

FREE STORY

Aria & Will

a series
by Kallysten

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Part 1

Aria's White Roses

Chapter 1

The child couldn't have been more than ten or eleven years old, yet she advanced through the centuries-old cemetery as boldly as though it had been a playground. She stumbled sometimes, her foot catching on uneven ground or an almost buried tombstone, but she never fell, never slowed down, never ceased to look straight ahead. She couldn't possibly be aware of much. The moonless sky only offered the cold light of the stars to guide her. Still, she walked on, determined as any general marching into battle that Wilhelm had ever observed.

He followed her at a distance, his attention divided between the strange child and her surroundings. The rhythm of her heart beat loud and steady in the emptiness of the night, and Wilhelm knew that if he could hear it, other vampires might as well. The last thing the city needed with the recent surge of demon attacks was for a vampire to kill a human child. Wilhelm had worked too hard to let that happen; he intended to make sure the girl was safe and home before long.

For now though, he wanted to know where she was going in the middle of the night, and why she was out alone after curfew—why she was alone, period.

From what he could see, her clothes were in good condition and clean, blue jeans and a slightly too large sweatshirt, and when a gust of wind brought her scent to him it was the clean odor of soap and shampoo. She didn't seem to be one of these refugees who arrived in town in droves every few days, attracted by the fortifications and the armed guards that were supposed to keep out the demons.

Finally, she stopped, and by the way she stood straight and still, Wilhelm could tell that she had arrived where she wanted to be. He continued to walk toward her, slower now that she wasn't moving anymore. In front of her, the marble tombstone was tall, the ground newly turned, the spray of white roses still fresh.

She remained immobile for a little while, the only movement being the wavering of her shoulder-length hair in the weak breeze. Then just as Wilhelm was about to cross the last few feet to reach her, she pulled something from the inside of her too long sweatshirt sleeve, and gripped it tight in her raised hand. The stake seemed eerily out of place in her hand, and Wilhelm stepped forward without further deliberation.

As much as he wanted to ask immediately what she was doing there, Wilhelm didn't dare be too abrupt, lest he frightened her and sent her running. He purposefully made noise as he approached, and when the child turned to him, eyes wide and startled, he tried to smile as non-threateningly as he knew how.

"Hello."

He was just beyond her arm's reach. Any closer, he felt, and she would bolt.

"My name is Wilhelm," he said after a few seconds of silence.

She frowned. "That's a weird name."

"So I've been told. You can call me Will, if you want. What is your name?"

Her frown deepened and she took a step back. "I'm not supposed to talk to strangers."

With some difficulty, Wilhelm managed not to laugh. "I'm pretty sure you're not supposed to be out in a cemetery in the middle of the night either."

She looked away, her cheeks darkening but her head still high as she stared at the marble stone in front of her. Wilhelm let his eyes trail over the inscription, and the pieces of the puzzle fell into place.

*Robert Vanyard
Beloved husband of Emily
Loving father of Paul and Ariadne
He will be missed*

The date of death was only three days earlier. Next to it, the symbol etched into the marble, a diamond trisected by a Y, told exactly how Robert Vanyard had died. There were too many of these symbols on recent graves, in this cemetery and all over the world.

"You won't need a stake, Ariadne," Wilhelm said very low.

The child's heartbeat accelerated, and this time when she looked at him, her eyes were even wider than before.

"How do you know—" she started, but seemed to think better of it. Her fist clenched around the stake as her voice shook in intensity. "Dad said people killed by demons come back, like vampires. He said that was why there are so many demons."

Wilhelm had heard the theory before, oftentimes before witnessing graves being dug up, caskets torn open, and corpses burned. He hated that this new myth was spreading even though it had no ground to it. He hated even more that it likened in humans' minds vampires and demons. How long until humans started killing the first as vengeance for what the second did?

"I am sorry to have to say this, Ariadne, because I'm sure you loved your father very much. But he was wrong. You could wait a year by his grave, and he still wouldn't come back."

If she had not been so still until now, Wilhelm might not have noticed how she started trembling. As it was, he pretended not to see.

“Come on, honey. Let’s get you home.”

A light hand on her shoulder sufficed to turn the child back toward the direction from which she had come, and she walked with Wilhelm without further prompting. After a few seconds, quiet sniffing sounds broke the silence; those were harder to ignore.

Wilhelm pulled a handkerchief from his jacket’s pocket, and held it in front of Ariadne.

“Trade you,” he offered.

A shaky hand proffered the stake, and a second one took the linen from him. A word of thanks was uttered, but so low that anyone else might have missed it. Wilhelm tucked the stake into his pocket, and rested his hand on Ariadne’s shoulder once more, lightly enough, he hoped, to be comforting without being oppressing.

It had been over three centuries since his mother had drilled into him that a gentleman never left home without a hat, gloves, and a clean handkerchief. After a few decades, Wilhelm had let go of the first two, yielding to the dictates of fashion, but the handkerchief had remained, futile but easy enough to keep hidden in a pocket. At times like now, it could be of use.

Once they reached the street, he let Ariadne’s steps guide his, keeping his hand on her shoulder and his attention on their surroundings. Despite what the rumors said, the fortifications and the Guard did not stop all the demon attacks, which was why the curfew remained in vigor. Why, also, Wilhelm continued his solitary patrols through the city rather than take his turn standing guard over the walls.

Only three streets away from the cemetery, the child stopped in front of a fenced yard and turned big, teary brown eyes up toward Wilhelm.

“That’s my home,” she murmured. “You can go, now.”

Wilhelm shook his head and pressed her onward without a word. He wouldn’t leave her until he had figured out why and how such a young child had been allowed to wander out at night.

