torina lithely danced away a step. "Did I give you permission to touch?"

"Why the fuck else would you run around in that?" he asked.

"Because it's a bathing suit." She rolled her eyes. "Unless you think it's better to swim without it?"

Micah leaned back on his heels and gave her a long once over, then he jerked his thumb towards the others. "If it was one of those jack asses I'd say no, but you're the exception to the rule, baby cakes."

"Baby cakes?" The name was so ridiculous even she couldn't keep a straight face and she broke into laughter. "You need to put more thought into your terms of endearment."

Before he could defend himself, she patted him on the back and strode towards the water. Though it was night, the ocean was warm, and she slid into it until the water was over her breasts. She lunged forward and swam with long, smooth strokes.

Swimming was something she'd learned in her new life; her immortal life. Her mother would never have allowed her daughter to do something as undignified as that. Ladies were ladies, and swimming was a sport for boys and badly raised girls. Torina imagined her mother watching television; young women wearing little more than underwear, sweating, swimming, running, doing the same things that men did. It was just as well that they'd received immortality after her mother's death. The woman would never have been able to handle the modern world.

When she got tired of swimming she made her way back to the shore. Loren, a teen vampire with dark curly hair and large brown eyes had joined his bald friend. The boy was dressed in a pair of loud Hawaiian style swim trunks and nothing else. His pale, naked torso only reminded everyone how young he'd been when he was turned; doubtless no more than sixteen. He always left Torina torn. In her day sixteen was a respectable age for marriage, even children, but modern conventions frowned on that.

In my day. As if I'm an old spinster.

The thought was infuriating, and the boy caught the irritation that flashed in her eyes. "Hey, Torina! What's wrong?"

She quickly composed her features; lips slightly pouted and turned up at the edges, brows lifted just enough to make her eyelids look thicker, and chin tucked just a little to draw attention to them. "What could possibly be wrong in a place like this?" she purred and touched his arm.

Loren flushed and broke into a grin. "That-that's true. I thought maybe Micah did something stupid."

The bald vampire swept to his feet. "What the fuck, pipsqueak?"

Loren shrugged. "Well, you kinda have a history of saying stupid stuff."

"That's an understatement."

Torina turned towards the sound of the new voice to find Jorick walking towards them. Tall, and broad-shouldered, Jorick had long, sweeping black hair and eyes the color of night. He moved with grace,

like a classical dancer, but his aura of raw power removed any doubts about his masculinity. Torina could think of several words to describe him: beautiful, egotistical, frustrating, self-centered, and delicious.

She wondered if his human companion found him as confusing.

“Fuck you, Executioner dog.” Micah spat and purposefully turned his back on the dark vampire.

“No, fuck you,” a voice said at Jorick’s side, and Torina suddenly noticed Katelina, the human in question. She wasn’t ugly, but she wasn’t a great beauty. Vampirism and some correctly applied makeup could work wonders, and, as she had done before, Torina squinted at her and tried to imagine what she could turn her into with a little work. The first thing would be her hair. It was a nice shade of blonde, but Katelina left it to hang long and limp in a plain ponytail. It would look better with some waves in it, and a few curls framing her face, especially around her eyes. Blue like a summer sky, they were Katelina’s best feature, but she failed to play them up. She desperately needed help.

Not that I have time to mess with such trivial things.

Torina turned her most winning smile on the dark vampire. “Jorick. How lovely to see you. What are your plans for this stunning evening.” She brushed her fingers over his shoulder and down his arm, to let her hand rest just above his elbow.

He cocked an eyebrow. “Katelina wants to ‘hang out’ on the beach.”

“And you don’t want to?” Katelina scowled darkly and Torina didn’t need to focus on the woman’s thoughts to know what she was irritated about. She gave Jorick’s arm a soft squeeze. “I suppose you’d rather stay holed up with...” she leaned closer and paused to let the innuendo fill itself in, then amended it to, “one of your books?”

“He didn’t bring any,” Katelina said firmly. “And we’re going for a walk.”

“A walk sounds lovely!” Torina let the vampire go to hook her arm through his. “I’d love to join you.”

“What do you wanna go with that jackass for?” Micah flexed his arms. “I’m a lot more fun than he is.”

She gave a silvery laugh and patted his bulging bicep. “I’m sure you are, but absence makes the heart grow fonder.” She tugged Jorick forward before he could untangle himself from her. “Have you seen the cove?”

The three followed the curve of the beach, Jorick in the middle, one arm locked in Torina’s and his other grasped just as tightly by Katelina. The blonde woman shot dirty looks Torina’s way, but she only squeezed Jorick’s arm tighter and giggled a little louder. If it was a competition the human would lose.

No, she wouldn’t, and you know it.

Torina ignored the nagging voice and released Jorick to catch up a sea shell. She twisted it this way and that, batting her eyes and making pointless observations that would have earned her any number of comments from lesser men. Jorick only grunted his lack of enthusiasm and tried to calm his girlfriend with a halfhearted smile and a squeeze of her hand, as if he was saying, “We just need to tolerate Torina for a little while.”

Like she was a spoiled child.

Her initial reaction was to repeat one of Micah’s favorite phrases and go where she was wanted, but she controlled the flush of anger and decided that he’d have to pry her loose. She might not have as many years on the clock, but she was his equal, and if he couldn’t treat her that way then he deserved to be irritated. He was going to see just what a spoiled child could be like.

She turned suddenly and thrust the shell at him. “You’ll carry that for me, won’t you? I would, but I don’t have any pockets.” She held out her arms, then motioned to her scanty swim suit.

Jorick’s eyes followed for a second and then snapped away. “You should have brought a bag.”

She gave him her best pout. “Please? It’s just one tiny little shell. I’d be ever so grateful.” She clasped his hand and held it to her breast.

Katelina made a dark, angry noise, and Jorick pulled away quickly and grabbed the seashell. “Fine. Just one.”

Torina batted her eyes. “See? I knew you could be reasonable!”

A moment later she had another shell, and then another. Jorick jammed them in his pockets with increasing annoyance, and the grooves in Katelina's forehead got deeper and deeper. Torina wondered which of them would pop first. She almost hoped it was the woman. That would make Jorick's evening so much worse.

Jorick stuffed the eighth shell in his pocket. "Where's your brother?"

"On the patio with that dreadful little Japanese thing." She snatched up a small stone. "Look at this!"

"No more!" Jorick barked. "Maybe you should spend some time with him."

"Who? Oren?" Her laughter was real. "Why? I see him all the time. Besides, I can't stand his new puppy. She hasn't left his side since we got here yesterday. I wouldn't be surprised to find out she sleeps on the floor next to his bed."

"She's not a dog!" Katelina cried. "She's a person!"

Torina snorted. "She's only a human."

"If she's only a human then you shouldn't let her bother you," Jorick said. Katelina gaped and he opened his mouth, then closed it again, as if there was no way to retract the statement.

"I didn't say she bothered me, only that I can't stand her. I am allowed an opinion, you know." She narrowed her eyes and held Jorick's gaze. Her next comment was silent, and packed with all the irritation she could force into it, "*Unless spoiled children aren't allowed opinions.*"

Jorick rolled his eyes in exasperation, but his reply was as silent as hers. "*If you don't want to be treated as a child, don't act like it. You're only tagging along to irritate Katelina.*"

"*Think what you want.*" She turned away from him and spoke loudly, "This has been an enjoyable little excursion, but the pair of you are far too boring for my taste. If you decide you'd like to have some real fun, Jorick, come see me. Otherwise, enjoy your walk."

She sashayed away, swinging her hips. She could hear the torrent of Katelina's aggravation, "- can't stand her! She's always pawing all over you. Why don't you do something about it?"

A smile curved Torina's lips as she imagined what the rest of Jorick's evening was going to be like.

And he thought I wanted to irritate Katelina!

She wasn't in the mood for Micah and Loren's eager-to-please puppy dog routine, so she turned from the path and plunged into the vegetation. The lush jungle sang with insect song, and she slipped beneath the trees and let her mind wander. She remembered when Jorick had moved into the plantation near theirs. He'd inherited it from his uncle, or so he'd claimed. She wondered now if he'd just taken it when the former occupant died, or if Jorick had killed him for it. It was hard to tell with him.

He'd been dashing with his dark, neat ponytail and his grim expression. Though he didn't get the darkness in his eyes until after he'd married *her*. Velnya was from Massachusetts. Jorick had met her while he was there on Guild business, and the first time Torina saw her had been at the wedding. One look at those large, hopeful, needy eyes and she'd known it was a mistake. The vampiress was a weak, silly little thing whose head was full of fluff and pleas for protection. That Jorick had expected his new life to end in anything other than blood was ridiculous. Had he really thought such a frail, clingy creature would defend herself?

Though Jorick had never told her, she'd seen glimpses of the end in his mind, and heard it from her brother. After the wedding Jorick and Velnya moved to the wilds of the Nebraska territory, and there Velnya was accused of witchcraft by the local humans. Jorick was away on Guild business, and when he'd returned he found that she'd been dragged from the house and burned alive. Though he claimed she didn't fight back because she didn't want to hurt the humans, Torina had never believed it. Could any woman really be that stupid? No doubt she'd expected Jorick to come riding in at the last second and save her, and only when she realized he wouldn't had she done anything, but it was too little too late.

Torina smiled as she imagined Katelina in her place. The woman was far from perfect, but Torina had to admit that she had guts. She wouldn't let a mob drag her out of the house and lash her to a tree. She'd bash their skulls in, and then she'd set *them* on fire. Jorick would come home to a pile of burnt humans and a very angry wife.

Katelina had certainly changed since Torina had first seen her. They were at war with Claudius and Jorick had shown up at their den with the trembling, terrified woman. He tucked her away in an upstairs bedroom, and Torina pounced on him before he even made it to the stairs.

“Well, hello. Long time no see.”

He unwound her arms from his neck and moved back. “Hello, Torina. I assume you’re well?”

She narrowed her eyes at his stiff words. “I could be better.” She moved closer and traced her finger over his chest. “And so could you. How about a few minutes alone?”

He grabbed her hand and dropped it quickly. “I’m sorry, but not now.” He started past her then stopped and looked back. “You met Katelina?”

He phrased it as a question, but it was really a statement. *You met Katelina, and I’m with her now.*

“I saw her, if that’s what you mean. But I thought she was Patrick’s? The two of you didn’t seem especially friendly.”

His desire was on his face and Torina realized that all of Oren’s ridiculous comments were true. Jorick really had fallen in love with a human. “You’re not serious?”

“About what?” Jorick ran a hand through his hair and sighed. “Yes. Maybe. I don’t know. I just know that I won’t let anyone harm her.”

“And how does your spending the night with me harm *her*?” But Torina already guessed the answer. “You think she returns your feelings? I was under the impression that she didn’t know what we were.”

The words weighed heavily in Jorick’s eyes. “She doesn’t, and I don’t know what she’ll say when she finds out.”

“Then don’t tell her. Let her go and-”

He cut her offer off. “It’s too late for that. Claudius’ men know she was with me, and I’m sure they know who she is. I won’t let another one die for me.”

“Velnya never died for you.” His angry glare was a warning, and she changed tactics. “What are you going to do with her? Turn her?”

“Maybe.” He seemed to deflate and leaned back against the wall. “I don’t know what I’m doing, Torina. Velnya was already a vampire, but Katelina... Oren’s said again and again what a mistake it is, and he’s right. You saw her. She’s terrified. She’s lived a modern life and I’ve dragged her from the sun into the shadows and shown her nothing but blood. How can she do anything except hate me? And when she finds out the truth about what happened to Patrick, about how he got involved, about why he was killed, she’ll hate me even more.”

