

Prologue

January 13, 2000

"Blood, Father," the tinny voice of his son piped up from the other end of the room. Simon Baldevar looked up from his easel in annoyance.

Putting his paintbrush aside, Simon stood up and swiftly crossed the vast chamber but he did not move quickly enough to appease the baby that began weeping inconsolably. The child's shrill, inhuman cries would puncture mortal eardrums, but they had no effect on the vampire father, except the mild irritation any parent felt toward wailing, howling offspring.

"Hush," Simon said to his one-year-old son and the boy's silver eyes with their inhuman slits for pupils focused on his father with an expression of intense longing and furious need. It was merely the blood lust all vampires suffered when they needed to feed, but it was decidedly odd to see those savage emotions reflected in the eyes of such a small creature.

"Blood," the baby repeated and Simon had to suppress a turn of disgust at his son's appearance. When the boy grew hungry and wasn't immediately appeased, his skin took on the translucent quality of a deformed vampire, knotted red and blue veins marring the surface of his milky white skin and his eyes started to lose their pigment.

Mikal flinched, perhaps sensing his father's revulsion, and his cries escalated into a strident howl that put a crack in one of the tower windows.

"Enough," Simon said over the din, but the child paid no attention. "I shall bring you food, now be silent."

As he left the room to secure prey, Simon reflected he should feel some pride that Mikal already spoke and understood language with such a precocious grasp. So far the boy was

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developing with amazing speed—his first words were spoken a scant eight weeks after he was born. When he wasn't consumed by blood lust and able to think clearly, the child was already learning how to read and write.

Mikal's physical growth also far exceeded that of mortal children. He was now the size of a three year old, though he remained underweight, as he had been from birth. No doubt that stemmed from the child's inability to digest any substances but blood and water. Simon worried at first that an all-blood diet wouldn't contain all the nutrients a child needed to grow properly, but Mikal's only deformity was his thinness.

Disdaining the spiraling stone staircase at the base of the tower, Simon used astral projection to enter the common room downstairs and found his servants idling about, though they made an immediate effort to look busy when their master appeared. They showed no surprise at his materialization from thin air for they had learned the hard way of their employer's supernatural abilities.

Simon's requirements for servants were strict. They must be destitute, have no family or friends to inquire at their disappearance, and no command whatsoever of the English language. He found them in a variety of places—Calcutta, Romania, the former Soviet Union, really any country with a thriving homeless population.

Simon had procured the wretched mass before him by inquiring in the native tongue of each sordid hellhole he visited whether the young (youths always supplied better blood than aging humans) homeless would be interested in employment in a foreign land. Once it was ascertained that no one would inquire at their disappearance, a group of five to ten was gathered up and shipped to the remote Scottish island on which Simon had chosen to rear his son. He'd owned the property since the eighteenth century when he ruthlessly displaced the residents so he'd have the island to himself.

Once his servants arrived, they had no choice but to watch helplessly as one by one of their number were dragged away, giving their final duty to their master by supplying blood to the vampire child, his father, and Mikal's nursemaid.

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Once they got some inkling of their predicament, a few attempted escape, only to be electrocuted by the fence surrounding the property or blown to pieces by the various land mines scattered around the moors. Even if they did manage to flee the island, they had to brave choppy, icy waters and swim to the mainland. If they survived that near impossible obstacle, the nearest village was ten miles away, ten miles of freezing, mountainous terrain impossible to cross without supplies. And if the escaped captive should manage to cross paths with a passerby before Simon caught up to them, they had no words to convey their predicament because they did not speak English.

Simon was careful to speak no English before his prisoners; he did not want some bright soul piecing together even a few words that could aid in their escape. That was why he beckoned to one dusky-skinned female and said in curt, perfect Hindi, "Come with me."

The girl paled to a dull beige color but could not disobey the vampiric order. Sobbing, because Simon made no effort to dull her terror with a psychic command that would have turned her into little more than a catatonic, she slowly crossed the room, piteously begging, "Please not me, please. I clean well. I am good servant. Please. . ."

Simon ignored the entreaty, though her anguish and terror were making his own blood lust rise. The girl was quite right in her argument, she was a good servant—they all were. The human spirit and capacity for hope never failed to astonish him. All his prisoners maintained perfect order in the castle. They seemed to believe that if they behaved, if they proved their worth, Simon would not harm them as he'd done to their less fortunate counterparts. Of course, such hope was utterly foolish—the world economy being what it was, Simon would never run out of food for Mikal or free help to run his home.