They reached the door, and Ariadne stood in front of it, head down and sullen.

“Aren’t you getting in?” Wilhelm prompted her.

She shrugged. “I don’t have a key.”

“Then how did you get out?”

Her eyes flickered to something behind Wilhelm's shoulder for a second. "I know how to climb down from my window," she said. "But I can't climb back up."

Glancing back at said window and the decorative woodwork along the façade of the house, Wilhelm refrained from commenting. While little girls could run away, using this kind of fanciful trellis, demons could also climb up to them.

Then again, demons rarely bothered with climbing to second story windows when they could simply tear down a door.

He took his hand off the child's shoulder and pressed his finger against the bell. He could hear it chime inside, three long notes that were probably easy to hear from anywhere in the house. The light and noises he expected did not come, however. He rang again.

"Mom is sleeping," Ariadne said. She sounded close to tears again.

"Well, we'll just wake her up, that's all."

A third time, he pressed his finger to the bell, harder this time as he was beginning to lose his patience. Finally, he could hear footsteps inside the house, and light filtered from the hallway through a window panel on the side of the door. When it opened, Wilhelm had to frown when the grown woman he expected turned out to be a teenage boy maybe three or four years older than Ariadne. The boy looked at Wilhelm, then at the child. His gaze seemed to push her into motion and she slipped past him and into the house, her steps faster as she started running up the staircase facing the entrance.

The boy turned to watch her go, and when she had disappeared turned an inquisitive look back toward Wilhelm.

"Are you with the Guard?" he asked.

There was a hint of heat to his voice, or was it reproach?

"I am not," Wilhelm answered truthfully. He had been part of the men that had created the quasi-military group, and he had trained more than his share of recruits, but he had never formally been part of them. "Are you Paul?"

The boy stiffened and gave a sharp nod. "Ariadne told you?"

"Something like that. I wish to speak to your mother. Is she home?"

Paul's eyes hardened even as his fists closed. Everything in him screamed of his protective instincts. "She's...unavailable. Come back in the morning."

"I found your sister alone in a cemetery in the middle of the night," Wilhelm said, keeping his voice cool despite his growing irritation. "I am not with the Guard, but I assure you the Guard will be informed and investigate this matter if I do not get to talk to your mother now. Can I come in or not?"

Technically, Wilhelm wasn't supposed to ask permission to enter a home without first identifying himself as a vampire. The city's charter said as much. There were times, though, when that information only complicated a simple matter. If he weren't allowed access now, he would send in the Guard as he had said he would. He understood grief as much as someone who had witnessed thousands of deaths still could, but no amount of grief excused allowing a child to run through the night.

"Come in," Paul said at last, resigned. He stepped out of the way, looking down as he did. "She's sleeping upstairs."

Wilhelm walked in and closed the door behind him, then motioned the boy to show him the way. Paul did so with obvious reluctance, but didn't say anything. He pushed a door open when they reached the landing, and after turning on the lights, he let Wilhelm walk in first.

"She took sleeping pills," he murmured. "You won't be able to wake her. She didn't even hear the bell ring."

Wilhelm glanced back at him. Leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, he seemed angry, though with whom Wilhelm couldn't tell.

On the side of the room, a door was ajar, revealing the en suite bathroom behind it. Wilhelm walked to it and quickly found a washcloth, which he soaked in cold water. Coming back to the bedroom, he went to the bed and sat on the edge of it, his upper body turned toward the woman lying across it. She wore pajamas and a slipper on her right foot, the other one having fallen onto the floor. A picture frame lay beneath her cheek, the glass still wet with tears.

With more gentleness than he felt capable of at that moment, Wilhelm dabbed the wet cloth against her brow, then over her cheek and down the back of her neck.

"Wake up," he said, his voice low, yet commanding. "Wake up Emily. We need to talk."

After a few more moments, she finally started to stir and raised her head weakly toward him.

"Robert?" she asked, clearly confused. "Is that you?"

"Robert is dead, Emily. And your daughter could have died as well tonight."

He stood as he spoke, and she sat up to keep looking at him. She was blinking repeatedly now, her brow furrowed in incomprehension.

“Ariadne? She... what? Who are you?”

“I am the vampire who found your child at your husband’s grave and brought her back to you. You can thank whatever God you pray to that I have no appetite for little girls.”

Judging by the way that she paled, she was beginning to understand. Wilhelm intended to drive his point home further.

“While you lay here lost to the world, your child slipped away from you. If she had died, you would have had no one to blame but yourself. Grieve your husband if you must, but do not put yourself in a position where you’ll have even more reasons to grieve.”

Wide eyed, the woman brought a hand to her mouth. Within seconds, she was stumbling out of the bed and rushing to the bathroom. The retching noises that ensued assured Wilhelm that she had understood his warning.

When he turned back to the door, Ariadne’s was standing in front of her brother, both his hands clenched onto her slim shoulders. They were both looking at him through eyes that reflected a mix of fear and awe.

“You’re... you’re really... really a vampire?” Paul asked.

Wilhelm nodded, giving the two of them a small smile that he hoped held some comfort.

“Take care of your sister now, boy. And no running at night for you, honey.”

He noticed, as he walked by the two children, that Ariadne’s hands still clutched his handkerchief. They were closed so tight on the piece of linen that they were almost as white as it was. He walked away without another word or a look back, sincerely hoping that he’d made enough of an impact on both mother and daughter that this family, or what remained of it, would be safe from now on.