“And so what if she hates you?”

She would never forget the look in Jorick’s eyes, half terror, half agony. “I don’t want her to.”
No, of course you don’t.

Torina abandoned both the past and the trees and crossed to the patio. Oren sat in the chair and Etsuko was still working on her embroidery. The perfect picture of domestic harmony.

“I see you’re enjoying the island,” Torina called sarcastically as she approached. “Do you plan to hide out the whole time?”

“If I can manage it,” Oren answered stiffly.

“You’re starting to sound like Jorick.”

Oren sucked his teeth and shook his head. “You mean like Jorick used to be. You notice he’s carousing on the beach.”

“I’d hardly call it carousing.” Torina climbed over the railing and dropped into an empty chair. Etsuko still didn’t look up and Torina made a haughty noise in her throat.

“He’s different, since he got the human,” Oren said.

“Yes, he’s finally quit pining over Velnya, and it’s just as well. She wasn’t really worth centuries of misery, was she?”

“She was his wife!” Oren snapped.

“So? Just because he was stupid enough to marry her doesn’t mean he has to spend eternity worshipping her.” She held back a sigh; she knew the dark territory the conversation was headed for and the vampiress it would be about. “You and Jesslynn were together for two hundred years. Isn’t that long enough for you to be subjugated to her will? Let it go, brother.”

Oren bristled. “Her ashes are barely cooled!”

“It’s been months, Oren. Or are you planning to follow Jorick’s example and mourn for centuries? I’ll give you a hint, his mourning was never complete. It was more show and self-punishment than real grief. Otherwise he’d have never visited me.”

Oren coughed and looked away. “I don’t want to listen to this.”

“Oh, please. As if you don’t know.” She picked at her perfect nails. “You also know it was nothing serious. I have no interest in trying to lay claim to him or rekindle any supposed flame. My point is that even he didn’t take his self-imposed grief seriously, so why should anyone else?”

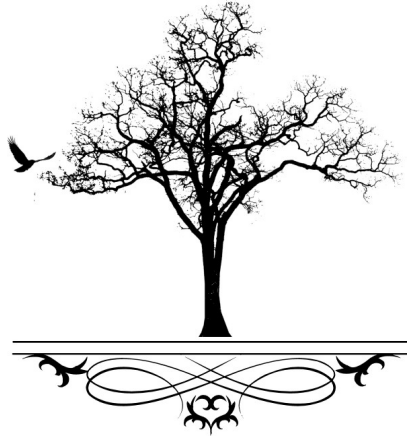
Much to Torina’s surprise, Oren’s eyes slid to the Japanese woman and then back. “I’m fine with my grief.”

Torina was tired of the endless circles, so she stood and stretched. “It makes for a cold bedfellow, but do what you want. I’m going to look for that idiotic Executioner. At least he’s good for a laugh.”

Oren didn’t reply, and she hopped over the railing and headed back to the beach. This was supposed to be a vacation and she refused to waste a moment of it on any of her countless worries.

Not even for her stupid brother.





Day 3: Oren

Oren took a seat at the breakfast table and poured himself a glass of crimson liquid. The blood was warm and salty, but it wasn't the same as drinking from a living creature. There was no link to the source, no connection to their memories or feelings. It was sanitized and impersonal, and he preferred it that way.

Etsuko sat primly next to him, wearing a pink flowered kimono. Her long black hair was pulled up into an ornate bun and her almond eyes were politely cast down, though he knew she was watching him. She was always watching. Since they'd come across her in Japan, Etsuko had haunted his steps and now she seemed to think she belonged to him.

He downed half the glass and set it back on the table. Etsuko snatched it up and refilled it. Her eyes met his for a moment and then dropped again. He was sure she meant well, but as far as he was concerned the human could just go back to Japan where she belonged.

A vampire with long black hair took a seat across from them and flashed Oren an abnormally cheerful smile. It was Jorick, his master, the one who'd made him into a vampire. "Good morning."

Next to him, like a blonde shadow, was the ever present human annoyance Katelina. "Good evening," she corrected as someone deposited a plate of food in front of her.

"It's our morning, little one," Jorick said and took a long drink from his glass. "You'll get used to it one of these days." Jorick turned to Oren with a wink. "What do you have planned for this lovely evening?" He motioned to the large glass windows where palm trees swayed against the backdrop of a tropical night.

"Nothing." Oren took another drink and hesitated before he set the glass down. As he'd thought, Etsuko quickly refilled it and bobbed her head in a pseudo bow.

"You should eat your breakfast," Katelina said and motioned to the woman's plate of food. "Before it gets cold."

Etsuko didn't look up. "I can eat when Oren-sama has finished."

Oren shifted uncomfortably and muttered, "It's fine. Eat your breakfast."

"If Oren-sama wishes it." Etsuko bobbed her head again.

Katelina opened her mouth, and Jorick cut her off, "Leave it, little one."

Though Katelina snapped her mouth shut and glared silently, Oren could see what she wanted to say in her mind, "*Etsuko isn't his servant.*"

I never said she was.

They finished their breakfast and Jorick and Katelina left for the beach. Oren stared at the empty decanter and tried to think of something to do. The sand and surf didn't interest him. He'd taken a walk the first night and then spent two hours getting the sand out of his boots and socks. He imagined Etsuko's

kimono had been an even bigger hassle, but he had no intention of asking. He was just grateful she hadn't tried to share his room with him.

With nothing concrete in mind, he wandered towards the patio. Etsuko followed, three steps behind, and stopped only when he did. He made an aggravated noise and stared out at the night. The scene was straight from a postcard, but the tropical splendor was already wearisome. What good were lush surroundings when there was nothing to do except sit and think?

A thousand demons whispered to him from the shadows and he struggled with whether to embrace them or push them away. He could see the faces of his murdered wife, Jesslynn, and his children, calling to him for blood, vengeance, and remorse. It had only been months since the Executioners had killed them, one by one. It was too short a time for him to abandon his grief.

Wasn't it?

He took a chair and Etsuko mumbled something about needlework. He waved his reply and she hurried off while he stared into the dark distance. Jorick had advised him to move on and let the past go, but it was hard advice to take. When Jorick's wife had been murdered he'd mourned. And mourned. And mourned. Until even Jesslynn had commented.

"She was such a useless creature. To think he's still pining for her is ridiculous."

"He loved her," Oren had told her, though even he wasn't sure that Jorick's devotion had been that deep and passionate.

"Not that much. He blames himself for her death and so continues this forced regime of mourning from a sense of guilt and duty. He'd be better to let it go and come back to the world. Mourning for eternity is useless."

Oren wondered if Jesslynn would feel the same way now that she was the murdered wife. Would she say that he should let it go? He found that one's opinions changed when they were personally involved.

It wasn't just Jesslynn he missed, but his children. Alexander had been trapped in the body of a five year old child, with a brain that was slowly maturing. Though still childlike until the end, Oren had often seen flashes of adult thoughts in the boy's deep eyes. How much longer would it have been before things got complicated? Before those adult thoughts turned to adult feelings, trapped in the body of a child?

And Tristan. He was only a few months old when Jesslynn turned him. As had happened to so many of their children, Tristan had been sickly with only weeks left to live. Oren understood changing him to save him, but to trap him as a perpetual infant? He'd never learned to speak, or to walk, and there had been moments, when Oren gazed into his tiny face, that he wasn't even sure there was a soul inside, rather just an empty doll that went through the motions.

He shivered at the thought and pushed it away. Despite that he had loved him; he'd loved them both. Alexander with his quick smile, cheerful nature, and accepting personality and Tristen with... with...

Etsuko returned, yards of dark blue cloth in her hands. She bowed quickly. "I hope I have not disturbed Oren-sama."

"No," he murmured, and looked back to the sea. He listened as her chair scraped across the patio and then the silence fell as she bent to her work. He had no idea what she was making. A blanket of some kind? He wasn't sure he cared, but his guilty thoughts hurt, and so he turned back to her. "What is that?"

"This?" she asked and lifted the cloth. "When I am finished I thought to make a kimono for Oren-sama, if it would please him?"

Oren blinked in surprise, lost for words, and tugged on his button up shirt. He couldn't imagine wearing what looked like a blue bathrobe, especially not in front of anyone. But there was a hopefulness in her eyes that made him think of Alexander and his horrible homemade Christmas presents. Year after year the child had presented him with things glued together, usually with homemade paste. One would think after several decades he'd have improved.

"That would be... nice," Oren said finally.

She smiled and bobbed her head. “Thank you, Oren-sama. I am glad you approve.” Then she turned back to her work.

Oren watched her for a moment. The needle and thread slipped easily in and out of the cloth, leaving behind perfect, practiced stitches. Though he found her old fashioned behavior bizarre in many instances, he had to admit it was refreshing to see a woman who could still do needlework.

If only she preferred to make shirts instead.

Jesslynn had quit making his shirts long ago, and he missed that. He’d mentioned it once or twice and she’d told him he could purchase them now. “They have mail order,” she’d said and shoved a catalog at him.

But mail order wasn’t the same.

Oren’s attention drifted to the distant sea again. Even his vampire eyes could only see so far before the world faded into night. He knew his vision was better than a mortal’s, though he didn’t know how much better. He’d been human so long ago that he’d forgotten.

Though he tried to ignore her, he was conscious of Etsuko sitting behind him and to his left. He could hear the slow steady pace of her heartbeat and, if he concentrated, the soft patter of her thoughts rattling along in Japanese. It was just as well he couldn’t understand the musical words. He doubted he wanted to know what she was thinking.

The breeze blew past them and he smelled her mortal blood. It wasn’t an unappetizing odor, but neither did it drive him into a frenzy of bloodlust. The smell of blood had only done that in the beginning, and then only when he was hungry. Living with human servants had soon cured him of that. Jesslynn had frowned on killing them.

“They’re hard to train!”

He fidgeted as her memory pressed close without the required rush of sorrow. Jorick might think a vacation was a good idea, but he didn’t. It was nothing more than a trap.

He made an unconscious noise of irritation and Etsuko asked, “Please forgive my asking, Oren-sama, but is something wrong?”

“No,” he said tersely. Her heartbeats sounded in the background. One. Two. Three. Then he said, “I don’t see the point of this excursion.”

“To the island? Jorick-sama said that Katelina-san needed a rest.”

“Yes, I know! But a rest from what? From running around the world? From sticking her nose into places it doesn’t belong; into fights she is ill equipped to handle? Jorick could affect the cure easily enough by taking her home and leaving her there.”

“You must pardon my asking, but Oren-sama does not care for Katelina-san?”

“No!” He cleared his throat uncomfortably as the impact of the statement crystalized. “I don’t hate her, of course. She has been useful now and then. She did manage to kill the Executioner, Senya.” He disappeared into an angry memory of the Executioners painted by flickering firelight as they murdered his family. He’d been able to kill one of them later, and Jorick another, but Katelina had killed the last of them. Finally, his family was avenged, though he wasn’t sure whether to be grateful to her, or annoyed that she’d done it instead of him.

A soft noise from Etsuko brought him back, and he tried to pick up the abandoned thread of conversation. “She’s also been a hindrance, though. Jorick is always forced to take considerations for her. Like this.”

