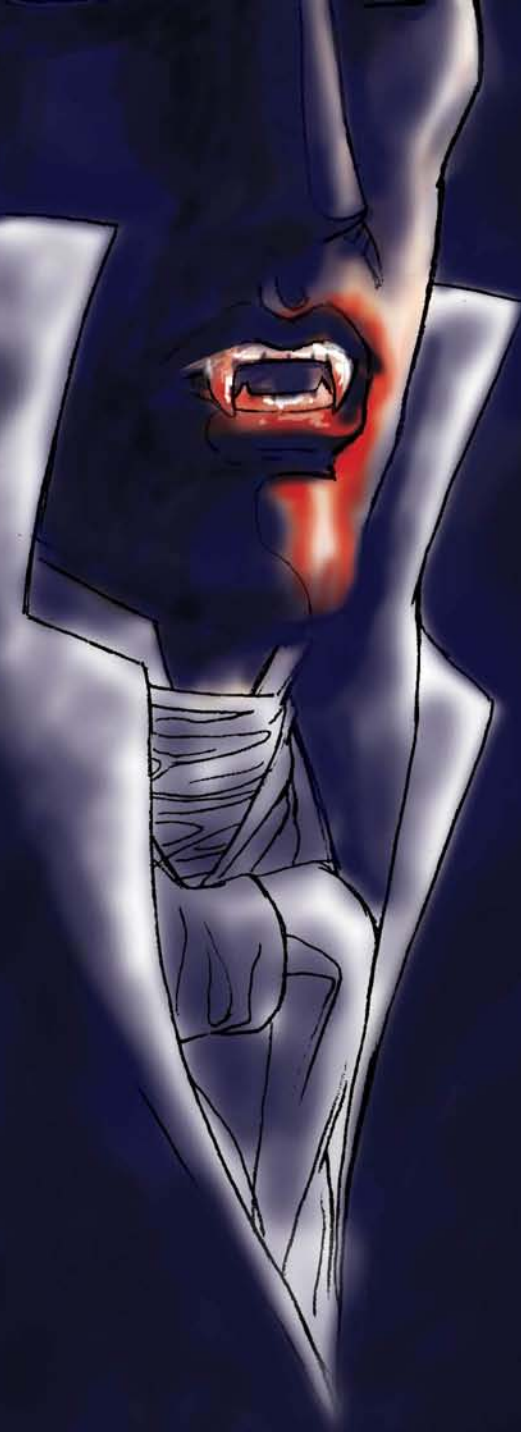


*Kelley Armstrong*



*Rebirth*

*xaviere\_daumarie@hotmail.com*

# Rebirth

England  
1802

Aaron stumbled from the tavern and gasped as the first blast of cold air slapped his face. He paused in the doorway and took a deep breath, letting it wash some of the toxins from his lungs . . . and maybe a few from his bloodstream as well. Geoffrey jostled him from behind, and Aaron gave him a good-natured shoulder that sent his friend staggering back.

“Move it, you big ox,” John said, kneeling Aaron in the rear.

“Just push me out of the way.” Aaron shot a grin over his shoulder. “Or maybe you should squeeze past instead. You’re skinny enough.”

Aaron stepped onto the cobblestone street and stopped for another gulp of fresh air. Not exactly fresh, he thought with a grimace. The narrow street stunk of shit—horse shit, dog shit, human shit—that’s what came of living so close you couldn’t take a crap without piling it on someone else’s. Give him farm life any day. There was plenty of shit there too, but at least there was room to spread it around.

He squinted up and down the street, his ale-soaked brain struggling to remember which way they’d come. That was another problem with towns. You couldn’t see a damn thing. The

buildings not only crowded your view, they crowded out the moonlight. The few lanterns dotting the street added more smoke than light.

“Inn’s this way,” Geoffrey said, smacking Aaron’s arm. “Come on before the mistress locks the door.”

Aaron grunted. She’d locked them out the last time, and it had been a long, cold night on the street. Aaron and Geoffrey came to the city for a weekend every other month, bringing goods to market. They’d finished their work this morning, but their families didn’t expect them back until Sunday night, knowing that any young man willing to stay home and help his parents on the farm deserved time now and then to sample the cosmopolitan treats he was missing.