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Walking away without a word or a last glance... Yeah, that’s definitely Will. I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve seen him do that in the last dozen decades. It used to drive me crazy that he could dismiss me so easily, but I’ve learned better, in time. He may be almost five hundred years old by now; but he’s still like the rest of us. Sometimes, he just doesn’t know what to say. And sometimes looking back means saying too much.

Would you believe me if I said I still have his handkerchief, even after all this time? I’ve sewn it inside my jacket, so I could have it with me at all times without fear of losing it.

The first time he noticed, he didn't recognize it. When I pointed out what it was, he told me I was too sentimental. I thought he was a jerk—hell, I've thought as much many times—until one day he admitted that he still had the stake he had traded for the handkerchief. When I gave him his words back, he smiled and answered that he knew.

It's been a while since that night—I was twelve, not ten as you said—but I still remember it well. It was September, and the air was crisp, though not cold. We had buried my father that afternoon, and I had memorized the way. I'm not sure anymore if I wanted to see him again, or if I wanted to make sure he didn't come back as a demon to hurt Mom and Paul and me. A bit of both, I suppose. It never occurred to me that I might meet vampires or demons on my way there. It never occurred to me either that if my father had indeed awakened as a demon, I'd never have been strong enough to use that stake. Not that stakes are very efficient on demons, but I couldn't possibly have known that, back then. All I knew was that my father was dead, my mother kept sleeping, and sleeping, and sleeping, and my brother hurt as much as I did. She stopped sleeping so much after Will had that little chat with her. We kept hurting, though.

I remember something else from that night. I never suspected until I heard him say it that he was a vampire, and even then, I had trouble believing it. Few of us can seem as human as he does. I envy his trick, sometimes. I've heard it said that it comes with centuries, but it would be more logical if centuries made us less human, not more.

One last thing I recall – he didn't say goodbye and he didn't look back, but I knew, there and then, that I'd see him again. I didn't imagine I'd be a vampire too eventually, of course not, but I was sure we'd meet again. Call it wishful thinking or premonition; the truth is, I was right. Less than a year passed before we met again.

Chapter 2

As useless as he knew it was with the alarm sirens blaring every few seconds, Wilhelm couldn't help keeping an ear out for sounds of battle in the distance. By Central Command's best estimations the demons were an hour away from the city walls, still much too far to even hear the stomping noises of an army. The town had resisted assaults from small groups of demons for years, with only a few managing to breach the defenses and rampage over the town before they could be stopped. However, there had never been more than a hundred or so demons trying to take the town walls at any given time. There was three times that number advancing toward Newhaven now.

"Sir? We've evacuated the entire block. The refugees are en route to the shelters; they should arrive within ten minutes."

Wilhelm spared a look at the soldier. His voice held the slight tremor that came with nervousness, but he held himself upright, and his eyes looked straight ahead without wavering. He couldn't have been more than eighteen. The Guard accepted children as young as seventeen, now. Wilhelm hated it, but he had been the one to convince Commander Bergsen of the necessity of it. They needed more troops, and that meant either opening the ranks to younger volunteers, or establishing a mandatory draft for the able-bodied men and women in town. It would come to that eventually, Wilhelm was sure of it, but Bergsen still couldn't resolve himself to it.

With a nod of thanks to the soldier, Wilhelm looked down at the map spread over the car trunk in front of him. He trailed a finger over the evacuated area and continued farther inside the city. The walls would be breached, this time, they all knew it. The question was how far would the demons be able to advance before the fifteen hundred men of the Guard managed to stop them and start pushing them back. The alternative would mean carnage. The city was full of refugees who had fled other towns destroyed by demon attacks; there would be no escaping this time. All Central Command could do was hope the Guard held strong.

"How full are the shelters?" Wilhelm asked when his finger stopped over the name of a small street he had visited almost nightly for the better part of the past year.

"Most report being filled to maximum capacity. But almost all of them say they can make room for at most a dozen more people if needed."

Wilhelm nodded again as he folded the map. "Then we're clearing out the next street. Same as before, two soldiers per household, civilians can take no more than one bag per family. I want the entire street cleared in twenty minutes. Stop the sirens as soon as it's done."

The soldier saluted before hurrying away. They always did, however often Wilhelm reminded them that he was not part of the Guard and military protocol did not apply to him. Bergsen snorted every time he heard Wilhelm say it. He had long since stopped trying to push a military rank on Wilhelm, but he still encouraged his troops to treat him as his second in command.

In private, they both knew who led and who followed, and Bergsen, thankfully, had no problem in taking orders from a vampire.

Following the flow of soldiers, Wilhelm pulled out his cell phone and called Bergsen. The Commander was at the wall, where they expected the first wave of attack to come, keeping an eye on the advance of the demons and on the preparations of the Guard.

"We're evacuating one more street in the north west quadrant," Wilhelm said without preamble. "I'll be back to the front within half an hour."

"Latest estimates show approximately three hundred and seventy demons," Bergsen replied. "And they're walking faster than expected. If you take more than half an hour, you'll miss the beginning of the festivities."

Information exchanged, Wilhelm flipped his phone shut and hailed the two soldiers who were about to walk into the fenced yard of a house.

"I'll take this one," he told them. "Move on to the next house."

The two women exchanged a quick glance. No doubt, they found it strange that he would take part in the evacuation himself. He owed them no explanation however, and at his raised eyebrow, they saluted him before hurrying off to the next yard. One of them was a vampire, but he could never have guessed from simply looking at her if he hadn't recruited her himself. The first vampires who had joined the Guard had demanded a special insignia, but Wilhelm had fought that idea with all his might. Distinguishing between humans and vampires would have led to nothing good.

He couldn't help glancing at the second floor window as he walked toward the front door. The light was on behind the pink curtains despite the late hour. The wooden lattice that had once run down the facade of the house had been torn away days after he had visited the house, almost a year earlier.