Though Etsuko didn’t speak, he felt the need to defend himself. “That’s not to say I don’t understand, to a point. A man must make concessions for his wife. Only, she isn’t his wife, is she? She isn’t even his equal. Do you know, I believe he enjoys keeping her human? I think he gets a – a thrill from her weakness and need for protection, and what could be weaker than a human? If he plans to keep her around then it’s time he turned her, whether she likes it or not. That’s his excuse – that he saw in her mind how terrified she is of becoming one of us, and so he won’t do it until she’s ‘ready’. Ready? How many vampires were ready? How many had a choice in the matter? It wasn’t my idea, I can assure you, rather Jesslynn’s.” The name conjured guilt, so he backtracked. “As I was saying, it’s been long enough dragging her around as a human. Jorick needs to do it and be done.”

“Jorick-sama and Katelina-san have been together a long time?”

Oren did a quick calculation that took some of the wind from his sails. “Five months.” He broke off and then rallied. “But Jorick has apparently convinced himself that they will be partners for eternity, so in this case months might as well be years.”

Etsuko nodded, but Oren imagined there was something judgmental in it; something that said he was being unreasonable. As if she didn't deem five months a long enough time to base such a commitment on. “In the past people got married after shorter periods of time and lived respectable lives together for many years.”

But not for eternity.

He floundered and Etsuko said, “I know it is a painful subject, but if Oren-sama does not mind my asking, was your own engagement long?”

“What? Jesslynn? Well, I wouldn't call it long but... I knew her for some time before I courted her.” The conversation approached uncomfortable territory and he steered it back. “Unlike Jorick. He decided he was in love with the human before he'd even spoken to her! Of all the ridiculous... He only did it because he knew it would complicate things.”

Etsuko gave another blank nod, and he rushed to explain, “She was dating a human that was helping us. When the enemy coven targeted her, Jorick volunteered to guard her. Or something like that. He was never supposed to make himself known to her, only keep an eye on things until the humans were no longer useful.” As the words left his mouth he realized how they sounded. “Until the war was over, I mean, because at that point what use would the humans have for us, or us for them? We'd have gone our separate ways and been glad of it. But Jorick had to become involved and it failed spectacularly, just like everything else.”

He fell into a disgruntled silence and tried for the thousandth time not to blame Jorick and Katelina for the Executioners' appearance at his house. There was no proof that they'd been followed, in fact there was evidence to the contrary. But the suspicion was still there like a dark seed wanting only a little food to grow. They'd arrived at his house, seeking sanctuary, and only days later the Executioners had come. Jesslynn had trusted the children to *her* – to that human – and look what protection she had offered them! Katelina couldn't save herself, how had Jesslynn expected her to save Alexander and Tristan?

”I am sorry that Oren-sama has faced so many difficulties. It must be hard to have suffered so many setbacks and unjust punishments.”

Oren jolted and turned in his chair to stare at her. In the months since everything had collapsed, no one had bothered to say that. “Well, yes.” He cleared his throat. “It has been... er... difficult, of course. There are... erm... difficulties...”

“I think Oren-sama is very brave,” Etsuko said admiringly. “To have faced such darkness and conquered it takes great strength.”

Conquered? “Um, well, yes...” He couldn't find any intelligent words. If one asked Jorick or the others, conquered would be the last word they'd use. Even he wouldn't say he'd conquered the darkness. Perhaps something more like “been overwhelmed by”.

Etsuko continued, “Add to that the running of Oren-sama's coven, and leading two battles, one against The Guild of the United States. That must have been very challenging.”

He tried to hide his surprise at her comments. No one had noticed how hard it had been. “Well, yes, it was challenging, actually. There was a lot of fighting among themselves. Trying to force everyone to cooperate, even for the briefest of moments, was more of a struggle than a one man war would have been.”

“I am sure that Oren-sama met the challenge bravely. A vampire of his many years will have learned great wisdom.”

Wisdom? He gave a strange little cough and for lack of a better reply managed to say, “Yes, quite.”

Concern crossed her face at his strange reaction. “I hope Oren-sama does not mind my saying so? I do not wish to be impolite or rudely familiar.”

“No, no, of course not. It’s... fine.” He gave another odd cough, as if trying to force intelligent words through the shock. It didn’t help.

“I am glad. I do not wish to be offensive. I know that Maeko-sama would also be upset if she thought that I was being rude.”

Oren seized the change of topic. “Yes. Maeko. Speaking of her, are you sure you wouldn’t rather have stayed in Japan with her?”

“I appreciate Oren-sama’s concern, though I believe that this is where I am fated to be.”

He couldn’t argue with fate, or even imagined fate, so he turned back to the seascape and tried to pretend that she wasn’t still back there. He waited a moment, and then pressed lightly until the pittering-pattering rise and fall of her thoughts echoed in his ears. They trundled along, still in Japanese, and he let them go.

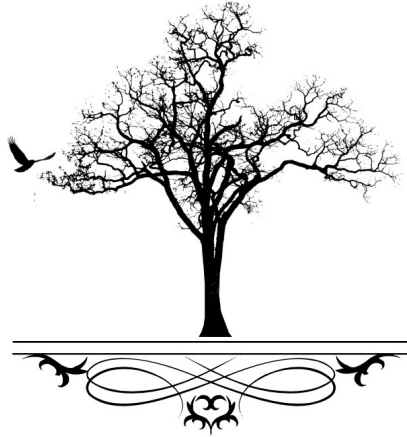
It’s just as well, he reminded himself. Did he really want to know what strange things she thought about?

She was right about one thing, though. Managing all of that – the covens, the alliances, the battles - had been difficult, especially considering the lack of help. After Jesslynn’s death, he’d counted on Jorick to take her place as the real commander and let him remain as the puppet, but Jorick had been too busy with Katelina to be of any real assistance, and then his sister... Just thinking about Torina and her never ending demands was enough to twist a sour expression across his face. She was his sibling, and he would always care for her, but that didn’t mean he should continue to tolerate her princess attitudes. She’d been spoiled for over two hundred years, and though he’d ignored Jesslynn’s demands that he “make Torina behave”, he suddenly felt that someone should at least try. It was time she remembered who had turned her into a vampire, and who led the coven.

“Yes,” he thought. *“It’s time she learned to appreciate her position.”*

And as soon as things got back to normal, she was going to.





Day 4: Sadihra

Sadihra rolled over and smiled at the vampire lying next to her. Wolfe's dark auburn hair was fanned out around his head and his deep gray eyes met hers. She traced her finger over his muscular shoulder and down his arm, leaving a little trail of golden sand. When she'd completed the circuit, he pulled her to him and captured her lips in a deep kiss. She opened her mouth to allow his hot tongue inside, and let him explore the inner recesses of her mouth. His hands moved down her naked back, stopping at the curve of her hips, and her tongue sprang to life, parrying with his, twisting, contorting, entwining.

He broke the kiss and trailed his lips down her chin, over her shoulder and finally to her ear. His breath sent delightful goose bumps shivering over her body and she clutched him tighter and breathed his name like a sigh.

His warm tongue traced the cup of her ear, teasing the tiny ridges, and then he murmured, "Haven't you had enough?"

She pulled back with a laugh to meet his eyes. "You know I can never have enough of you."

"You say that..." He trailed off as doubt shadowed his features, but she quickly kissed it away.

"It's true." Now was not the time to let past mistakes ruin the brightness of their vacation. "But you have already had your fill of me," she added teasingly.

He arched an eyebrow and suddenly pinned her to the sand. She struggled, if only to show she was dominant, but surrendered when his fangs brushed her shoulder. She licked her lips expectantly and tasted the residue of his blood.

"Whoopsie!"

They both jerked up, hands reflexively reaching for weapons that weren't there, to find a red haired vampire dressed in a pair of speedos. It was Verchiel, an American Executioner. Despite his high office, Sadihra hadn't made her mind up about him. This incident did little to help him in her eyes, though he wore an exaggerated look of remorse, hands clutched comically to his mouth.

Sadihra grabbed her shirt from the ground and quickly held it over her naked body. Verchiel batted his eyes innocently. "No need to do that on my account. I think people wear too many clothes."

Wolfe snarled at him in German, and the redhead backed away towards the rolling surf, hands up in surrender. "Sorry, sorry. How was I supposed to know you two were here? You should put some sort of warning up next time. This is a public beach, you know."

Wolfe charged him, one hand ready to strike, and the other holding his swim trunks over his nudity. It would have been funny if Sadihra hadn't been so irritated.

She motioned with her hand and a wave of ocean water reared up and threw itself over Verchiel. Wolfe pulled back in time to avoid getting soaked, and Verchiel held his arms out in surprise. "I suppose I deserved that?" He broke into a wide grin and shook his head like a dog, flinging water everywhere.

Wolfe swore, and backed away as the redhead laughed. "Okay then, I guess you're busy so I'll see you later." And then Verchiel seemed to evaporate; a wind walker who moved so fast she couldn't see all of his movements.

"Idiot," Wolfe muttered and stormed towards his scattered clothes. "He's so annoying even the Höher Rat refused to keep him!"

The mention of the Sodalitas' High Council crushed Sadihra's amusement. As if Wolfe sensed her reaction, he paused and turned back to her. "It will be all right."

"I don't know." She shook the sand from her bathing suit before she pulled it on. "They're going to be angry and I don't blame them. I defied orders."

Wolfe's expression was torn between comforting her and being stern. It was a touchy subject, and she wasn't surprised when he went with the later. "Yes, you did. I was supposed to accompany Jorick and the others, and if I had they would have gone to the United States and wouldn't have woken Samael."

"No, Malick would have. Would that be better?" she snapped.

"The Kugsankal will deal with Malick when they're ready," Wolfe said dismissively. "Perhaps they'd have been ready sooner had they felt he was in danger of controlling Samael?"

"You speak for them now?"

Wolfe finished dressing. "When ordered to." He met her eyes. "If you want to remain a Scharfrichterin so badly, then that's something you need to learn."

She buttoned her shirt over the clingy bathing suit and perched on a nearby rock. "Are you going to stop trying to get me dismissed?" He didn't answer and she repeated the question with more venom.

"Fine! And when you die-" He broke off and looked towards the ocean, as if something in the distance had absorbed all of his attention. "We're immortal, Sadihra, but not invincible. Jilsenna's death should have taught you that, as it did me."

Her chest tightened when he mentioned her sister. She could still see the labyrinth, smell the blood, and hear the screams. In her memory, Jilsenna dodged forward and then her body went stiff as the dark skinned wind walker slammed his fist through her chest. He'd looked up and met Sadihra's eyes, and for a split second she'd seen the promise of her death written in them.

And if Cyprus hadn't dragged her out of there, the promise would have been fulfilled.

"But what good is life if we have to spend it cringing in the shadows, afraid? You say you learned that we're not invincible, but you go out on assignments without a thought. You battle, and you fight. You could be killed as easily as I."

He opened his mouth to argue, then wisely closed it. "Because it's my job, Sadihra. But it doesn't have to be yours."

"We've had this argument. I won't stay home like a good wife while you're in the field. I'm not weak."

"I never said you were," he snapped, exasperated. "Is it so wrong to want to protect you?"

"Yes and no. It isn't wrong to want to look after someone you love, but it is wrong to constantly insist that they can't take care of themselves. Wolfe, if this is going to work, you have to treat me as an equal, not as something weaker that needs your protection. Though I understand that old habits are hard to break, it is a new world now. The antiquated notion of what it means to be a female is just that; antiquated."