The girl broke out into uncontrollable tremors as they climbed the stone staircase and Mikal's cries became audible to her mortal ears. Her knees gave out and Simon had to yank her off her feet, carrying her the last few steps. The increased closeness, throwing her neck against his mouth, proved too much

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temptation and Simon's blood teeth punctured her young, tender neck to drink of the warm nectar pouring down his throat.

How pleasant it would be to drain her utterly but his son needed the blood far more than he did. Reluctantly, Simon pulled away from the girl after only a few swallows, enough to take the edge off his hunger momentarily. After Mikal fed, Simon would secure his own meal.

At least now, the girl was more docile. She'd been drained of any fight, though there was still more than enough blood in her to sate Mikal. Throwing open the thick wooden door to the chamber, Simon heard his son's screams increase when his sharp nose picked up the human's scent.

Simon dropped the girl, semi-conscious and no longer aware of her surroundings on the floor, and plucked Mikal from his playpen. He set the boy down and watched him toddle toward the girl with the lightning fast determination of a hunting cat.

No longer did Simon have to hold his son up to a human while the boy fastened his small, pointy fangs to their neck or wrists. Now Mikal was capable, if the prey was prone and unable to defend itself, of feeding by himself.

Simon watched in fascination as Mikal's head, with its sleek cap of thick, dark hair, bent toward her neck and he began to feed. A few minutes later, Mikal's deformities vanished; his skin and eyes regained their normal tones.

While Mikal fed, Simon reflected on the child's vampiric progress. As of yet, the child had no ability to travel the astral plane like his father, but his telekinetic ability was growing quickly. Even better, he was learning to control it—no longer did Simon have to keep the child in a room with no moveable objects for fear he might harm himself.

Mikal's other major improvement from infancy was his eyesight. When Mikal was newborn, his eyes had been extremely sensitive to light... even a candle made him flinch and cry. But over the past six months, his pupils and retinas had strengthened. Now Mikal tolerated artificial light and Simon was sure the child, product of the first successful mating between two vampires, would one day be able to walk in sunlight.

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"All dead," Mikal sighed and raised his blood-stained mouth from the girl. At first, Mikal hadn't understood death, had wailed and screamed when the blood supply ended, banging his feet and fists against the floor like any ordinary child in the midst of a temper tantrum. But a few slaps from his annoyed father and his own instinct had led him to abandon corpses quietly once he had all he could of them.

Simon nodded and picked the child up, using a damp cloth to clean his face and dressed him in fresh garments. Mikal made no effort to resist his father's ministrations but neither did he seem to welcome them.

As Simon held the indifferent boy, he remembered Mikal's mortal twin, Elizabeth, and his heart contracted painfully. How different the little girl was from her brother, so appealing in her innocence and helplessness. Elizabeth... how he missed her, longed to rear his mortal girl with her mother.

Simon glanced over at the painting he'd been working on of Meghann nursing Elizabeth. He'd worked on the piece for more than six months now and still wasn't satisfied. It was a fair rendering of a pretty young mother feeding her baby, but Simon was frustrated by his failure to capture the maternal radiance he'd seen shining in Meghann's eyes. Meghann had never looked as beautiful to him as she had that night she first held their mortal daughter in her arms, the night Simon had had to leave her and take Mikal far from prying eyes.

Simon knew these thoughts of his consort and Elizabeth were dangerous, that his yearning for them made him resent Mikal. Simon had to remind himself that it wasn't the boy's fault Meghann had borne twin children, one a vampire that must be sheltered from all that would try to destroy him and the other a mortal that must be sheltered from the brother who would surely grow to despise Elizabeth for not needing to be hidden from the world as he was.

While Mikal was raised in obscurity and Elizabeth was safe with Meghann, Simon's responsibility was to foster in his son the strength and cunning that would ensure his safety and someday allow him to leave this wretched highland backwater.

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With that thought in mind, Simon began Mikal's lessons for the evening. "You must begin learning to capture the humans on your own, young one. I cannot always bring them to you."

Mikal listened carefully, his fully restored silver eyes concentrating on Simon with an attention span that belied his chronological age. "How do you get them, Father?"

Simon laughed, resisting an urge to swing Mikal into his lap, and stretched out beside him on the gray stone floor. From past experience, he knew the child would resist any gesture of affection. "We have many ways of luring the mortals to our side and making them bend to our will. But you are too young to learn the arts of mesmerism just yet. Until you are old enough to hold them with your mind, you must deceive the humans, play on the pity and adoration they will feel for any small, helpless child. Remember what I told you about weeping?"

Mikal nodded and immediately began a false sobbing of great piteousness.

"Not yet," Simon said and held up his hand, pleased when the child shut off his cries with the ease of flicking off a light switch. "I will go now and secure another human. Wait until you pick up the scent outside the door and then begin to cry."