He raked his fingers through his messy curls as he reached the door and pressed the bell. The three chimes were the same as he remembered, but when the door opened, the woman behind it was much different from the grief-struck widow he had once met. A hint of fear clung to her scent, but she showed none of it and the way she stood straight screamed her determination.

"Your street is being evacuated," he said, wondering if she would recognize him. "Your family has five minutes to pack one bag before we take you to safety."

He saw her gulp, but she nodded before turning back toward the inside of the house and calling out very calmly: "Paul, Ariadne, we're leaving."

Within seconds, the two children were descending the staircase while their mother picked up the travel bag resting against the wall. Clearly, they had listened to the earlier broadcasted emergency instructions. If everyone had prepared like them, Wilhelm thought grimly, the evacuation could have been finished in half the time.

Both Paul and Ariadne opened wide eyes when they saw Wilhelm, and the girl gave him a shy smile; they recognized him, even if their mother did not, but neither of them said anything as she motioned them to step out. She closed and locked the door behind her; when she rested her palm against the white wood for an instant, her lips moving soundlessly, Wilhelm guessed that she was praying she would still have a home when it was over. He felt a slight pang at that. There was no place he called home anymore. No place he would miss if he needed to leave town.

"The trucks are this way," he gestured toward the end of the street, and the three humans started walking behind him. There were other groups walking up the street, all of them accompanied by soldiers. They had learned the hard way that they needed to accompany the evacuees to the trucks if they wanted a fast evacuation.

Wilhelm was startled when a small, warm hand slipped into his. He looked down and met Ariadne's eyes. She had grown, since he had first met her, and her head almost reached his shoulder.

"You're Will, aren't you?" she asked quietly.

"And you're Ariadne. I remember you."

Her smile widened, just a little.

"I've seen you," she murmured. "When you walk down our street. You always look at my window."

Both Paul and his mother were observing the exchange, Wilhelm noticed, and neither seemed pleased by it. Uncomfortable, he freed his hand from Ariadne's.

"I just wanted to make sure you were safe," he replied, shrugging to make his words more casual. "You haven't been walking around at night anymore, have you?"

A quiet gasp from the mother revealed that she understood, at last, who Wilhelm was. When he glanced at her, she looked away, her cheeks suddenly very pale.

"I haven't," Ariadne said with a shake of her head. "But I'll join the Guard, when I'm old enough. They will let me, won't they?"

Paul muttered something under his breath that might have been a curse. His mother was more vocal.

“Ariadne, that’s enough.”

The thread of fear in her voice caught Wilhelm’s attention, and he looked at her again, wondering why she was so upset. Did she believe he would take Ariadne at her word and give her a sword right there and then? Who did she think he was?

“Maybe by the time you’re old enough,” he told the child just as they were reaching the trucks, “the war will be over and there won’t be need for the Guard anymore.”

Paul let out a bark of dry laughter at that; he was shaking his head while he climbed into the back of the truck and helped his mother. Ariadne was last, and she turned a large smile toward Wilhelm before following them.

“Good luck,” she said. “I’ll wave at you next time you walk in front of my house.”

He managed to smile at her then turned away and quickly strode to where the soldiers who would soon to go the front were gathering. He looked at all of them with new eyes, his fatigue from the past days all of a sudden lifted. Each one of them had volunteered to be there and believed in what they did. Maybe the battle wouldn’t turn out so badly, after all.

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Are you trying to make me look like a Lolita, and Will like a pervert? Let’s set things straight, all right? I was twenty-two when he first let me kiss him, and it was five years later before we did anything more than that. The age difference will always be there, of course, but you don’t have to make it look so bad.

While we’re at it, that’s not how I remember the events of that night. I do remember squeezing his hand, because I wanted to say thank you—for bringing me home, months earlier, for talking to my mother, for being kind—but I didn’t quite know how. Also, I don’t think I was smiling that much. Hell, the sirens had been blaring for at least two hours when we evacuated. I was scared I was going to die, or if not me, Mom or Paul. I can’t possibly have smiled that much. I don’t care what you think you know, I just didn’t.

As for Will... You’re not explaining much about him, are you? I guess that means I have to.

The reason why he came to our door was the same reason he had for walking through my street so often when he patrolled the town, or even for deciding to evacuate my street and not the next. It’s also the same reason why he kisses me every time we leave for a fight. As old as he is, with everything he has seen, all the battles he has

fought, he still needs something to fight for. He needs an image at the back of his mind of the people he's helping to keep safe.

When he first met me, in the cemetery, he didn't have that connection anymore, he told me, long after we had become lovers. So, he picked me and my family as the people he'd fight for, the people he would do everything in his power to protect. With his influence in town, 'everything in his power' turned out to be quite a lot when I joined the Guard, and we had a couple of heated arguments about that. He can be so stubborn!

His need for someone to keep alive was also why he was so upset when I was turned. I thought he would kill my Sire when I rose as a vampire. For the longest time, I told myself he had just been jealous that he wasn't the one to turn me, but now I know better. I know him better. Still, even after all this time, he always manages to surprise me.

The last time he did was just days ago, after our last big battle. As soon as it was clear that the demons had retreated for good and wouldn't be back for a while, he gave his orders to his second in command and then led me to a car with blacked out windows, on the other side of town, where it would have been safe even if the demons had pushed further in. We were both covered in mud and blood, and I was dying for a bath, but he shushed my protests and made me climb in. He drove for the remainder of the night, too fast for someone who had fought for hours. I dozed off after a little while; even if he drove fast, I knew he wouldn't run us off the road.