"And how long will those attitudes last?" Wolfe asked skeptically. "You would base our relationship on a human social movement still in its infancy?"

"It goes beyond that! You know I'm capable. You know I can hold my own in a battle. I was allowed into the Scharfrichter for a reason. I deserve respect, no matter what social conventions humans or vampires embrace."

"I never said that I don't respect you, Sadihra. Yes, you are capable. Yes, your abilities are well developed, and yes, you can hold your own against most foes. But what happens when you find that one enemy you can't defeat? What do you expect me to do when they bring me your medallion and say -" He choked off and shook his head.

She slid off the rock and moved to stand behind him. She hesitated and then laid a hand on his bare shoulder. "I understand, but you can't hold me back because *you're* afraid. It isn't fair." She paused, then added, "It's selfish."

He spun to face her. "Maybe I am selfish, but I know what it's like to lose someone, and I don't want to do it again."

She held his gray eyes. "Neither do I. Does that mean you should quit the Scharfrichter? I already lost my sister on a mission."

Wolfe growled in his throat and looked away. Sadihra's cheeks flushed with success. Though he might not admit defeat, he'd lost.

"Fine." He looked back to her. "Assuming the Höher Rat doesn't relieve you of duty, then I won't argue with you anymore under one condition. Marry me."

She drew back unconsciously. "Wolfe..."

His expression turned grim. "I know how you feel about it. That it's a trap designed to force women into the home, but you can't win everything. You expect me to concede, then I will, but you have to, too. I believe it's called a compromise."

She ground her teeth, her sense of triumph gone. "When?"

"As soon as we get back to Munich and our schedules allow it. I imagine there will be some follow up to this assignment. I foresee one of us being sent to look into Malick, if not into Samael. Once that is settled we'll have the wedding."

She cringed backwards another step. She recalled her childhood and her own father. An angry drunk who let his wife raise the children and support the family while he administered punishment for imagined infractions. Sadihra could still remember his tirade after all the long years, "You should thank the heavens I married you, whore. How many other men would take you with a bastard child in your belly?" Then her mother would scrape and nod, and give him anything he wanted, as if he was some kind of god who'd saved her from destruction rather than a monster who had thrust her into a life of misery.

Sadihra's hands tightened into fists at her sides. If only she'd been the oldest child, the one who couldn't claim to share that monster's blood. But that was her older brother Etherin. He'd run away on his sixteenth birthday, and Sadihra had memorized the parting words he'd whispered to her and Jilsenna, "When a man proposes anything to you, remember our mother before you agree."

Wolfe crossed his arms impatiently. "Do you agree?"

His words brought her back to the present and she snapped, "It isn't fair."

"Is it fairer for you to have your way on everything? You say you want to be treated as an equal, but really you want to be my better. Everything is your way and I should nod and take it. I'm willing to compromise, Sadihra. Let me know when you are."

He turned on his heel and strode up the beach, in the direction of the vacation houses. Sadihra started to call his name, then stopped. There was no point in talking to him when he was in one of his moods.

She walked in the opposite direction, splashing through the ankle deep water as the waves came in and out. Wolfe knew how she felt! He knew-

"Well hello!"

Sadihra jumped and spun to find Verchiel leaning against a palm tree. The speedos covered far too little of his wiry frame and she rolled her eyes. "You might as well be naked."

"I can be, if you prefer." He made it if to grab his waistband, then grinned. "You can shimmy out of that suit, and we could go skinny dipping."

"You're an idiot."

Sadihra walked past him, but he was suddenly beside her. "That's not very nice, especially since I came to see how you were after your fight with old crabby-britches."

She jerked to a stop and glared at him. "Were you spying on us?"

"Ha ha! You *did* have a fight! I only guessed from your sour expression. So what's it about?"

"None of your business."

"I could just read your mind, you know?"

She stopped, hands on her hips and eyes narrowed. "Fine, then do it."

He blinked. "What?"

"You heard me. If you're such an amazing mind reader then do it." A moment passed and Sadihra snorted. "I'm not as easy to fool as that little human. More than half of your ability is just guessing."

"That isn't true."

"Of course it is."

He turned suddenly serious and leaned close to whisper, "Why do you object to getting married?"

Sadihra jerked back angrily. "None of your business!"

"It wouldn't hurt you to tie the knot with crabby-britches. You're planning to stay with him forever, anyway, and if you change your mind you can always get divorced nowadays. Or kill him and be a widow. Whichever."

She stormed away without replying. To her relief he didn't follow, though his words stayed with her, and she tried to deny the logic in them. He was right that she planned to stay with Wolfe forever. Even during their time apart there had been no one else. She'd had offers, but she'd turned them down. He was the only one she wanted, and yet...

And yet, it's a trap.

She walked the circumference of the island. Jorick and his human were snuggled down together under the palm trees, and she pretended not to see them. She wasn't in the mood for a happy couple. Though she found it odd that the human was still, well, human. Why hadn't Jorick turned her into a vampire? He seemed to be in love with her, but then perhaps he wasn't as committed as he appeared.

Or perhaps she isn't.

When Sadihra had made a complete circuit, she turned for the houses. They were two storied twins, made of drift wood and roofed in thatch to give them an island vibe. She expected Wolfe to be in the living room, but he wasn't. She wasted a few minutes studying the map that hung on the wall and tried to find which of the many islands they were on. It was a hopeless task, so she abandoned it and resumed her search.

After checking the kitchen, dining room, patio, and bathing room, she finally found Wolfe in their bedroom. He sat on the bed, looking at something in his hand. When she stepped through the doorway he looked up quickly and stuffed the object in his pocket.

"What's that?" she asked.

"Nothing you're interested in," he said coldly.

He stood to leave but she blocked his path and dipped her hand in his pocket. She came back with a piece of cloth, like a handkerchief. Wrapped inside was a photograph of the two of them. Most of the colors had faded to red, but she recognized the moment. "Bernard's promotion party."

He jerked the photo from her hand and quickly rewrapped it. When he didn't say anything she demanded, "What do you want from me?"

His eyes flashed. "I want you to bend once in a while, Sadihra. Everything must always be your way or no way. You don't have to spend eternity proving your dominance. I'm not your father." She made to slap him and he grabbed her wrist.

"How dare you bring him up!"

"Why? That's what this is over. That's what it's always over. Do you think because you marry me that I'll magically change? I'm not your father, and you're not your mother, and, as you so often point out, the world isn't that way anymore. You want my attitudes to change with the times, then so should yours!"

"-if you change your mind you can always get divorced nowadays."

"I'd rather kill you," she snapped.

"What?"

"I'd rather kill you than divorce you and leave you to find someone else and flaunt her under my nose."

Wolfe let go of her wrist and stepped back uncertainly. "Why would I? Did I flaunt anyone in front of you in the last ten years?"

“I don’t know,” she lied. “I wasn’t paying attention.” But of course she was. She watched everything he did and tried to guess what she was missing.

“Of course I didn’t,” he said dryly. “And why do you think that was, Sadihra?” She didn’t answer and he went on, “Because there was no point. At best they would be a poor imitation of the woman I really want.” He met her eyes and drew closer. “Whether you want to admit it or not, Sadihra, you are mine and will be mine until the world dies.” He cupped her cheek. “And I am yours.”

She caught her breath and gazed into his eyes. She could see his words mirrored there; see everything she’d ever wanted. He was right. Verchiel was right. She wanted him forever, so why did it matter?

“Yes,” she said softly.

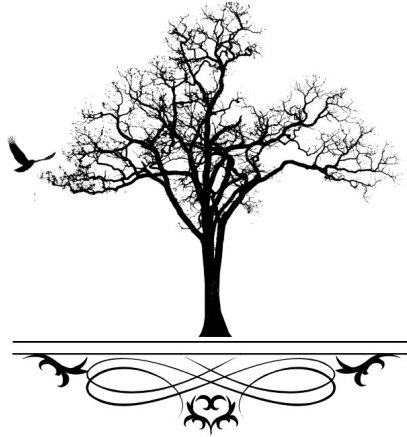
Wolfe studied her and finally asked, “Yes, what? Yes you’re mine? I don’t-”

“Yes, I’ll marry you. Idiot.” As she said the words a weight lifted from her shoulders, as if the burden of the decision was so much heavier than any commitment could ever be. “But I won’t be chained to a kitchen.”

He cocked an incredulous eyebrow. “I don’t have a kitchen, only a single burner stove top, and I don’t think it would hold you.”

She had a sudden urge to smack him.





Day 5: Loren

Loren scaled the beach, a giant shell in his hand. It was one of a dozen treasures he'd dredged up from the bottom of the cove in the last hour. Like a hopeful puppy, he slid to a stop at the foot of Micah's beach chair and thrust the shell in the bald vampire's face. "Look at this."

Micah flinched back and wiped droplets of sea water off his nose. "Yeah, I see it." Loren waited a second and he added, "Nice one."

Loren deposited it in the chair next to him, with his other treasures. "Are you sure you don't want to try it? I can show you how to swim. Even if you don't catch on it's okay. We can't drown."

"Yeah, sure we can't," Micah grumbled.

The conversation felt like something from a sitcom. The vampire looked like a thug. Muscles bulged from his white tank top and ink decorated his arms and his face. At a glance Loren would have guessed he was the kind of guy who'd done time. Heck, for all Loren knew he had. And yet the guy was scared of the water.

Loren mopped his dark curly bangs out of his face. Turned when he was sixteen, he was stuck behind the mask of a cheerful kid for eternity. He had no choice but to take it in stride, just like he took his missing arm.

At the thought his brown eyes slid sideways to the stump. Thanks to his vampire blood there were no scars, no horrible deformities, just a perfect arm, wrapped in smooth porcelain skin, that ended at the elbow. No matter how neat it appeared, it still sent a shiver up his spine. But, at least he could look at it now. When it had first happened...

"Come on," he tried again. "You don't have to go all the way in."

"I said no." Micah tugged out a cigarette and lit it, as if that ended their conversation. His next words came in a cloud of smoke. "Go hassle someone else, huh?"

Loren rolled his eyes and headed back down the beach. Of his companions he seemed to be the only one who really understood what the words "beach vacation" meant. Maybe that was because he'd grown up on the beach. Maine was cold for half of the year, but the other half he'd lived barefoot and crusted with sand.

He splashed into the water and waded until it was deep enough to swim. Long, one armed strokes took him out into the cove, and he dropped down beneath the dark waves. He spun on his back and looked up to see the night sky through the water; the stars rippled and smeared with the waves and the crescent moon bobbed.

He turned and dived deeper. The watery world got darker, but his vampire eyes picked through the gloom to the rocks and plants below. He scanned for something worth hauling up. Something that would interest his bald, crabby friend.

He sensed her presence before he saw her. Torina swam next to him, wearing her scanty emerald green bikini. His eyes were drawn to her breasts, which threatened to spill out of the small top, and his mind went straight to the gutter.

She gave him an appreciative smile and a wink, as if she'd seen his thoughts. Then she swam towards the surface. Loren hesitated for a moment before he followed her.

He broke out through the top and wiped water from his eyes. She bobbed next to him, her long red hair wet against her head and her usual makeup missing. Without it, she looked a little less glamorous, and that much more approachable.

"Nice to see someone else swimming." His eyes moved against his will to her heavy cleavage.

She cocked her head to one side and studied him. "I'm surprised to see you out here since you lost your..." she trailed off, and her green eyes touched on what was left of his arm. "I didn't think anyone could swim with only one."

Though he cringed inside, he forced a smile. "It took some getting used to, but it's really not that different."