One of those “treats” peered out from an alley as they passed. She met Aaron’s gaze and batted her lashes in what he supposed was meant to be a come-hither look, but seemed more like soot caught in her eyes. She couldn’t have been more than thirteen, the bodice of her dirty dress stuffed to simulate the curves she wouldn’t see for another few years . . . if she lived that long.

Aaron reached into his pocket, walked over and pressed a few coins into the whore’s palm. A look, part relief, part trepidation sparked in her eyes, then they clouded with confusion as he walked back to his friends.

John bumped against him. “How drunk are you? You forgot to take what you paid for.”

“Oh, Aaron never has to pay for it,” Geoffrey said. “A tart sees him coming and she closes her purse and opens her legs.”

“If you don’t want it, I’ll take it.”

John started to turn, but Aaron grabbed his shoulder and steered him forward.

“What?” John said. “It’s paid for.”

As they stumbled past an alley, a whimper snaked out from the darkness within. Then the crack of fist hitting flesh.

Aaron stopped, drunken grin sliding from his lips.

“Ya gotta have more than that,” a voice rumbled. “Find it . . . or I will.”

“Aaron . . .” Geoffrey said, plucking Aaron’s sleeve. “It’s none of your business and, for once, let’s leave it that way, or we’ll be late and spend another night on the street.”

Aaron brushed his friend off and strode into the alley. As he walked, his vision cleared and his steps steadied, the effects of the ale sloughing off as he focused on the voices. He pulled himself up to his full height and peeled off his jacket. That was often enough—tower over the thug and give him a good look at the muscles earned in life on a farm, and most would decide they really didn’t need that few pence tonight after all. As he approached the two—a black-haired lout and a quaking shopkeeper—his gaze went to the lout’s hands, looking for a weapon. Nothing. Good.

Aaron grabbed the lout’s shoulder. “You want to rob someone? Try me.”

The lout’s hand slammed forward. A flash of metal. Where had that come—? Before Aaron could finish the thought the blade drove into his chest, right under the breastbone. He shoved the man away and staggered back into the wall. His hands went to his chest. Blood pumped out over his fingers. The lout came at him again, but the sound of running footsteps made him think better of it and he ran off into the darkness.

“Aaron? Aaron!”

Aaron tried to take a step, but faltered and slammed back against the wall. For a second, he stood there, knees locked, forcing himself to stay up. Then he crumpled.

Aaron twisted in his bed. Too small. The damned thing dug into both his shoulders and hit the top of his head and bottoms of his feet. Inns. They cram as many people into a room as they can, and if you're more than five-foot-six, well, that's not their fault. Eyes still closed he took a deep breath. Flowers . . . and a faint musty smell. The mistress probably set out fresh blooms to cover the smell, so she wouldn't have to change the bedding more than once a month.

He should open his eyes. He knew that—but he also knew that first blare of morning sun was going to feel like Satan's imps stabbing pitchforks in his eyes. He shouldn't drink so much. He wasn't used to it and he paid for his folly every morning after. Speaking of folly . . . he let out a groan. The lout in the alley. Next time he decided to rescue someone, he would take that extra moment to make damned sure the lout wasn't concealing a knife. Now he *really* didn't want to get up. He'd been stabbed in the chest once before, and it had taken him weeks to recover.

His father was going to kill him. He remembered the last time, when he'd been unable to lift anything heavier than a piglet for a month. His father had to do all the chores, and he'd keep giving him that look, muttering "Aaron, Aaron, Aaron," his weathered and wrinkled face collapsing in a deep sigh. He kept his gaze down when he did it, to cover the pride in his eyes.

"A big strong boy with a good heart," he'd boast to the neighbors when he thought Aaron couldn't hear. "What more could a father want?"

"God gave you strength," his mother always said. "Always remember that it's a gift, and gifts from God are to be used in the service of God. Help those less fortunate than you, and you'll please Him."

Helping others, though, did not mean getting stabbed and being unable to help his aging father. His mother would be very firm about that.

“Be *careful*, Aaron,” she’d say. “You’re too quick to act. Take a moment to *think* as well.”

Maybe he could persuade one of his brothers to come back home for a month and help. Even as the thought passed through, he dismissed it. They had their own families and jobs and farms. He was the only one left . . . and his father relied on him. He groaned again.