Simon flew back downstairs and saw the appalled glances of his servants. The false sense of relief they'd felt when Simon took the Hindi girl vanished now that he'd come back for another of their kind. Would there be still more deaths before he chained them up for the day? Of course, they dared not protest for fear Simon might dispose of the whole miserable pack. He grabbed a pretty blond Romanian, thinking she would be a most delectable meal; Simon intended to feed off the lion's share of her blood.

Outside the great, thick door, a perfectly normal child's crying began and Simon saw the young woman's terror subside at the thought of a child more helpless than she needing her.

Simon opened the door and leaned against the doorframe, watching the girl run to Mikal, exclaiming in her Eastern European dialect, "Oh, poor little child, poor boy! What does this dreadful man do to you?"

Careful, Simon thought at Mikal, sobbing and holding his arms out to the girl in an appealing manner. *Don't show your*

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blood teeth; keep your lips over them. Don't strike, too soon, let her kneel down before you lunge...

Mikal followed his father's commands perfectly; only when the girl knelt by his side and her movement to scoop him up brought her neck within range of his mouth did Mikal bite her.

The girl let out a stunned scream and tried to pull away from Mikal but the boy had a firm purchase on her neck and began drinking greedily, quickly draining the girl's strength to resist. Shocked and in great physical pain, the girl slumped next to Mikal, her skin rapidly losing color as he fed.

"Well done," Simon complimented Mikal before he wrenched the child from the mortal girl and began feeding from a vein in her breast.

"Mine!" Mikal howled in outrage and actually yanked on his father's hair to try and pull him away from the prey.

Annoyed at being interrupted while he fed, Simon dropped the unconscious girl to the floor and pulled Mikal over his knee, administering a swift spanking. "Never raise your hand to me, boy. Next time my reprimand will not be so light."

Simon deposited the screeching child, now sobbing in earnest, in his playpen and returned to the mortal girl, deciding to finish her off by feeding from the femoral artery in her left thigh.

"Mine! Mine! Mine!" Mikal continued to howl, but Simon paid him no mind as he drank the girl's youthful, vigorous blood. Though Mikal was smart enough to climb out of the enclosure, Simon had enchanted the playpen with a magical barrier Mikal could not exit unless his father allowed it.

"What in the world is this racket?" a female voice demanded and Simon smiled up at Adelaide, his nursemaid during his mortal lifetime and now immortal nanny to his son. She'd been in her early fifties when Simon transformed her, still a handsome woman with salt-and-pepper hair and a buxom figure, her age betrayed only by a small webbing of crow's feet around her eyes and a slight hint of sag under her jaw.

"Good evening, Adelaide," Simon said and pulled a steaming washcloth out of a brazier to clean his face. "I trust you've fed this evening."

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"I fed a few nights ago and I have not your insatiable appetites," Adelaide retorted, the strong Scottish burr Simon remembered in her mortal voice reduced by four centuries spent on various continents to a mere hint of accent. "Now tell me what you've done to that poor child to make him carry on so."

"The boy interfered with my meal," Simon explained and Adelaide raced over to the playpen to remove the weeping child.

"Hush now, lovey," Adelaide crooned, holding the child with an expert air borne of vast experience. Simon noted with amusement that Mikal merely looked bored at the soothing.

"She was mine," Mikal said accusingly to Simon, impatiently brushing Adelaide's hands away from his face.

"My son," Simon said and grasped the boy's chin between his thumb and forefinger, "until you stand before me as a man with the means to support yourself, nothing belongs to you. Everything you have is a result of my largess and I may give it or take it away as I deem fit."

"You great, dumb lummo!" Adelaide blazed and Mikal's odd eyes showed appraising interest at her fury. "You cannot speak to a child like that!"

"I may speak to my child however I wish," Simon said evenly and pulled Mikal from her, returning the boy to his playpen. Simon handed the child some picture books and raised his eyebrows at the speculative glance his son shot him. This was no sulky pout but the measuring look of an adult, saying plainly he would neither forget nor forgive this incident

"Excellent," Simon praised and rewarded Mikal with the rare treat of a bottle filled with blood from several different victims. "You have seen you must bow down to my will for now, but some part of you looks to gaining revenge in the future. You learn quickly, son."

Something that might have been a smile crossed the child's face before he began suckling noisily at the rubber nipple on his bottle while he scanned *The Three Little Pigs*.