"If you say so." She moved closer and dropped her voice, as if sharing a secret. "If that had happened to me... I don't know what I'd do."

He shrugged. "You'd figure it out pretty quick."

She looked thoughtful and then shook her head. "I don't know if I would. We're not all as resilient."

"Ah, it's not being resilient. There's just no other choice except to curl up and die, and who wants to do that?"

"I guess it would depend on how bad living with it was." She turned back for the beach. "Are you coming?"

A crude reply popped in his head, but he settled for shaking his head no.

"Suit yourself." She swam off, and he watched her go with a silent sigh. She might seem more approachable, but he knew she was way out of his league. Of all the vampires on the island the only one who might have a chance with her was Jorick, and he was too busy with his human girlfriend to consider it.

Jorick was the vampires' vampire. The kind that all the chicks wanted and the men respected. Tall with broad shoulders and long dark hair, he had a commanding presence and enough dark, emo brooding to make women want to save him. And even the men who hated him had to grudgingly admit that he was kick ass. Hell, even Micah had had to admit it.

Loren sighed. It was enough to make anyone feel inadequate.

He dove again and came back up with another, larger shell. He tucked it under the stump of his left arm and swam back to land. Micah was still in the chair, smoking, and he showed him his newest find. It garnered less enthusiasm than the last one had, and Loren deposited it with the others.

Jorick and Katelina suddenly stepped out from the palm trees. The human woman squinted and then let go of Jorick's arm to draw closer. She pointed to the pile in the chair. "What's all that?"

"Stuff I found," Loren answered proudly. "There's some cool stuff."

"No gold," Micah huffed.

She rolled her eyes. "Are you expecting pirate treasure?"

"Yeah why not?" Micah tugged out his cigarettes and Katelina snatched one from his fingers before he could light it. "What the fuck, Lunch? Tell your boyfriend to support your habit."

"It's not a habit. I just like one now and then. And quit calling me that." She took a long puff and perched on the edge of the chair. "So what are you doing?"

"You're lookin' at it, Princess," Micah answered and held his arms out.

"Looks boring." She took another puff. "Torina's up on the hill."

"What's she doing there?" Loren asked.

"Probably looking for someone to sleep with." Katelina scowled and took another angry drag. "If she latches onto Jorick one more time..."

Micah chortled. “Worried your man has a wandering eye? You could keep him looking at you if you wore something better.” He nodded towards the one piece swimsuit and the floppy shirt she’d pulled over it.

“You mean run around naked like she does?”

“Whoa! Who’s naked?” Loren asked and then laughed. “Ah, she and Jorick are old news.”

“So they say.” Katelina took another puff. “But she’s always hanging off of him.”

“She hangs off of everyone,” Loren said. He glanced down the beach to where Jorick had taken a seat. The vampire didn’t look directly at them, but Loren had a sense that he was still watching.

“She can hang off parts of me, anytime.” Micah gave a crude, throaty laugh and Katelina rolled her eyes.

“You’re all disgusting.”

Loren held up his hand. “Hey, I didn’t say anything.”

“But you were thinking it.” She inhaled and sighed. “I don’t think we’re ever going to get rid of her.”

“Torina?” Micah asked. “Probably not. But what’s the rush. We need some fucking eye candy around here.”

Katelina made a disgusted noise and stomped out the cigarette butt. “As if she’d give either of you two the time of day.” Before they could reply she flounced off towards her boyfriend.

“Someone’s touchy.” Micah watched the couple for a moment then turned back to the teen. “I heard him and Oren talking last night. Apparently he’s worried about something.”

“What?” Loren asked with interest.

“How the fuck should I know? It has something to do with Lunch and that vampire in the temple.”

“Samael?”

“Yeah, whatever the fuck his name is.”

When no more came Loren pressed, “And?”

“And I don’t know! Fuck, they quit talking as soon as they realized I was there. Not like the Executioner ass hole is gonna tell me anything. But, ask me, he should worry more about that red haired freak than some mysterious guy.”

Loren groaned. “You’re not back on Verchiel again? I told you, I think Jorick’s over reacting. Verchiel ‘s just aggravating them.”

“Sure he is. I tell you, if that was my girlfriend he was hitting on I’d punch his face in.”

“He’s not hitting on her. He’s just teasing her.”

“Whatever you say, pipsqueak. Just keep in mind I have a few years’ experience on you, huh?”

Loren snickered. “You have a *lot* of years’ experience, grandpa.”

Micah raised a fist. “You better watch that grandpa crap, kid.”

Loren jumped up and grinned. “You’d have to catch me first.” Then he took off, running through the palm trees and up the hill. He heard Micah swear and then the sound of his pursuit. At least the lug was out of his beach chair for five seconds.

Loren dashed out of the trees and onto the bald crown of the hill. Torina sat on a bench, her legs crossed and a book in her lap. “Oh, it’s you.”

“Who did you expect?” he asked. Before she could answer, Micah popped out of the jungle growth and tackled him to the ground.

“Grandpa, am I?” He ground his knuckles into the teen’s head.

“Hey! No noogies!” Loren shrieked, laughing.

Torina stood and surveyed them. “What are you doing?”

“I’m teaching this kid a lesson. Say uncle!”

“Why uncle? Why not grandpa?” He broke into laughing shrieks again as Micah ground harder. “All right! All right! Uncle!”

Micah stood and dusted his clothes off. “Damn kids these days have no respect.”

“Can you really expect them to when you behave like that?” Torina asked.

“What the fuck’s wrong with how I behave?”

“Oh, nothing, for a five year old.” Torina resumed her seat and flipped her book open.

Micah leaned on the back of the bench, no doubt leaning over just enough to see straight down her top. “So who you waiting for sugar cakes?”

“Not more of those horrible attempts at a pet name.”

“Nothing wrong with that one, was there?” Micah looked to Loren for support, but the teen just shrugged. He couldn’t really imagine calling a girl that, or any of the other names Micah came up with.

“If you say so.” Torina all but stifled a yawn. “Why don’t you run along now?”

“Why? You in a hurry to get rid of us?” Micah made a show of taking a seat next to her. “Me and pipsqueak got as much right to be up here as you do.”

Torina didn’t bother to answer, but Loren could see her annoyance on her face. They were never going to find out what was going on by hanging around. “Hey, Micah, this is boring. Let’s go.”

“What?” Loren gave him a just-shut-up look, and he grumbled. “Yeah, yeah, fine. Guess we’ll see you later.”

“Better later than sooner,” Torina called as they disappeared into the trees again.

When they were out of ear shot Micah demanded, “What the hell was that?”

The teen shushed him. “She’s not gonna tell us, and whoever she’s meeting won’t show up while we’re there.”

Micah seemed to suddenly catch on. “You mean we wait here and then follow whoever up?”

“Something like that.” It was doubtful her secret rendezvous would walk right under their noses, but stranger things had happened. “Who do you think it is?”

“Well it ain’t her brother, that’s for sure, and it ain’t us. That leaves Jorick, that ass hole Wolfe, or that red headed Executioner. If I had to bet, I’d go for him.”

“Verchiel? I thought you said he was after Katelina.”

Micah rolled his eyes. “He ain’t after Lunch like that. He just wants a piece coz he ain’t supposed to have it. You know, sticking your finger in someone else’s pie kind of thing. I bet he’d do Torina, too.”

“Who wouldn’t?” Loren asked and then snickered.

They fell silent, and the minutes dragged past. Loren didn’t have a watch, but if he did he’d have checked it obsessively. He had just decided that they should sneak up the hill and see if Verchiel had gone up the other side, when he heard someone crashing noisily through the foliage.

He opened his mouth, but Micah motioned him to silence. They both squinted through the dark, and sniffed. As the perpetrator drew closer, his scent met them and Loren’s eyes went wide.

“It’s a human,” he whispered. He sniffed again and thought he recognized one of the island staff.

Micah shushed him and they stood motionless and tense as the man hurried past them, almost close enough to touch had they wanted to. They waited until the sounds died down before Micah signaled Loren to follow and started up after him.

They crept silently up the hillside and crouched at the edge of the vegetation. Loren peered between the giant leaves of some tropical plant. The man stood in front of Torina, eyes locked with hers and his expression one of helpless devotion.

The redhead cocked a hip and then motioned him closer. He walked without looking at his feet, and only stopped when she touched him. She traced her finger from his shoulder up his neck and to his chin. She smiled, slow and seductive, and then drew him towards the bench.

How much of this should we watch?

Loren shifted uncomfortably and glanced at Micah, but the bald vampire seemed oblivious. Loren looked back to the hilltop and his eyes went wide as Torina straddled the man and with a final whisper in his ear, bit into his neck.

Half sex, half feeding, the scene was out of some bizarre porno, and though Loren knew they shouldn’t watch, he couldn’t stop. It was only when the vampiress made a high, moaning sound of climax that he managed to tear his eyes away and slink back into the plants.

Micah met him a moment later and wordlessly they hurried down the slope. When they reached the clearing around the houses Loren broke the silence. “Holy shit!”

Micah laughed and slapped him on the back. “Ah kid, I’ve seen better.” He sobered. “Though what the fuck is with that guy? She could have her choice and she picks him?”

“Maybe she likes humans?” Loren suggested. The images were still bright and clear in his mind and left his face red.

“You mean like Jorick seems to?” Micah snickered.

“Jorick seems to what?”

They looked up guiltily to see Katelina and Jorick. “Oh, uh, hi.” The teen’s face turned redder as the participants in his mental scene suddenly changed to the newcomers.

Katelina gave him an odd look. “Are you all right?”

Jorick narrowed his eyes and Loren knew he’d seen it, but there was nothing he could do. “Yeah, um. Fine. Just gonna go swimming.”

“Then maybe you should go?” Jorick suggested.

“Right. Good idea.” He grabbed Micah’s arm and dragged him away.

“What the fuck, pipsqueak? I didn’t have time to irritate Lunch yet.”

“What do you want to do that for?”

“Because it’s fun to watch her get all worked up. And Jorick gets all pissed and starts threatening shit that you know he ain’t gonna do.” He pulled loose, and grinned. “You gotta love that.”

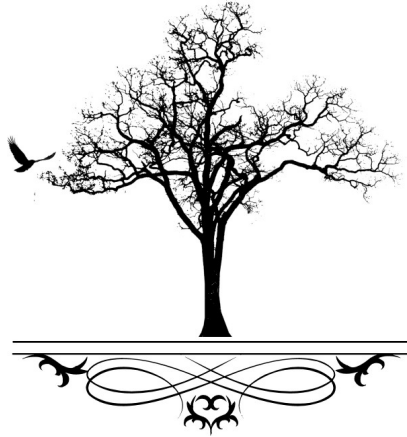
“I dunno. I always worry he’ll make good on his threats.”

“Nah. And even if he tries, I say let him. I’ll show him a thing or two, huh?” They stopped next to the beach chairs and Micah dropped into the one he’d abandoned. “You know what we need, kid? Some chicks in bikinis.”

Loren managed to nod, but after the scene with Torina he wasn’t so sure. One was bad enough. What would he do if they had an island full of that?

The idea was enough to keep his imagination busy the rest of the night.





Day 6: Verchiel

Verchiel leaned back in the hot tub and peered over his sunglasses. The accessories were pointless at night, but he was determined to embrace everything about the island getaway. Just because he was a vampire didn't mean he should have to miss out.