Enough of that. Time to grit his teeth and get up. You make your bed; you lie in it. Next time, look closer for the damned knife.

He pulled up his knees. They struck something with a hollow thwack. He opened one eye. The light didn’t hurt . . . probably because there hardly was any. The wavering glow of candlelight only cast a dim glow in the dark room. Was it still night?

He reached sideways, to brace himself as he sat up. His hand smacked against wood. A bed with sides on it? Had Geoffrey and the others dumped him in a horse trough again?

He opened the other eye. Still good. Grabbing the sides, he heaved himself up, bracing for the throb of pain through his chest. It didn’t come. Had he dreamed the stabbing? His fingers moved to his chest. Felt fine . . . fine and whole. Damned cheap ale. Giving him nightmares now.

He sat up and blinked. A dark empty room, lit only by a few candles. Vaguely familiar . . . There was a board across his box-like bed, pushed sideways away from his head and chest. That’s what he’d hit his knees on. A black-robed figure sat near his feet. The soft sound of regular breathing came from the figure. Asleep.

Aaron rubbed his eyes. Where the hell was he? It looked familiar. He blinked, memory clicking. It looked like the inside of the family mausoleum. Well, not really a mausoleum . . . it was made of roughhewn wood, not stone and marble. A mausoleum for a farmer’s family was

ridiculous . . . as every neighbor had, at some point, whispered to another. But that was the condition of marriage his mother had made.

“My children must be buried above ground,” she’d told his father. “It is our way.”

His father hadn’t argued. Who knew what *her* ways were? She was a Jew and a foreigner and all he knew was that this beautiful young woman he’d met in London was willing to marry him, a forty-year-old bachelor, and bear his sons. She could have said she wanted him to build her a tower to the moon, and he’d have done it.

As for why Aaron was waking up in the mausoleum . . . well, obviously the ale was giving him nightmares. Damn. He’d really hoped the *stabbing* part of his evening had been the dream, not the waking. He moved to lie back down and return to sleep when his knees knocked the board again, this time sending it clattering to the floor. The figure in the chair jumped up, her hood falling back. A dark-haired woman, gracefully sliding into middle-age—his mother.

“Aaron!”

She rushed to him, hands grabbing his shoulders, fingers digging in. Her face loomed over his—blotchy with tears, eyes swollen, hair bedraggled.

“Say something,” she whispered. “Please.”

“I drank too much. Again.”

Her arms flew around him, head going to his chest, burrowing in, shoulders convulsing in a silent sob.

“I prayed it would be you,” she whispered. “I know it’s not right for a mother to have favorites, but I always hoped—if God chose one of my children for the blessing, I hoped it would be you. And then after . . .” She hiccuped a sob. “I prayed, Aaron. I *prayed* you’d be the one.”

“What one?” He pulled back to look at her. “I really think I drank too much. Maybe if I just go back to sleep—”

He tried to lie down, but her fingers dug into his shoulders.

“No! There’s no time. Your father . . . he’s already worried about me. He wants to seal the coffin. It’s been three days. It must be sealed.”

“Seal? Coffin?” Aaron looked down. “I’m sleeping in a coffin?”

His mother took his hand and pressed it to a spot above her breast. “What do you feel, Aaron?”

His fingers almost trembled with the pound of her racing heart. Before he could answer, she moved the fingers to his own breast . . . and they went still.

“Now what do you feel?”

“Noth—Bloody hell!” He jumped, almost tumbling back into the coffin. “What—”

“You’re *alive*.” His mother words were harsh with emphasis. “A different kind of life, Aaron, but you are alive and that’s all that matters.”

“All that—? I’m not breathing! I don’t have a—”

“You died, and you’ve been born again. It’s a gift of my blood. A secret gift, told to each woman before she weds. Every generation only a few are blessed. They die, and return to live again . . . to live, and live, and live, and nothing can kill them. A blessing beyond measure.”

“So I’m . . . alive?” He chewed his lip, then slowly nodded. “All right. But what do we tell Father?”

Her gaze dropped. “We can’t tell him, Aaron. You . . . you can’t ever see him again.” She hugged him again. “I’m so sorry. But he wouldn’t understand. What you are . . . they have a name for it. They . . . they do not understand it.”

“What am I?” he said slowly.

When his mother didn't answer, he reached up, wrapped his hands around her upper arms and pulled her away from him, his gaze going to hers.