"Have you not a brain in your head?" Adelaide demanded with the same loving exasperation Simon had heard in her voice over four hundred years. Normally Simon would not entertain anyone upbraiding him but Adelaide had a special place in his

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heart. As his birth mother had died when he was three, Adelaide was the only mother Simon had ever known. He'd never forget how she'd sheltered him from his cruel father and two elder brothers, demanding her young charge be educated in a manner befitting a peer of the realm. If not for Adelaide, Simon could only speculate on how different, and most likely worse, his life would have been.

"A rather well-functioning one," Simon answered her question and invited her to join him at the polished oak table he'd set up in an alcove by the stained-glass, diamond-shaped windows.

"I have reason to doubt that," Adelaide muttered and accepted the proffered glass of single malt scotch. "What do you think you are doing with your son? Do you mean to rear him to despise you as you loathed your father? I do not think I need to remind you how that father-son relationship ended."

Simon smiled, remembering that his first success with the Black Arts came the night he had a demon dispose of his father. "Mikal will not make an attempt on my life simply because I discipline him."

"What you are doing is not discipline! You are bullying that boy and I can already see the resentment building in him."

Simon slammed his drink down with a thud that reverberated through the spacious chamber and glared at his former nurse. "Bullying? Have you forgotten what that child is? Adelaide, Mikal is the only vampire to be born, not made. You know the power he'll have one day. When Mikal grows to manhood, he'll be able to walk in sunlight, and we may have that gift as well by drinking his blood. But that's only if he survives long enough to achieve his destiny. Do I need to remind you of the fools that will try to destroy him for no better reason than that he is my son, let alone that his own might will make them weak as mortals compared with him? Once Mikal leaves this isle, there is no corner of the world that will be safe for him. He must be bred to have the heart and mind of a warrior. Yes, I push him, and there is little room for coddling in his upbringing. Mikal must grow up fierce and hard if he is to meet the challenges his fate will set

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before him. I'll not have the boy turning into a timid milksop like the pathetic nothings mortals are churning out these days."

"What would you turn the boy into?" Adelaide demanded. "If you smash any softness within him, that means the child will have no love in his heart for anyone—including you. Have you thought on why he'd bother to keep you alive then, if the day comes when Mikal's more powerful than you and he feels nothing for you but resentment? Or do you truly think you're so omniscient no one can destroy you?"

"Why should Mikal resent me? Because I shelter him until he's old enough to fight for himself? Because I will teach him all I know, make him my apprentice as I've done with no other before him? You talk of the child needing sentiment and petting—open your eyes, Adelaide. The boy spurns any affectionate gesture of yours, does he not?"

"That is why you must tread a careful line with him," Adelaide replied, undaunted. "Mikal is cold and withdrawn by nature. Love does not come easily to him. Meghann felt the darkness within Mikal before you took him from her... she writes to me that she fears what it might metamorphose into. Meghann felt all that when the child was an infant; her feelings have grown stronger in the past year. Why are you blinding yourself, Simon? Can you not feel that unfathomable need for destruction and harm inside your son? Instill some kind of affection in that boy or he may well develop into what the mortals' term a sociopath."

Simon laughed heartily and poured himself a fresh shot, shrugging when Adelaide refused a refill. "Now I know you've been corresponding with Meghann—sociopath is a word only my little psychologist would use. Do you know she threw that term in my face to describe me when she tried to leave me? She recanted her views on my behavior, just as she'll get over these baseless fears about Mikal."

"Meghann left you because you refused to let go of your old-fashioned blather about masters and tried to dominate her," Adelaide said, referring to the forty years when Simon and Meghann were separated and she sought shelter with Simon's deadliest enemy, the vampire priest, Alcuin. It wasn't until Simon managed to slay Alcuin two years ago that he was able to reclaim

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Meghann. "I warned you that no modern girl, especially one as vivacious and spirited as the woman you described to me, would accept being nothing more than your chattel. I was right then and I'm right now when I tell you to honor your vow to Meghann and raise him as she would if she was here."

"But Meghann is not here," Simon said calmly. "And that foolishness of what she wants for Mikal is the reason why. Meghann has a soft heart—wonderful for the raising of our daughter, but she'd damage our son with those idiotic notions of good and evil she picked up from Alcuin."

"Meghann is not a soft fool to be dismissed simply because she lacks your ruthlessness!" Adelaide snapped. "She was canny enough to get a stake through your heart and evade you for forty years. You love the girl, I'll grant you that, but you show her no respect and that will lead to the demise of your relationship. Simon, don't you understand Meghann will leave you for good when she learns that you deliberately raised her son in contradiction of all her directives?"

Adelaide did not even have time to register the white-hot fury in Simon's eyes before he lunged over the table and grabbed her throat, placing a Bowie knife to her heart. Any sudden movement on her part and the knife would impale her.