A broad shouldered vampire with long, black hair strolled past, a blonde human female on his arm. Verchiel grinned and waved. "Hey, Jorick! Kately! Check it out!"

Jorick turned and gave Verchiel a cold once over, and Katelina said, "It's a hot tub. We've seen it the last five days we were here."

"Yeah, but you haven't been *in* it!" He reached for the control panel and turned on the jets. "Look at this!" he shouted over the noise. "I'm almost floating away!"

"We could only hope," Jorick said.

Verchiel switched the jets off. "That's not very nice. Here I am, inviting you to join me for some relaxing socializing, and I get rude comments. I don't know."

"You're not inviting us to be nice," Katelina said with a roll of her eyes. "You're just doing it to be aggravating."

He clutched his chest. "I'm hurt at your harsh words! You wound me! That you would take my good intentions and twist them so..." he trailed off and then grinned. "Ah, come on. It's not like you're doing anything else."

"Jorick isn't dressed for it," Katelina said, pointing to the vampire's dark slacks and long sleeved black pullover. Verchiel thought he detected a hint of aggravation. Though the human wore a floppy shirt, underneath was a swimsuit. At least she was ready for the beach.

"He can sit on the sidelines," Verchiel suggested innocently. "Three of us in here would be crowded anyway. I know! Even better! He could jog back to the house and wallow in his gloom and emo outfits, and you and I could have some much needed alone time."

Jorick gave a long, low growl and started forward, but Katelina pulled him back. "We're supposed to be on vacation. That means vacation from trying to kill idiots."

Jorick snorted and then led her away, casting a threatening look back. Verchiel waved in reply, and then settled down into the warm water. At least he'd tried.

He adjusted his sunglasses and tried to slide down until he could kick his feet up on the edge. He was too short, and ended up with his head under the water. His sunglasses floated away and he lay there for a moment, looking through the liquid veil at the night sky. He could see the edge of one of the island mansions, hulking and crowned in dry palm leaves, like a transformed island hut.

Minutes ticked by and he finally got bored and popped to the surface, his bright red hair streaming. He wiped water from his eyes and peered at the expanse of swaying palms to his right. He could sense someone, though he couldn't smell them. He leaned over the edge of the tub and inhaled

deeply. The scent of grass and leaves, damp earth, fungus, sand, and sea mixed together in an overwhelming cacophony. Underneath it, he found the thread of a fragrance. Immortal and tinted with fresh blood and expensive perfume. It was Torina.

Verchiel snatched his sunglasses and propped them on his head, then plastered a casual smile across his face as she stepped out of the vegetation. Her long red hair fell around her shoulders, and an emerald green bikini clung to her curvy body. Her naked skin gleamed creamy and porcelain in the yard lights.

She paused and flicked her green eyes over him. Verchiel nodded, and pressed on the edges of her mind. He could see the bald crest of the hill and a human male. He didn't need to go any further to figure the rest out.

"Well hello there," he said cheerfully. "And where have you been?"

She crossed her arms over her ample breasts. "Walking. I can guess where you've been."

"Right here," he answered. "Best seat on the island."

She cocked an eyebrow. "It looks lonely."

"Why don't you join me and change that?" He flashed her a fanged grin.

She rolled her eyes. "Sorry, I got trapped by Loren and Micah earlier. I've had my quota of moron for the day."

"Then isn't it lucky I'm not a moron?"

She gave him a condescending look. "If you say so." She started towards the beach and then turned back. "I don't suppose you know where my brother is?"

"He's on the patio, I think." Verchiel jerked his thumb towards the backside of the second island house. "He's spending some quality time with his human."

Torina drew herself up. "She is not his human! She's just a mortal leech who's attached herself to him. He'll scrape her off soon."

"I wouldn't count on that. They both seem pretty comfortable with the arrangement."

"No he isn't."

Verchiel made a point to yawn. "Then why hasn't he sent her packing yet? I don't know about Oren, but I wouldn't voluntarily spend my first vacation in three centuries being harassed by a human I couldn't stand. I think he likes her company."

"No, he doesn't," Torina said icily.

"Why? What's not to like? She doesn't chatter, doesn't ask questions, and doesn't make demands. She sits quietly, and when he wants anything she runs and fetches it. She's like an admiring personal servant."

"She's annoying," Torina snapped. "At least Jorick's stupid human doesn't worship the ground he walks on. If he ever gets around to making her a vampire she might not be too bad. That Japanese woman that hangs on Oren..." she trailed off and shook her head. "She's worse than a dishcloth."

"Then maybe you should befriend her and teach her to be independent?"

Torina scoffed. "I don't need any friends."

"Everyone needs friends. Why don't you start with me? I'm feeling particularly friendly today." He waggled his eyebrows.

"Oh grow up." She turned away and then paused again. "I imagine you know where Jorick and his pet are?"

"On the beach, I think. Micah and Loren are down there, too, and Wolfe and Sadihra snuck off for some private time. I'm afraid I rather ruined it the last time they tried."

"You have a way of doing that," Torina said, and headed towards the beach.

"So much abuse!" he called after her. "I know you only use the cold words to mask your true feelings!" He could feel it for a moment; a flutter in her mind as she contemplated coming back to tell him off, but then the impulse disappeared and she moved out of range.

"That was fun, wasn't it?" he said to no one. The chirping bugs were his only reply, and he dropped his sunglasses down again. "It's a shame we didn't go to Hawaii. At least there are hula girls there."

He held up his hands and wiggled his wrinkly fingers. That was something that vampirism didn't cure, though he wasn't sure why. If he'd had a laptop or his phone handy he'd have looked it up, but it wasn't worth a lot of effort for a casual curiosity. Besides, he doubted there was much of a cell signal.

He climbed out and toweled off, then wandered into the house for a snack. A polite Asian lady poured him a glass of blood and bowed a lot. He gave her a good come hither look, which she ignored, and with a shrug he wandered outside to the patio.

Just as he'd thought, Oren sat in a chair, his nose stuck in a book. Etsuko was behind him, working furiously on her needlework. Verchiel tilted his head this way and that, admiring the subtle pattern.

"What are you making?"

Oren looked up sharply, as if he'd been unaware of Verchiel's presence, but Etsuko calmly replied, "I had thought to make a kimono for Oren-sama, if he does not object."

The blonde vampire cleared his throat uncomfortably, and looked quickly back to his book.

"I think that's a great idea," Verchiel said. "I bet he'll look great in it."

Etsuko nodded, but Verchiel noticed the blush that stole over her cheeks. The woman had it bad.

Oren shifted uncomfortably, and though he stared at the pages, Verchiel didn't think he was reading anymore.

"You should make him a whole fleet of them," the redhead suggested with a grin. "He could have one for every day of the week."

"Does Verchiel-sama not think that would be excessive?" Etsuko asked with genuine concern, and Verchiel bit back a laugh.

"He's only teasing you," Oren muttered.

"Oh!" Etsuko blinked uncertainly, then recovered. "I see."

"You should relax," Verchiel told her and dropped into the nearest empty chair. "You and gloomy Gus both."

"Excuse me?" Oren snapped.

"Oh come on! We're in a tropical paradise and you're sitting by the house, reading a book, wearing jeans and a long sleeve shirt. You even have boots on! Boots! This is the kind of place where you chill and let it all hang out." He motioned to his own speedo.

Oren's voice and expression were cold. "Hardly. You'd do well to wear more. None of us want to look at you without clothes."

"I have clothes! I'm wearing just as much as your sister."

Oren's frown deepened. "Yes, I know. As if it would hurt her to wear something."

"It's the beach!" Verchiel reminded him. "Bikinis should be mandatory for all the ladies." He gave Etsuko a wink that turned her cheeks pinker.

Oren looked horrified and his eyes skipped away. Verchiel saw the shimmer of a thought in his head; a vision of Etsuko in a tiny red two piece. He snickered to himself. At least Oren wasn't as dead as he liked to appear.

"I think everyone could do with more clothing," Oren snapped. "And I could do with more silence. Don't you have someone else to annoy?"

Verchiel kicked back in the chair, hands behind his head, and feigned innocence. "I had thought about checking up on Kately and grumpy boots, but he seemed so hostile the last time I saw him."

"Do you blame him?" Oren asked. "He knows what you're up to."

"I'm not up to anything." He mimed hurt. "Why do all of you have such a low opinion of me?"

"Because you give us such cause to."

He didn't bother to ask how, only sighed dramatically. "It's sad. I try so hard and yet I'm still rejected."

"Rejected?" Oren blinked. "What are you blathering about?"

"I try to be your friend. I try to come and say, 'hey, how's it going? Let's hang out,' and all I get is told to go away."

"Then perhaps you should try to be less annoying?"

Verchiel threw a hand to his head. "I try. Oh, I try. But it seems no matter what I do, no matter how acquiescing I am, someone is offended. Someone is mad. Someone is impatient."

Oren cleared his throat and drew away from the display. "Yes, well, try harder then."

"You say to try, but how? How am I to try? How am I to please everyone?"

Oren choked. "I-I don't..." A sudden idea seemed to strike him. "You could leave Jorick's human alone for starters."

Verchiel sat up straight, grinning. "You mean Kately? Ah, I wouldn't want to abandon my buddy, now, would I? Can I help it if Jorick's over sensitive and thinks I'm trying to steal her away? I mean I could, if I wanted to. Who could resist this?" He motioned to his lithe, toned physique.

"I imagine any number of women could," Oren said dryly. "And perhaps Jorick wouldn't be oversensitive if you weren't always trying to get her alone."

"Is that what it looks like? How interesting." Verchiel tapped his chin thoughtfully.

"Of course it does. Are you completely stupid? On top of that you drank from her."

"I was starving," Verchiel interjected.

"Of course you were. And you had no control." Oren's tone was sarcasm. "We've all been starving before."

"Then you should be sympathetic."

"That wasn't my point." Oren's eyes flashed and he met Verchiel's gaze and held it. "Vampires caught in a bloodlust may feed on anything they can get their hands on, but that doesn't mean that they enjoy it as much as you did."

"I have no idea what you're implying." He smiled sweetly. "Perhaps you could elaborate?"

Oren growled. "We both know you-" he broke off, as if he just remembered Etsuko was there. "You know," he finished stiffly. "Enough. I have better things to do." He made a point of turning his angry attention to his book.

"Is the story really that interesting?" Oren didn't answer and Verchiel sighed. "I think it's lovely that you defend Jorick and Kately. It shows real loyalty, especially since you hate her so."

"I never said I hated her," Oren snapped. "I'm starting to feel that way about you, though."

Verchiel ignored the slight. "Really? She thinks you hate her, and given the way you're always talking down to her, or complaining about 'the human' being in the way, I don't blame her. I'd start to think that too."

"I don't complain about her being in the way! Except when she is. Which happens quite frequently." He broke off, frustrated. "Jorick would be easier to handle if she wasn't in the middle of things."

"You mean easier to talk into things, like joining wars?" Verchiel suggested. "You're done with those now, though."

"Whether I am or not has nothing to do with this conversation!" He growled and then looked back to the book. "Never mind. I'm finished speaking to you."

Verchiel shrugged and stood. "Suit yourself. I'm just saying that you might try being nicer is all."

Oren snarled, and Verchiel waved to Etsuko and then wandered down to the beach. He made to put his hands in his pockets, but without pockets the gesture fell to nothing.

"Maybe he's right about the clothes. Or else they should just put pockets on these."