“Mother . . . what am I?”

She wouldn't look him in the eye. “They . . . they call it a . . . a vampire, Aaron, but they don't understand—”

“A vampire!”

“It is not what they think, Aaron. You are not some soulless demon. You can feel that. You are still you, still my son, still as good and as God-fearing a man as you ever were.”

He forced her chin up, to meet her eyes. “And the . . . blood, Mother? Is that a lie, too?”

“You must feed, yes. On human blood. But it is only feeding, like taking milk from a cow or eggs from a hen. You do no harm.”

“So I do not need to kill?”

A hesitation. A long hesitation, then she hurried on, words tumbling out, almost incomprehensible, “Only once a year, before the anniversary of your death.”

“And if I do not?”

Her gaze met his then, eyes blazing. “You must Aaron. You must.”

“Kill another person to prolong my own life?”

She hesitated again, and the struggle in her eyes sliced him to the core, the conscience of a moral woman at battle with the ferocious instinct of a mother who will do anything to keep her child alive.

“You can make careful choices,” she said softly. “Find those who are dying, and relieve them of their suffering. It is only once a year, Aaron. There are people, many people, who are not long

for this earth. Take their lives, and do some good with it. Honor God in that way, and He will understand.”

God? Aaron bit back the word before it flew from his mouth. He suspected God had very little to do with this “blessing,” but if his mother believed so, if she’d convinced herself that it was so, then he would not destroy her faith by questioning the origin of this taint in her blood. And, as he sat there, holding her, listening to her cry, he knew he would not destroy her hope either. A loving, loyal son he’d been in life, and so he would be in this . . . nonlife.

She said he couldn’t see his father, which meant she’d expect him to leave. She’d want to see him again, to be sure he was still with her, however far away, but if he were to drift . . . perhaps to decide his new life lay in the New World before the year was up, she would understand. He had a year. A year of feeding on the blood of men, but if she were right, and it did them no harm, then he could stomach that. He would visit her, and feign contentment for her, and before the year was up, he would leave, and let her believe that he was still walking this earth, somewhere, happy and alive. That he could do for her, and so he would.

Aaron slunk through the alley looking for passed-out drunks. *Like a stray dog rooting for scraps in the trash*, he thought. He’d been a vampire for nearly a month now, and it wasn’t getting any easier. Instinct showed him how to feed, but he despised every second of it. It didn’t seem to have too much effect on humans—his mother had been right about that. Yet skulking through alleys like a scavenger, preying on the weak, it made his stomach churn . . . or it would, if his stomach could still churn. The only thing his gut did these days was complain when he wasn’t paying enough attention to it.

As a human, he'd always been able to skip a meal or two during harvest, work through from dawn until dusk and eat when he had time. But now he was at the mercy of his appetite. He had to feed daily, and if he was but an hour or two late, his whole body revolted, turning sluggish and slow, leaving him crawling through back-roads, looking for food.

As he walked, a cry came from the dark end of an adjoining alley. He went still, the old urge taking over, honing in on the sound like a cow hearing the bawl of her calf. *These days it was more like a hawk hearing the squeal of a mouse*, he thought. From savior to predator. A blessing indeed. He kicked a bottle into the stone wall and watched it shatter. The cry came again. His head lifted again, the old instinct refusing to buckle under the new order.

He stopped in mid-step and tilted his head. And why should it buckle? Was he not impervious to harm? So his mother claimed. Perhaps the time had come to test that assertion. The worst that could happen? He'd get another blade between the ribs and be free. But if he couldn't die, then there was nothing to keep him from doing the same thing he would have done a month ago . . . and, this time, claim a blood bounty from the would-be human predator. He heard the thug snarl something to the woman in his grasp, and Aaron's lips parted, canines lengthening. He ran his tongue over them. Now this was one meal he wouldn't mind taking.

Six months later, Aaron slid along the darkened road, his feet making no sound. He'd learned that his new body came custom-made for stealth, for hunting. Ahead of him walked a man, shoulders squared, swaggering slightly. *Proud of yourself, aren't you*, Aaron thought. It takes a brave man to beat a whore.