When he woke me, the sun was beginning to appear above the horizon and I didn't have time to really see where we were. We hurried into a small house. There were white roses just about everywhere, hundreds of them, and I laughed at their scent and beauty. White roses are our flowers. They have become a symbol of mourning for many people, but they have never been so for us.

Thankfully for him, there also was a tub, in this house – a nice, large one, in which we both fitted easily. We washed each other, and played a little, but we were both too tired for much more. We went to sleep between satin sheets. I hadn't seen any of those in decades if not more; I have no idea where he found them. We slept the day away, catching up on sleep lost preparing yet one more big battle.

We rose together by nightfall, and while I warmed up some blood I found in the fridge, he went outside for a moment. When he came back, we fed quickly and then he slipped a blindfold over my eyes and led me out. He made me sit down on the ground before removing the blindfold. He had spread a blanket in front of the house, but that wasn't what made me open my eyes wide. Just a few steps in front of me, the yard ended in an abrupt cliff, and I could see miles and miles away, small clusters of light where our towns lay, and the immensity of the sky above them. It was breathtaking.

I kept watching when he sat behind me, his legs on each side of me, and pulled me to rest against his chest. He tugged at my robe's belt and pulled it open, baring me to the

night. His hands played over my body, soft and gentle, arousing me slowly but with the confidence brought by decades of sharing the same bed. We made love blanketed by the night, and lay together afterwards, watching the stars together, reminding each other of the names we gave the constellations more than a hundred years ago until there was nothing left to say. And then...

"This is why I fought last night," he murmured, and I knew he wasn't talking about the stars.

Chapter 3

“So we’re back to square one.”

Bergsen’s voice reflected his frustration and tiredness, and Wilhelm could not blame him. They had both been sure that the new ammunition perfected by their research labs would prove key to turning the odds against the demons in their favor. It had taken them years to reformulate the metal casings and powder components into something that would have an effect on the demons; and for the past week, soldiers had used the new rifles and ammo whenever demons had approached the walls. After some good news on the first night, the results had ended up disappointing. It was almost as though demons had instantly adapted to this new threat.

From that first night, three decades earlier, when demons had appeared seemingly out of nowhere all over the planet, humans had fought back with their best weaponry, guns, assault rifles, automatic weapons that could pierce through any kind of body armor and tear a man to shreds within seconds. Yet everywhere, the same reports had come. Bullets simply did not work. The demons’ wounds healed within seconds, fast enough for the gunner to see the flesh repair itself—if the gunner lived that long. A shaky, grainy video had even showed to the consternation of military advisors all over the world that the more bullets fired into a demon, the faster it healed.

Fire had looked like a promising alternative at first, but the incredible heat required to slow down the demons, let alone incapacitate them, made it too cumbersome. In time, the disruption of fuel supplies had rendered it even more inconvenient.

Chemical weapons could have posed an ethical dilemma if their first use had not proven that demons were immune to them.

In the end, resorting to bows, blades and other close range weapons had been a necessity. For the first time in military history, the advantage didn’t belong to those who had the technical and numerical strength, and soldiers all over the world had traded their guns for swords, axes, spears and halberds. Museums had been ransacked and weapons of the past had been reproduced with the techniques and metal alloys of the day. It had taken long, bloody weeks before the first troops had gone into the battle with the slightest chance of coming back alive.

“All this work for nothing,” Bergsen griped again. His hand clenched around the report he had been reading, tearing pages and crumbling them into a ball.

“At least now we know what doesn’t work,” Wilhelm commented coolly. He was just as upset by the news, but complaining wouldn’t change the report’s conclusions. “That leaves us other options to explore. We’ll find a solution, eventually.”

Bergsen snorted. “Eventually’ might be fine for you, Will, but it’ll be too late for me and many others. You might have all the time in the world, but we don’t.”

Wilhelm’s answer was no more than a cold look. Bergsen sighed and nodded as though he had answered in words.

“Of course I’m not blaming you,” he said, his voice calmer now. “I’m just so...tired.”

It was Wilhelm’s turn to nod his understanding. They had all been fighting for too long. Nevertheless, none of them could afford to take a day off.

“What should we have the labs work on?” he asked, bringing Bergsen back to a hopefully more productive line of thought. “Did you see—”

A sharp knock on the door interrupted him.

“Come in,” Bergsen called out.

A soldier stepped in, his salute perfect as he looked straight ahead rather than at either men seated at the desk.

“A prospective recruit is requesting a meeting with you, sir.”

A flicker of the soldier’s eyes toward him left Wilhelm confused. Not only was this Bergsen’s office, but also, Wilhelm rarely ever met with recruits unless he sought them out in the first place.

“Direct him to the recruiters’ barracks,” Wilhelm said. “I don’t have time for this now. There are other vampires there who will talk to him.”

“Sir, it’s a girl, a teenager, and I do not believe she is a vampire.”

Wilhelm shrugged. “I still don’t have time.”

With a gesture, Bergsen dismissed the soldier and they resumed their talk, the incident already forgotten. However, after a few minutes, a second knock revealed the same soldier; and even though his voice remained steady, he seemed flustered.

“Sir, she requested that I give you her name. She insisted you would meet with her if you knew who she was.”

Wilhelm barely refrained from grumbling. “Then tell me so I can send you back to inform her that aggravating me in the middle of a meeting is not the smartest thing to do.”

The soldier swallowed heavily, as though Wilhelm's bad mood had been directed toward him. He was a new recruit, and they were often more nervous around Wilhelm than they had reason to be.

"Her name is Ari...Ariadne, sir."