The second idea was better, and he contemplated how hard it would be to add them. He supposed he'd have to find some spandex – that was what they were made out of, wasn't it? Though spandex was probably hard to sew, and his skills were basic. Maybe he could get Etsuko to do it for him?

"Speedos with pockets. We could make a mint."

"Who the hell are you talking to?"

Verchiel looked up to see Micah, a bald vampire with a goatee and lots of tattoos. Near him was Loren, a raven haired teen, clutching a pile of seashells to him with one arm.

"Well hello there! And what are you two up to." He nodded to the teen's treasures. "That's a lot of shells!"

“Yeah,” Loren said hesitantly. Enthusiasm slowly crept over his face. “There’s some really good ones in here. I found most of them in the ocean, but a few of them were on the beach. Micah even found a couple.”

“You managed to get the big lug out of a beach chair?” Verchiel asked.

Loren laughed. “I know, right?”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” Micah eyed the redhead. “You tryin’ to start somethin’?”

“Oh, lighten up.” Loren rolled his eyes. “He’s right, you’ve hardly done anything but sit in that chair and smoke.”

“So what’s wrong with that? This is supposed to be a goddamn vacation. We’re supposed to be relaxing, not fucking running around all the damn time. When you’re on a vacation you’re supposed to do shit that you like, and that’s what I like.” He rounded on Verchiel. “You got a problem with that, Executioner?”

“Hey, hey, I’m not judging. What you want to do in your personal time is your business. I’m just surprised that your buddy there doesn’t mind spending so much time swimming by himself.”

“He likes swimming by himself. Don’t you?”

“Uh,” Loren tightened his hold on the shells. “I dunno. It might be kind of nice if you’d give it just a tiny try.”

“Are you fucking serious? Look, that ocean it’s... it’s fucking...” He broke off and Verchiel felt his fear, like a dark pulse. “It’s fucking deep.”

“Of course it’s deep! It’s the ocean!” Loren rolled his eyes. “You could just go wading at the edge if you’re too scared to go in all the way.”

“I’m not scared!”

“Really?” Verchiel asked. “That’s not the impression I got, since you won’t even go near it. But of course, you probably have another reason for your behavior, right?”

“What fucking behavior?” Micah roared. “I just don’t fucking like water, a’ight? You got a problem with that?”

“No, no. Nothing wrong with being afraid. It’s a brave man who admits to it.”

Loren snickered and Micah snarled. “What the fuck? I’m not – fuck this. Come on pipsqueak. We’ll ditch those damn things in the house and have some lunch.”

Loren nodded and they moved around Verchiel and up the slope towards the house. Their voices floated back to him and he could hear the bald vampire muttering, “I’ll show that Executioner dog that I’m not fucking scared. You wait, after lunch.”

“I can show you how to swim,” Loren said enthusiastically.

“Hey, hold your fucking horses. I said I’d stick my feet in it, I didn’t say I was gonna get submerged.”

Loren nodded, then glanced back to Verchiel. He might have waved had he had a second hand to do it with. It was a shame that he’d lost his left arm during the fight at The Guild, but he should be glad he hadn’t lost more than that.

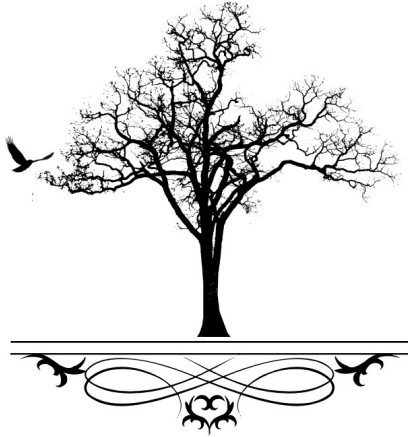
Verchiel shrugged it off and continued to the beach. Jorick and Katelina were nowhere to be seen, but he noted that Wolfe and Sadihra were seated on a rock, his arm around her and her head on his shoulder. He thought about interrupting them, but a quick scan left him with the impression that they’d worked things out for now.

With nothing else to do, he headed down to the water and waded in until he was deep enough to swim. After a few strokes he rolled over on his back, hands behind his head, and floated. Voices came to him, and he looked to see Jorick and Katelina locked in an argument.

With a grin he started for the shore. As Micah had said, a vacation was for doing what you thought was fun, and what could be more fun than interfering with everyone? They were all the better for it when he was finished, so they should be grateful. Maybe he should start charging them, like Dr. Phil or whatever the new psychiatric flavor of the week was.

As screwed up as they all were, he could make a mint.





BONUS - Day 7: Chapter One of Children of Shadows

Katelina leaned back in the beach chair. She could hear waves lapping the beach and the cry of some far off bird. Above her the moon hung in a thin crescent and uncountable stars twinkled. Farther down the beach a bonfire glowed throbbing orange. She could make out the silhouettes of the revelers around it, but it wasn't worthy of a vacation snapshot. That was why she'd left the disposable camera in her room.

To her left Jorick reclined in a chair, his long dark hair pulled up in a sloppy bun. Even on the beach he wore his usual black pullover and slacks. Like a cartoon character, he refused to try different clothes. He swore that after centuries he'd settled on the perfect ensemble.

"Enjoying yourself?" Amusement glittered in his dark eyes.

She forced a smile. "Of course."

His reply was the fanged grin of a vampire. "I'm glad. You've wanted to come to the beach for months."

She made a noncommittal sound. Though her boyfriend and his associates were vampires, she had still imagined her beach vacation dappled in sunlight. Three a.m. on a nearly deserted island wasn't what she'd had in mind. Where was the sunscreen? Where were the cabana boys? Where was the beach fun?

Jorick chuckled. "You chose the wrong traveling companions for that."

Mind reading - one of his vampire abilities. "Remember when you respected me enough not to do that?"

"It's not a matter of respect, it's just easier sometimes. Besides, you think loudly."

"So you say. You used to worry I'd get mad."

"Yes." He grinned. "I think we're past that now. Isn't it more important to save time?"

Her only reply was a sigh.

A figure abandoned the fire and headed toward them. Katelina scowled at his ridiculous crayon colored red hair and the expanse of pale, naked flesh. His speedo trunks left little to the imagination—not that she wanted to imagine it.

"Of course you do!" Verchiel chirped as he stopped next to her chair, a reply to her thoughts. As if she needed another mind reader. "Are you gloomy gusses going to sit here, or come join the fun?"

Katelina snorted. "Why? It's only you, Micah, and Loren hanging around the bonfire acting macho."

"You forgot Torina," Jorick said with amusement.

"Of course, the reason they're acting like macho idiots." Her eyes strayed toward the fire and the silhouette of a curvaceous vampiress. Her long red hair fell around her shoulders in salon perfect waves

and her emerald bikini looked like it was made for her. Torina was enough to make a supermodel feel inadequate. How could Katelina, an average human with an average figure, compare?

Jorick caught her hand and squeezed it. "It isn't a competition."

"We could have one," Verchiel suggested with a broad grin. "We could start with the two of you in bikinis, add some pudding, and see who comes out on top."

Katelina tried to smack him, but the redhead seemed to evaporate and reappeared a few feet away. Super speed; another of his abilities. "Aw, come on. It could be fun! No? All right, but don't say we didn't offer." Then he disappeared and reappeared near the fire a moment later.

She turned to Jorick, expecting a customary burst of outrage, but he grinned. "He might be on to something. I imagine you'd look fetching in nothing but pudding."

Before Katelina could express her opinion, another vampire drew near, dressed in a button up shirt, jeans, and boots. It wasn't just his tawny hair and amber eyes that made Katelina think of a lion. There was something in the way he moved, a sort of fluid, feline gait that said he was waiting to spring. It was Jorick's fledgling.

"Oren!" Jorick called. "Come to join us?"

"Hardly." He cast an unhappy look over them. "Is this necessary?"

"You don't approve of a vacation?" Jorick asked.

Oren drew a tight breath. "I'm not saying one doesn't deserve a rest, but is now the time?"

"Why not?" Jorick's eyes skipped to the dark ocean. "Both your war and exile are over."

Oren gave a contemptuous snort. "Have you forgotten I attacked The Guild's citadel?"

"They already doled out the punishment in your absence." During the battle, Jorick had incapacitated his fledgling and hidden him in a supply closet, leaving Oren's brother-in-law to be executed in his place. "If you ask me, it isn't a bad thing to be rid of Fabian."

Oren opened his mouth, then closed it, as if he couldn't argue. Fabian had been an annoying, bitter vampire. Since The Guild had put him to death for leading a war against them, Oren's lust for battle had grown cold, as though it had been Fabian pushing all along. And it probably was. Even Torina, Oren's hot blooded sister, had seen the pointlessness of attacking the American vampires' capitol.

"Fine," Oren said. "What about Malick?"

Katelina cringed at the name and Jorick said, "He's the True Council's problem."

It was the answer she'd expected. Malick was Jorick's master; the vampire who'd given him immortality, and then manipulated him for years after. Jorick would always have a strange mixture of loyalty and well-deserved hatred for him.

"What about Samael?" Oren asked impatiently.

Jorick waved the question away, like smoke that threatened to obscure his vision of peace, but Katelina didn't feel so casual. Behind her eyes she could still picture Samael, naked except for his flowing hair. They'd expected to find Lilith, the supposed mother of all vampires, asleep in the mountain temple, instead they'd gotten him.

"Will the True Council take care of him?" Oren asked sarcastically. "We woke him, Jorick."

Jorick's good humor slipped from his face. "No *we* didn't. I know the idea was to wake Lilith and use her to destroy Malick, but it obviously doesn't work that way. Sorino woke Samael, and couldn't control him. It seems the legends were wrong."

"Maybe," Katelina muttered, then spoke louder. "There were things written on the wall in the temple. Sorino said 'We will do as the inscriptions say', so they must have told the truth." The scene in the dark room came back to her. She could hear the screams of the battle raging upstairs; Jorick and the others fighting Malick's henchmen. She could see Sorino's satisfied smile as he forced her to take out the legendary Heart of the Raven.

Without thought she murmured, "He said, 'It's the heart of Naamah, one of Samael's wives, and it is necessary to the resurrection'" She shook the memories away. "Obviously that was written on the wall, because until then he thought it was Lilith's."

"Only he can read the inscription," Jorick said gently. "Sorino 's gone, but if he wasn't, do you think he'd tell the truth?"

No, she didn't believe Sorino would tell them, unless it benefited him. Though they'd parted politely, there was an understanding that they weren't friends.

Jorick smiled and some of his lost amusement returned. "It doesn't matter, little one. Things will sort themselves out. In the meantime, you've finally got your beach vacation, so enjoy it."

She absently rubbed her wrist. Samael had bitten her and left it a gaping, bleeding mess. Though she had no memory of it, she knew he'd healed her with his blood before he disappeared. But why? Was it like Jorick and Verchiel had suggested? Had Samael 'tinkered' with her mind? Verchiel had called it a kill switch. The thought left her shivering.

Jorick's attention was still on Oren. "—we have to go to Munich and then—"

She jolted at the implications. "You're taking Oren to the vampire capitol of the world?"

"As I said, the guilds have bigger things to worry about than a vampire who, if you'll pardon me, is relatively new and powerless in their estimation."

Oren's jaw tightened. He stiffly excused himself and trekked back across the beach.

"You hurt his feelings," Katelina said.

Jorick shrugged. "It's true. The Kugsankal—The True Council—is thousands of years old. Malick is nearly three and they're older than he is. To them Oren and his attempted uprising would be a trifle eclipsed by Malick and Samael. I doubt they'll even notice he's there."