The world was full of would-be predators. If you knew where to look, you could find one any day of the week, and with very little effort. Aaron no longer worried about the effects of his blood-taking. If one of his new “victims” suffered a bruised neck or a day or two of weakness, he wouldn’t feel guilty. A world of difference from slinking through alleys. He had his power back, and his pride.

His mother had noticed the change almost immediately.

“See,” she said every time he visited her. “You are adjusting. You are *living*.”

And so he would continue to live, for another half-year. He’d already begun hinting about traveling to the New World, and his mother was pleased, seeing this as a sign that he was planning for his future, that he planned to have a future.

A couple rounded the corner and headed Aaron’s way. In an instant, his bearing changed, shoulders lifting, slowing, stride shortening, jauntier, the smooth glide vanishing. He reined in his field of attention, too, concerned only with his immediate surroundings, not straining to see and hear his target. A friendly smile and tip of his head as the couple passed. He walked another half-dozen steps, glanced over his shoulder at them, then swung his gaze around, slow and careful. When he was certain he was alone, the predator returned.

As Aaron drew close enough to hear the clomp of the man’s boots, his fangs began to extend. An automatic reaction, like salivating. He forced himself to think of something else, of where he’d spend the night, and the canines retracted. He nodded, pleased to have mastered this trick of control.

When his quarry hit a T-intersection at the end of the lane, Aaron closed his eyes to test another developing skill. He counted to twenty, then looked. The man was gone. Turned left, his gut said. He hurried to the crossroad and looked each way. There, ten yards to the left, was the

man. Aaron grinned. It'd been weeks since he'd "guessed" wrong. He hadn't figured out how he could track people. His sense of smell was better attuned to only the scent of blood. This tracking skill seemed more like a sixth sense, being able to "feel" a presence, as if the pulse of life were vibrating to him through the air. Lately he'd even begun to be able to separate "presences" and could track a target through a group—albeit a small group—of people.

As he drew closer to his quarry, he slid into the shadows. No real need to hide. He was, after all, he thought with a small grin, impervious to harm. Still, there was no sense calling attention to himself. A slow glide through the shadows then, once he was close enough to smell the man's unwashed body, he'd swoop out and snatch him up, and his victim would be unconscious before he was even sure he'd been attacked. *Like a hawk diving for a mouse*, Aaron thought, and his grin widened.

Something whispered behind him. Aaron swung around and focused on the sound with a speed and precision that still astounded him. No one was there. He didn't need his eyes and ears to tell him that—he sensed it or, more accurately, *failed* to sense anyone. He replayed the sound in his mind. The whisper of leaves? The rustle of blowing paper? Both logical explanations . . . except that he'd been plagued by these odd noises behind him—quite natural noises of various types—for days now. Aaron took a slower, harder look around. Every sense told him there was no living being there, and yet . . .

He shook off his unease and loped off to catch up with dinner.

Aaron took one last draught of blood, shivering as the heat of it streamed down his throat. Then, with more reluctance than he cared to admit, he ran his tongue over the puncture wounds to stop the blood flow. He lifted his head and eased back on his haunches.

“You can take more than that.”

Aaron whirled sideways so fast he almost toppled over. There, less than a foot away, stood a woman. A woman who gave off no “sense” of life, who had slipped up on him as quiet as a phantom. Her dark green woolen cloak blended into the shadows, only accentuating her copper red hair and pale skin. Under the cloak, Aaron caught a glimpse of a dress—a fine dress, as finely made as the cloak, spun from the kind of cloud-soft wool he’d only ever seen in shops.

She wasn’t beautiful, and she had to be almost as old as his mother, but there was something about her that dared him to look away, maybe the piercing stare of her green eyes or the almost arrogant tilt to her sharp chin or the slightly bemused smile on her lips—or maybe it was all three of those things, sending out different messages and challenging his brain to figure out what the combination meant.

“You can take more than that,” she said again. When he only stared, she arched her brows. “Well?”

“You’re a . . . vampire,” he said slowly.

A slight roll of her eyes. “I should hope so. Do you have many humans popping ’round to give you pointers on blood-taking?”

“You’ve been following me.”

A graceful shrug of her shoulders. “Curiosity. The curse of our race. Live long enough and anything new tickles your fancy. And you certainly are new. Hereditary, I presume.”

When his brows knitted, she said, “Vampirism is in your bloodline.”

“Is there any other way?”