He had stumbled on the unusual name, but of course, Wilhelm recognized it. He frowned, annoyed that the child apparently thought her name would be enough to force him to drop everything he was doing to meet with her.

"You know her," Bergsen guessed. "We can finish this later if you want."

Wilhelm shook his head. "No. We have work to do." Glancing back at the soldier, he gave a sharp nod. "You have my answer for her. If she continues to argue, have the MPs escort her out of the building."

The soldier saluted before walking out.

"You should be nicer to your groupies," Bergsen said, his voice just on the edge of teasing. "Especially wannabe recruits. Heaven knows we need more of them."

"She's fifteen," Wilhelm scoffed. "Unless you changed the minimum age without telling me, she can't join the Guard."

A rare chuckle passed Bergsen's lips. "So you do know her. And her age. If I didn't know for a fact that you don't have time for that, I'd point out that she's much too young for you."

With a grimace, Wilhelm looked down at the report in front of him and tapped it with a finger.

"We have work to do."

~

When, after hours of debating, arguing, and agreeing on the direction that they needed to take, Bergsen and Wilhelm walked out of the office, Ariadne was still there, sitting on a bench on the side of the lobby. Wilhelm's eyes went straight to her as she stood. She looked sullen, her voice cold when she asked if she could speak with Wilhelm now.

"Such determination should be rewarded," Bergsen butted in, the smallest of smiles tugging at his lips. "Don't you think, Will?"

With a roll of his eyes, Wilhelm stepped forward and motioned the girl to follow him. He led her to his office, which was down the hall from the commander's office. He rarely ever used it; he was always on the move, and if he needed to sit down, he usually did at

Bergsen's desk. Ariadne patted the seat of the chair he indicated to her, and dust rose in the air. She sat without commenting on it and looked around her expectantly.

"I thought there would be more old stuff in here," she said after a few moments.

Wilhelm cracked a smile despite himself. "I'm the only thing that qualifies as old here. Now what do you want?"

Arms crossed, he was leaning against his desk a few steps in front of her. She looked at him with determination and—could it be hope?

"I need you to talk to my mother and convince her to let me join the cadets," she said, very seriously, in the tone of someone who had practiced her words. "I want to be ready to fight when I enroll in the Guard but Mom refuses to sign the consent form."

Wilhelm waited, certain that there had to be more, but Ariadne did not add anything and merely continued to look at him.

"I don't see why you want me to talk to her," he started.

Ariadne jumped in right away, as though she had practiced that part too. "You convinced her once when she was acting stupid. I know she'll listen to you again."

It was doubtful, Wilhelm thought. After all, Ariadne's mother had sold her house and moved to a different part of the city as soon as she had learned he was patrolling her street regularly. As far as he was concerned, she had spelled out rather clearly that she wanted nothing to do with him—be it his protection or his opinion on how to raise her daughter.

"I am sorry, Ariadne. That's a family matter, and I have no right to interfere."

"You have to talk to her," she pressed on, her voice strained now, and leaned forward as though to give more weight to her words. "My father would have let me do it."

"But your father is gone," he said, as gently as he could, "and it's your mother's opinion that matters."

"You're a jerk!" she shouted as she jumped to her feet and glared at him, her fists closed tight and her eyes gleaming. "I thought you cared about me but you don't! I should have known when you stopped patrolling in front of our house!"

Standing as she was, only a couple of feet in front of him, she seemed to dare him to deny her words—seemed, also, to be demanding an explanation, or even an apology. Wilhelm gave her neither.

"It's time for you to go home."

He escorted her to the door, and led her down the corridor to the entrance of the building. He was shocked to discover, when they reached the door, that the sun was just about to set, the sky lit up in pink hues over the western horizon.

"If I let you go alone, you'll be breaking curfew," he sighed, glancing back at her.

The look she gave him made it clear that she couldn't have cared less.

"Come with me."

Protected by the long shadows cast by the buildings around them, he went to the camp garage and requisitioned a car to drive Ariadne home. She followed him the entire time without a word, but without balking either when he told her to get into the car. She remained silent for most of the drive, until they were only two blocks away from her new home.

"So you do know where we live now," she commented, very quietly.

Wilhelm did not answer. It hadn't been very difficult to find out that piece of information.

When he parked the car in front of the small house, Ariadne did not move.

"I really would like you to talk to her," she said, staring straight ahead at the road. "I know she'd listen to you."

After taking a deep breath to calm down so he wouldn't snap at her, Wilhelm asked: "What makes you think I want you to join the cadets?"

The look of pure surprise she gave him made it clear the idea that he might side with her mother had not entered her mind.

"You're still a child," he continued. "I've seen too many children die already to want you to fight."

He could see, by the hard frown she gave him, that she disagreed with his calling her a child, and that she wouldn't stop pressuring her mother to let her enroll. Cadet training was nowhere near as dangerous as the actual Guard was, of course, but Wilhelm refused to help her step onto that path. It was a decision she could make for herself when she was old enough; but not one he would encourage in any way.

She opened the door and stepped out without a word of goodbye. Wilhelm watched her go to her door, and glimpsed someone opening to let her in before he left. His mind blank, he drove back to the camp to return the car. He had been patrolling the streets of the city by foot for years, breaking his routine only when large attacks were expected.

Just as he was leaving the camp again, he walked to the front of the wall where the Guard posted the names of its dead. At the foot of the wall, beneath the most recent list, rested a bouquet of white roses. They were in full bloom and Wilhelm took a deliberate breath to take in their scent, wondering how many more children would die under his watch.

~

I may have been fifteen, but I knew what I wanted to do with my life. I was not a child. It took Will many years to realize that.