"I hope you're right."

The night was growing late when Katelina and Jorick headed back to the beach house. The two-story building and its partner were like Bugs Bunny island huts on steroids, made of what appeared to be unfinished wood and roofed in something that looked like grass. She expected to see dark skinned natives in grass skirts and the odd cannibal hiding in the jungle. Instead there were manicured lawns and a handful of English speaking staff. So much for cartoon reality.

Katelina stopped in the kitchen where a friendly woman made her a fizzy pink drink, then she joined Jorick in the living room. Between the futons and scattered tables, an antique map hung on the wall. Islands were scattered across the face of the ocean like freckles and labeled in foreign characters.

"Which one are we on?"

He shrugged. "It's hard to tell if it's accurate, or just decor." He held out a piece of paper. "This was on the table."

The note scrawled inside said simply:

We must leave tomorrow.

Wolfe.

She scowled. "He's ordering us around like he captured us."

"Only in his imagination. Nevertheless, he's right."

Katelina wasn't ready to say goodbye to the island paradise. Leaving meant returning to cold places and even colder attitudes. "Do we have to?"

"Yes. We need to go to Munich and report so we can go home."

Home. It was a shadowy word that conjured different places: a lonely house in Maine, a neon green monstrosity where her mother lived, and a small apartment buried deep underground in the vampires' American Citadel. She suspected the last option was the home he referred to.

He slipped an arm around her and pulled her to him. "Cheer up, little one. We still have tonight."

"In that case, I need another drink."

Jorick led her up the winding wooden stairs and down the hall to their bedroom. A large cotton clothed bed stood in the middle with a headboard of driftwood and gauzy curtains that mimicked mosquito nets. A bench below the picture window held their suitcases and a selection of puffy throw pillows. The view beyond was magnificent, though to Katelina's mortal eyes most of the details were lost in darkness.

Jorick pulled her back against him. His lips tickled her ear as he whispered, "Should I describe it for you?"

Goosebumps raced up and down her back and she giggled. The fruity drinks had left the world wobbly. "It's a lot of palm trees and some creepy bugs hiding in the leaves."

"That hardly does it justice." He kissed the lobe of her ear and then moved lower to nuzzle her neck. "Yes, there are palm trees, majestic palm trees whose trunks stand proud and tall, gently curving—" he broke off to lift her hair and kiss his way up the back of her neck. "—up to the magnificent cluster of emerald green fronds—" He ran his fingers through her golden tresses, letting the strands fall back around her shoulders. "—that dance in the breeze." He tightened his arms around her and swayed as if they, too, were dancing.

"What about the bugs?" She laughed and tipped her head back until she could see his eyes, so dark they were almost black. She let herself drown in the heady warmth, wrapped in a sensual softness that left her breathless.

"Bugs?" He slipped the straps of her bathing suit over her shoulders and peeled the garment down until she was naked. Then he brought her hand to his lips, tracing kisses over her fingers. "The graceful palms shelter many things." He trailed his lips over her wrist and down to her elbow, and then across the back of her arm to her naked shoulder.

She gave a soft murmur of pleasure that ended in another giggle. "Such as?"

"Oh, there are insects, of course, diamond eyed creatures—" He kissed his way across her back to her other shoulder and then moved slowly down her arm. "—whose wings sparkle incandescent in the light and shine with colors like mother of pearl. Barely more than gauze, they're delicately stretched over a fragile framework that lets them glide—" He paused to spin her around so that she faced him. His eyes ran over her nakedness and then he moved in closer and kissed her forehead and her cheeks. "—glide from the uppermost reaches of those palms, down—" He moved to her neck and then to her shoulders. "—down until they reach—" He cupped her breasts and kissed their rosy peaks. "—the smooth stones."

She threw back her head and laughed. "Stones? Really?"

He laughed with her, and then squeezed the fleshy mounds, gently massaging and teasing her hard nipples with his thumbs. "You underestimate their importance."

She murmured her enjoyment and managed to say, "But stones aren't pretty."

"Says who? Each one is unique, shaped by the hand of Mother Nature herself, kissed by the rain —" He rained kisses over them. "—rounded and smoothed by the elements and the pounding surf. With delicate colors and subtle highlights; shades of white and pink and blue." He broke off to take first one and then the other in his mouth. She moaned softly and he released them. "But we can't stay among the peaks and valleys forever, we must glide down—" he paused to kiss his way over her ribs and down her stomach, until he was on his knees before her. "—down to the mossy—" He stopped to tease the thatch of golden curls before he opened her legs enough to allow his lips past. "—moist ground below."

She let out a long, low moan and clutched his head, opening herself and pressing him deeper into the soft folds of her flesh. Her fingers tangled in his long, midnight hair and she floated on a bubble of intoxication and pleasure as his hot tongue stroked her delicate center.

Her legs trembled as he moved his kisses to her inner thighs. His tongue teased her soft skin and then, he bit.

She gave a cry of surprise and pain, but it faded away and left her in the red-tinted, pleasure-soaked world of the vampire bite. It was a connection that could take their prey to hell or to heaven. And heaven was where he took her. He was inside and outside her; everywhere at once, pulsing, touching, stroking, caressing. She could feel both his desire and his satisfaction coursing through her veins, igniting her passion. As the sensations became more intense, things flashed behind her eyelids; pictures too fast for her to see and words too soft for her to understand. As always she felt the desire to catch them, to see, to know, as if some ancient secret was buried in them. She groaned loudly, urging him on, her instincts screaming for more; more contact, more pleasure, more blood.

Without conscious thought she pulled away from him and he let her go. She stumbled back, dizzy with euphoria and alcohol, and fell to her knees. He moved to her quickly and caught her in his arms, concern burning beneath the lust in his eyes. "Are you all right?"

She gripped the collar of his pullover. Her voice sounded husky and foreign in her ears. "I will be."

She tore his shirt, pinned him to the floor, and bit into his chest. He gave a cry of surprise, and no doubt pain as her dull teeth pierced the skin. His hot, spicy blood filled her mouth, but it didn't satisfy her thirst, only intensified it.

He rolled with her, so that he was on top. She struggled briefly as he shifted to remove his pants and slide himself between her thighs. Her legs opened readily for him, and she thrust with her hips, encouraging him, even as her open mouth sought the bleeding wound. He thrust into her at the same moment that she clamped on, and her body arched with a cry of delight. Lost in a crimson tinted world, she didn't even notice when he bit into her shoulder.

Moments crashed over one another in a carnal cascade of ecstasy. The sounds and images returned, closer than before and, just as it seemed she might understand, her body rocked with the climax of release and she cried out, severing the connection.

The world slowly came into focus; the ceiling with exposed rafters, the bench, the soft white rug under her back. Next to her lay Jorick with his shirt torn open, panting and rubbing at a smear of crimson on his chest.

She licked her lips and tasted blood. She'd bitten him. Again. She was momentarily horrified and wiped her mouth, as if it could hide what she'd done.

"I've told you it's nothing to be ashamed of."

"You say that but..." she turned away and stared at the curtained bed. "When that happens it's like I'm someone else, and then I come back to myself and have to deal with the consequences."

He pulled her to him. She resisted for a moment, but his soothing hands coaxed her surrender and she relaxed against him. "Isn't all lust that way?" he asked teasingly. "Is it really that you become someone else, or that you're finally free enough to be yourself?"

Her cheeks flushed and she sucked her bottom lip. It still tasted like him. "You're saying I'm blood thirsty?"

He nuzzled her neck, and licked the bite he'd made, as if sweeping away the last of the crimson evidence. "More like a wanton pleasure seeker." He laughed and held up the shirt she'd torn as proof. "There's nothing wrong with that, given the right circumstances."

She met his gaze and teased him back, "What would the wrong circumstances be?"

His dark eyes grew darker, and his voice lost its humor. "If it's with the wrong vampire."

She looked away as a memory popped to the surface. A starving creature skulked in the corner of the prison cell, little more than skin and bones and matted red hair. It stared at her with hungry eyes, and then it struck. She fought at first, and then... and then the world fell away and she'd come crashing back with blood on her lips to find Jorick snarling and trying to murder Verchiel.

"It wasn't like that," she said sharply, as if Jorick had forced the memory on her. "Malick—"

"Yes. I know. Malick manipulated you and then sicked the poor, starving clown on you and you bit him back in self-defense or—" he broke off. "It doesn't matter."

She rubbed absently at the scar Verchiel had left. "It obviously does. To you. He apologized a long time ago and already said he was starving and didn't realize who I was."

"I'm sure," Jorick muttered darkly.

She pushed on, "Malick only arranged it to punish you for not following orders."

Malick. The master hung over them like a dark shadow that tainted everything.

Jorick sighed deeply and pulled her closer. "Nothing is tainted, not you or me or this." He motioned with a hand to indicate the two of them. "I love you."

She buried the side of her face against his chest and inhaled his deep, musky scent. "I love you, too."

He pressed a kiss to the top of her head and then swept to his feet. “Come, little one. I may be used to sleeping in strange places, but even I won’t forsake a bed for the floor.”

It was an hour later when Katelina slipped from the bed and tiptoed out of the bedroom in search of a bathroom. It wouldn’t be long before the sun was up. The sky outside already had a thin, colorless quality along the horizon. Soon all the protective plates would be over the windows to block the burning sunlight and shield the house’s occupants. She could already see some of the island’s employees struggling to put them in place.

When she was finished, she slipped through another door to a broad balcony. The last of the night breezes blew her long hair back from her face and tried to tell her stories of others who’d stood on the sandy beaches and bathed in the surf.

She surveyed the lush lawn below and traced the line of palm trees that marched down to the beach. The whole place was almost too perfect.

“That’s why it’s expensive,” a voice volunteered from the shadows. Katelina turned to see Verchiel step out onto the balcony wearing a pair of flannel pajama pants that sagged too low for her comfort. His ridiculous red hair was wet and the faint smell of soap wafted from him. She looked away quickly from his naked chest, something she’d seen far too much of on the beach in the last week.

After the earlier conversation, he was the last vampire she wanted to see, as if his presence made Jorick’s complaint more credible. Regardless, Verchiel leaned on the railing next to her. He scanned the beach scene and something strange passed across his face. What could ruffle his affable veneer?

“What?”

“It seems... I don’t know. Maybe I’ve been here before.” He shrugged and stepped back, his usual smile on his face. He nodded toward the humans hurriedly fastening up the last of the metal plates. “The sun will be up soon. Since I don’t fancy a third degree sunburn I’ll leave you to it.”

He started for the door and Katelina asked absently, “Don’t you miss the sunrise?”

“Nah. I’ve already told you I don’t remember anything from before Kateesha turned me, including the sun. Besides, I have a snazzy tropical sunrise calendar in my apartment at the Citadel, so I can see one every day if I want.” He gave her a wink. “Speaking of pictures, you might catch the sunrise for your photo collection, but don’t stay out too late or Jorick will worry.”

And then he disappeared.

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About the author:

Joleene Naylor is the author of the glitter-less *Amaranthine* series, a world where vampires aren't for children. As a compliment to the novel series, she has also written several short story collections and the *Amaranthine Files* encyclopedia.

In what little time is left she watches anime and updates her blogs, all from a crooked Victorian house in Villisca, Iowa. Between her husband and her pets, she is never lonely, and should she ever disappear one might look for her on a beach in Tahiti, sipping a tropical drink and wearing a disguise.

Ramblings from the Darkness at <http://www.joleenenaylor.com>
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