“Yes, but it’s very difficult, not to be undertaken by the faint of heart or the uninformed, and you don’t strike me as the kind of young man who would choose such a thing.”

“Choose?” His lip curled. “Who *would* choose such a thing?”

Another elegant shrug, then she waved at the unconscious man. “You can feed more without killing him. Quite a bit more. It’s easier that way, so you don’t need to hunt almost every night.” Her gaze met his. “Unless you like to hunt every night.”

When he didn’t answer, she continued, “Whether one enjoys the hunt or not, every night can be a bit taxing, and inconvenient. Continue feeding then and I will—”

“I don’t want to kill him.”

An exasperated sigh. “May I finish? I was about to say that I will show you how to tell when you’ve taken enough, to stop before you pose any danger to his life.” An arch of the brows. “Acceptable?”

He nodded, but did nothing.

Her lips twisted in a smile. “Here, let me turn my back, and give you some privacy.”

He waited until she’d turned around, then repositioned himself on the other side of the man, so he could see her while feeding. Several times he stopped drinking, not trusting her to tell him when to cease. With that exasperated patience, she had him continually check the man’s pulse and, so long as it was strong, he could continue. When the pulse finally fluttered, she told him to stop.

He closed his eyes, and luxuriated in the warm heaviness of a full stomach.

“Better?” she said.

He opened his eyes to see her watching him. He blinked, forced his fangs to retract and got to his feet, gaze turned from hers.

“I can teach you more,” she said, voice almost a purr.

“I don’t—thank you, but no. I don’t—won’t need it.”

He expected her to press for an explanation, but she said nothing, just studied him then nodded, that same, infuriating, half-smile on her lips.

“You don’t intend to make your first kill,” she said. “That would be quite a . . . waste, don’t you think?”

He didn’t answer.

“Well, perhaps then, if you are in your . . . final months, you could use some companionship, someone you can talk to. It does get rather difficult, doesn’t it? Talking to people, being with them, always worrying whether they’ll see what you are, never quite able to stop thinking about what *they* are.”

“I’d like . . . I want to be left alone.”

A polite nod. “As you wish.”

With that, she turned and walked away.

As the months passed, Aaron found his mind often slipping back to the red-haired vampire. He’d be feeding, and hear her voice, telling him how to watch for signs that he’d drunk too much. Or he’d be scooting through a busy market, always nervous about getting too close to humans, and he’d wonder if such caution was needed. Could they see that he wasn’t breathing? Would they

sense that his heart didn't beat? She could have told him that, probably eased his anxieties with tips and tricks for blending into the human world. Or he'd be walking at midday and think about the first time he'd ventured forth after sunrise, crouched under a drawn curtain, wagging his fingers over the sill, tensed, certain they'd burst into flame as the legends always said. She'd probably get a laugh out of that, maybe tell him stories of other "sun-wary" vampires.

Mostly, though, he thought about her when he was sitting in the corner of a bar or waking in an inn, surrounded by strangers, not daring to say more than a word or two. For someone who'd always valued the company of others, this was the worst part of his new life: the loneliness. Now and then, he'd hear a whisper or a rustle behind him when he was hunting, and he'd turn to look for her. Then he'd see the newspaper blowing past or the dead leaves scraping against a window pane, and he'd tell himself that what he felt was relief. He'd told her to leave him alone and she had.

As the anniversary of his death approached, Aaron's resolve didn't falter. He enacted the final step of his plan, telling his mother that he was setting out for the New World, an action she'd come to expect after his months of talking about it. Naturally, once gone, he couldn't contact her—he couldn't send a post and risk his father recognizing his handwriting—but his mother understood that, and bid him farewell with only a few tears. He hated deceiving her but, given the choice between lying to her and breaking her heart, he supposed God would forgive him the falsehood. As for whether God would forgive the rest . . . well, Aaron refused to fret over it. He'd done the best he could with the hand Fate had dealt him and, if God condemned him for his

choices, that was His decision, and Aaron wouldn't waste a moment of what little time he had left regretting anything he'd done.

He was sitting in a tavern, enjoying an ale—a *good* ale, in a *good* tavern, surely he deserved that much in his final days. Most of what he'd earned doing odd jobs over the last year he'd given to his mother. One of his brothers had brought his wife and moved home to help with the farm, but Aaron still liked to contribute. On his last visit, though, his mother had given the money back and told him to put it to good use in the New World. So he'd donated half to charity, and was indulging himself with the remainder.