To this day, I am still certain that a word from him would have been enough for my mother to sign that damn paper. Without his help, however, it took me six months to convince her to let me enroll in the cadets training. I had to plead, beg, nag, pout, argue, and in the end, I even had to resort to a threat.

I had spent a week writing her a letter that listed all the reasons why I wanted to take part in that training. When I gave it to her, she sighed, and without even looking at it she said she wouldn't change her mind. It hurt and I lashed out with the threat I had hoped I wouldn't need.

"You can prevent me from joining the cadets, and even force me to wait until I'm of age to enroll in the Guard. But if you do, my eighteenth birthday will be the last time you ever see me."

She looked at me as though I had just announced I was going to the moon.

"You don't mean that," she said after a few seconds, but her voice trembled with shock.

"I've never meant anything more in my life, Mom. I didn't want it to come to this but—"

She slapped me. I can't remember her ever raising her hand to me before that day. She hurt my pride more than anything else, and I left her there and went to my room. My eyes were stinging, but I refused to cry. Later that night, she came to me and said she had read my letter. She had brought the signed parental consent form for the training with her. Nevertheless, she never apologized for slapping me, and I never did for threatening her.

The day I graduated from the actual Guard training, she admitted that she had hoped I would tire of the discipline and demands of the cadets before I ever enrolled in the Guard. She couldn't have been more wrong.

She wasn't the only one who opposed my desire to join the Guard. The entire time she and I argued, Paul never lost an opportunity to show his own dislike for the Guard, and by extension the cadets. It comforted our mother in her opposition, I suppose, until I made my last argument.

I know why my brother had such a strong attitude against the Guard, even though I never understood it. He blamed the Guard for not having protected our father. But Dad was killed while traveling outside of the Guard's protection zone, coming back from visiting our grandparents in a nearby town. How that makes his death the Guard's responsibility is beyond me.

Paul never showed any interest for what I learned or did in my training, or later in the Guard. I remember, when I came back from my first week at the camp, I expected Mom or him to show some curiosity in what I had done. Mom asked me only if it was hard and if I had changed my mind. Paul waited until we were alone to tell me what he thought. I can still hear the exact tone he used, half sneering anger, and half condescension.

"Getting yourself killed won't bring Dad back."

I shrugged his words off. I wasn't a child anymore, and I had known for a long time that our father wouldn't return.

"And that vamp won't ever replace him either."

That hurt, more than it had any right to. And it probably hurt even more because it held some truth.

It wasn't so much that I wanted someone to replace my father. No one could have done that. But I've given it a lot of thought, and I guess what I wanted—what I needed—was someone who wasn't afraid of demons. Someone who didn't turn pale as a bed sheet when the sirens blared to life and announced another attack. Someone I could trust with my every breath, like, when I was a child, without even knowing it, I had trusted my parents. My mom had tumbled from that pedestal when she had broken down after my father's death; and yes, Will had replaced her, had replaced them, simply because he had been there. Simply because he had rested his hand on my shoulder and taken me home. I didn't have that insight at fifteen, so Paul's words brought nothing more than pain, and the guilt of feeling as if I was betraying my father rather than honoring him. When my leave ended and I returned to the camp, I was glad for a new reason. I would have a full week away from my brother.

For a year and half, I spent every other week at the cadets' camp, only a block away from the Guard's building. About two dozens other trainees were there on alternate weeks, as many girls as there were boys. The instructors instilled discipline in us along with a respect for the authority of hierarchy. We weren't allowed to fight demons, of course not, but we learned hand-to-hand combat and how to handle swords, axes and bows. The hand-to-hand, a mix of several martial arts, was mostly to improve our endurance, focus and coordination. No human could hope to best even the weakest demon without a weapon, and even most vampires would find it difficult if not downright impossible.

We were taught, also, how to fortify a street, and how to guide civilians during evacuations. In the last few months before I was sworn into the Guard, there were so many mass demon attacks that we helped evacuate the streets closest to the walls on a weekly basis. It became routine for us, but the civilians were always reluctant to leave – reluctant enough, actually, that when it was suggested that the streets closest to the walls be permanently evacuated, we came very close to having riots on our hands. With the town full of refugees, all homes were needed. The solution would have been to refuse new arrivals, but Bergsen and Will never issued that order. We were the city with the best fortifications and defenses in the country, and they had decided that as long as the town could live with the delivery of food from beyond the walls along with what our gardens produced, the doors would remain open to refugees. It took decades before that changed.

Between intensive training and evacuations, these months flew by, slowing down only when I returned to a more 'normal' life every other week. With the regular education system as shaken as it was, I learned far more at camp than I did in school, and those weeks spent into a cramped classroom, with my peers looking at me and the other cadets with both trepidation and envy, seemed like a loss of time when I could have learned so much more elsewhere.

For the entire time, I never saw more than glimpses of Will, and never was able to talk to him. Bergsen spoke to us on a regular basis, reinforcing the importance of what we had chosen to do, but Will never was one for public speeches. Even today, he leaves speaking to others, and is happy to lead from behind the curtain—or from the front row of the defense lines.

When I formally joined the Guard, though, I started seeing more of him than I sometimes wished I had.

Chapter 4

The apartment's window opened on the nicest view the ten-story building offered. Down below, the gray of the city was brightened by a splash of green. The city's largest park, these days, doubled as one of the gardens that helped provide fresh food to humans. On the horizon, far beyond the walls, the mountains seemed purple or blue, depending on the time of day or the weather.

However, it wasn't because of the view that this apartment had been assigned to Wilhelm, or that all vampires' quarters were located on this same side of the building—the north side. As much as the human members of the Guard sometimes complained about it, they understood the sheer necessity of these quarters' assignments. Good fabric and good wood were sparse, too much so to waste on completely blocking direct sunlight.