"We go back a long way, nurse," Simon said in a low, menacing whisper as his knife tore through her clothes and nipped her skin. "I respect you deeply and I care for you. But I will not hesitate to slay you if you breathe a word of any discontent you feel to Meghann. What Meghann does not know about Mikal's upbringing cannot harm her. She has Elizabeth to keep her content until we reunite. I don't mind your correspondence with Meghann; continue to write her if that is your desire. But there will be no details in your letters; you tell her Mikal is healthy and safe and that is all you write. I don't want Meghann spending the next eighteen years pining for a child she cannot have... it might distract her from caring for Elizabeth properly. Is that understood?"

"Yes," Adelaide said immediately, knowing the only thing that placated Simon in one of his fits was immediate compliance. She wasn't displeased or hurt at Simon's behavior—it would take

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a great deal more than some little knife and hot words to turn her against him. Adelaide knew Simon Baldevar far better than he knew himself. She'd known him since he was a wee, screaming babe in her arms and then the ambitious young man that made his own fortune before he found immortality. He hadn't done either of those things by allowing anyone to perceive weakness in him. No, Adelaide wasn't hurt but she was disturbed at how thickheaded and stubborn he was being regarding Mikal.

"Then we shall consider this unpleasantness disposed of for good." After he licked a drop of her blood off the knife, Simon helped Adelaide out of her chair and escorted her to the door. "I must take a business trip. After all, I have spent a year in this miserable, cold hovel and neglected my interests. The computer has assisted me greatly, but the time has come to inspect my holdings personally. Besides, Mikal will need more food soon. Go and pack my bags and inform the pilot I wish him to be at Heathrow tomorrow evening at nine o'clock sharp."

"How long will you be gone?" Adelaide questioned calmly and saw Simon's eyes gleam with respect at her nonchalant attitude. The others he transformed always either knuckled under his harshness or made fruitless plans to destroy him for his humiliation of them. They never understood that Simon was a hard but fair master. After a punishment or reprimand, his rage was forgotten and he treated the disciplined person as he had before whatever they'd done to displease him.

"Several weeks... a month at most. I leave Mikal in your most capable hands," Simon said with a cool grin that showed he respected Adelaide enough to believe she would honor her word while he was gone and not take advantage of his absence to contact Meghann.

"Simon, wait," Adelaide said before he could close the tower door. "I am writing to Meghann this night and I wish to enclose this for Elizabeth. She must know of her father if she is to love you."

"Adelaide," Simon said softly at the antique miniature painting she pulled out of her pocket. It had been painted in 1590, when Simon was almost thirty years old, three years before he transformed. "Good nurse, I know your intentions toward me and

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mine are beyond reproach that any action on your part stems from love. Send the miniature to Meghann that she may show it to Elizabeth."

Adelaide smiled and left the tower to carry out Simon's bidding, knowing the praise was as close as Simon would come to apologizing for his behavior.

She also knew Simon had only written to Meghann once since he left her, despite the many letters Meghann sent him concerning their daughter's progress. Some might view Simon's behavior as cold but Adelaide knew he simply couldn't bear a correspondence with Meghann knowing he couldn't see her. A clandestine visit to Meghann and Elizabeth was out of the question—part of Mikal's present security stemmed from the other vampires of the world believing that Elizabeth was Simon and Meghann's only child. The immortals felt nothing but contempt for the mortal baby and left her and Meghann alone, believing Lord Baldevar's seeming abandonment of them showed they were no threat.

Adelaide sighed; she knew what it had cost Simon to leave Meghann just when he'd finally gotten her to accept him again. She also knew Simon's intentions for Mikal were good, wanting the child to grow tough and capable, but couldn't he see that he was going to turn Mikal into a monster?

Adelaide was not scared of the death Simon had promised her if she went to Meghann with her fears. She would go ahead and inform Meghann anyway if she thought it would benefit Mikal, but she knew Meghann didn't have the same sway over Simon's mind as she had over his heart. Simon might not listen to her any more than he did to Adelaide.

Right now, Adelaide could see only one path available to her. Simon had to spend a great deal of time away from this island to protect his wealth and make sure his enemies did not forget his power over them.

When he was away, Adelaide would attempt to instill in Mikal the love and sensitivity Meghann wished her son to have. She would also work on easing Simon away from his current position that any softness would spoil the child.

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If that didn't work, then God help them all for Adelaide knew very well who Mikal's first victim would be if she didn't find a way to stem the remorseless evil she sensed in the child—the vampire that made him what he was. And if Mikal was successful in slaughtering his father, then there would be no one in the world to check him or keep him from destroying everything in his path... no one at all.