When half the tavern's patrons turned to gawk as the door swung open, Aaron turned with them. The moment he saw that flash of copper hair, he couldn't help smiling. He covered it with a gulp of beer as the red-haired vampire swept toward his table in the corner.

She cast a suspicious glance at the stool, and brushed it off before sitting.

“Ale?” he said, lifting his mug.

She only arched one brow, as if she couldn't believe he was even asking.

“They might have wine,” he said.

“If they do, I'm sure I don't want it,” she murmured. Her eyes studied his, then she gave a soft sigh. “Still haven't changed your mind, I see.”

“Nope.”

Again, that keen stare.

“You aren't brooding, are you?”

“Do I look like it?”

“Good, because there is nothing duller than a brooding vampire.” She adjusted her skirts, then waited while he polished off a quarter of his mug. “What if I were to offer you a way out?”

“A way out of what?”

“That vexing moral quandary you’ve mired yourself in.” When he frowned, she said, “A way to take a life without feeling guilty about it.”

“It’s not guilt—”

“Yes, yes,” she said, fluttering her hands. “It’s wrong. Morally reprehensible. Violates the sixth Commandment and all that. But what if there was a loophole? A way to continue living.”

“Not interested.”

Another soul-searching stare, then another sigh. “You are a stubborn one, aren’t you? Better than brooding, I suppose. Humor me, then. I believe I have found a way for you to live; at least do me the courtesy of hearing my suggestion, as payment for my earlier assistance.”

“It won’t change my mind, but you can tell me if you like.”

She rattled off an address.

When he frowned, she said, “Go there and take a look. I believe you’ll see something that would . . . interest you. How much longer do you have before your anniversary?”

“Eight days.”

“Perfect. Take three. Spend some time at that address. Then meet me here again, at midnight.”

Three days later, she was already in the tavern when he arrived, and already had a mug of ale waiting for him.

“Well?” she said when he didn’t speak fast enough.

He shrugged.

“What? You did see what I meant, didn’t you? It’s the home of a grave robber. One who supplies corpses to the medical schools. Very fresh corpses.”

“He kills people and sells the bodies.”

“And that doesn’t . . . give you any ideas?”

“If you mean killing him, I probably will. Might as well. If I’m already damned, there’s no harm in it, and if God has forgiven me for the rest, he’ll forgive me for that. Either way, the world will be better off.”

“Good,” she said, settling back in her chair. “So you’ll kill him and—”

“Oh, I’ll kill him. But as a man, not a vampire.”

Aaron almost choked on his beer, fighting not to laugh as the red-haired vampire slumped forward, looking ready to beat her head against the tabletop.

“Sorry,” he said, biting back a smile. “But I said I am resolved.”

“No, you’re stubborn, and I don’t know why I’m wasting my time trying to change your mind.”

“Because you’re bored? Looking for a challenge?” His lips curved in a slow grin. “Or maybe because I look like something you might want to decorate your bed with?”

She gave an unladylike snort. “My tastes don’t run to farm boys.”

Aaron only smiled and leaned back, stretching his legs.

“Explain this then,” she said, leaning closer. “You obviously feel compelled to do these acts of . . .” A shrug. “Charity, I suppose, perhaps through guilt or a misplaced sense of altruism. But you do them and you enjoy them. You will kill this grave-robber to help others, yet refuse to do it in a way that would prolong your life, and allow you to *continue* helping others. Does that make sense?”

He sipped his beer and gave a soft grunt.

“No, it does not,” she said, slapping her gloves on the table. “I would propose, then, that you take this grave-robber’s life, as a vampire, and live for another year, since you already intend to kill him.”

Again, Aaron only grunted. After a moment, he agreed to give it some thought.

Two days later, Aaron was in the grave-robber’s house, kneeling behind him, draining the last dregs of blood from his body.

“Make sure you take it all,” the red-haired vampire—Cassandra—said. “If you leave any, it won’t work.”

He did as she said, then leaned back, closed his eyes and shuddered.

“And so you have another year,” she murmured.

He opened one eye. “But that’s it. Just one more.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” she said. “Now, come. All this bloodletting has made me hungry. Hunt with me.”