"What good is that view to me?" Wilhelm had once heard a vampire protest to some human friends. "Give me a windowless room instead, and maybe I'll sleep better."

Wilhelm had long ago ceased to need much sleep. As a fledgling, he had heard from Masters that, in time, he would learn to forego sleep altogether. He had thought then that they were simply trying to impress him, but with passing centuries, he had started to need less and less rest to feel refreshed. He had rarely closed his eyes for more than four hours at a time since the demons had appeared. It often seemed like a much longer time than that.

After going to bed an hour or so after sunrise, just long enough to hear the preliminary reports for the night, he usually woke by midmorning—if he managed to sleep at all. Some mornings, the news was simply too dire for him to even fall asleep; on those mornings, it was difficult to refrain from calling Bergsen and telling him that it was over, Wilhelm was quitting. He had never wanted to take such a great part in the fight, had been quite content with helping where he could, but little by little over the years, Bergsen had pushed more and more responsibilities on him.

He had protested, of course, more than once. The last time he had let his exasperation pierce through had been a few weeks earlier.

"If I had known when I helped you organize the Guard that you'd trap me with all these duties, I'd have left town instead."

Bergsen hadn't even shown the hint of a smile. "If you had, this city and its people would have died within months."

The worst thing was that he meant it.

Day after day, the same routine unfolded. Wilhelm got out of bed, used his allotted four and a half minutes of hot water in the shower and fed, all of it so automatic that he didn't need to think. The blood in the fridge was always human. Some weeks, the turn out of volunteers at the blood bank was too low, or the number of human casualties needing transfusions too high. Animal blood was distributed to the vampires in the Guard when that was the case, but not to Wilhelm. He hadn't requested this privilege, but he also hadn't requested to be treated like the other vamp recruits. Sooner or later, Bergsen would need to cave in and make the blood donations a mandatory part of the war effort.

Only after finishing his first glass of warmed blood did Wilhelm go and pick up the sheets of paper someone had pushed beneath his door. Returning to the small kitchenette, he warmed a second glass of blood in the instant-oven and sat down to look at the numbers. On good days, the first line, the line for human deaths attributed to vampire activity in the last twenty-four hours, would be zero. This was not a good day.

"Damn it. I knew I should have looked for that lair last night."

His mutter seemed louder than it truly was in the silent apartment. When he put down his glass, some blood sloshed over the side and stained the table red.

The second line showed how many new vampires had arrived in town in the same twenty-four hours. Today's report showed none, but the reports from the previous two nights had showed four and seven respectively. Wilhelm was ready to bet that there was a new clan in town, one that either did not care about the rules or had unruly fledglings amongst its members. The city could use more vampire recruits in the Guard, but it had no room for vampires that killed to feed.

Picking up the phone on the wall, Wilhelm dialed the headquarters' number.

"What are your orders, sir?"

He didn't bother with civilities. The soldier who had answered knew who was on the line, just as he knew Wilhelm wouldn't have bothered calling if he did not need to.

"Prepare a map with the locations where the bodies were found. See if you can pinpoint where they were last seen alive, too. And send MPs to question people near those points, see if anyone noticed new neighbors."

The request was a routine one, and the soldier did not ask for clarifications. Wilhelm hung up the phone and returned to his study of the bleak numbers.

The next lines identified the vampires that had been killed during the skirmishes with demons the previous night. These numbers were never as high as the ones on the second sheet of paper, which were human members of the Guard killed or seriously injured, but added together they always weakened the town's defenses too much for comfort.

Already thinking about where he would start his search that night, he abandoned the grim reports and his half finished glass in the kitchen and went to lie on the battered sofa. Books were piled up just within arm's reach and he picked one up at random. He had read each book in these untidy piles dozens of times and could recite parts of each from memory. This familiarity was exactly what he needed at that moment. With his mind filled with numbers and death, the flow of words would stop him from thinking for a little while, and maybe even stop him from wondering if the fight was hopeless.

He couldn't have said how much time had passed when a sharp knock on the door startled him out of his reading. No one ever visited him, not even Bergsen, and if they needed him to go to the headquarters because of an emergency, they always called him.

His surprise only increased when he opened the door to find a glowering Ariadne behind it.

"You had no right to do that!" she began without warning. "I've wanted to fight with the Guard for six years, and with just a few words you robbed me of that!"

Her eyes were blazing with the same fire they had held when she had come to ask for his support almost two years earlier. The difference was that now she was tall enough to look straight into his eyes. Every time he saw her, it became more difficult to remember the young girl he had once found alone in a graveyard.

"I don't know what—" he started, but a snort interrupted him.

"Don't insult me on top of it."

The anger in her gaze only strengthened, and Wilhelm gave a small nod, acknowledging it.

"See," she started again, "the problem with putting me behind a desk is that it gives me access to my own file. And to the letter, signed by you and countersigned by Commander Bergsen, that requested this assignment for me. What happened to assignments in the Guard being decided at random?"

The initial outburst had calmed, but her voice was more compelling for it, her righteous anger giving it weight. Wilhelm had never seen her like this. He had seen her afraid, distressed, pouting, even happy, but never truly angry, and she seemed like an entirely different person in front of him. It made him realize that, even though he had kept a close eye on her over the years, making sure she was safe, then following her progress when she had joined the cadets, he had no idea who the young woman in front of him was. All he knew was that her name was Ariadne, and he had pledged to himself to do his best to keep her alive.

"Come in," he said, shaking himself out of his torpor, and stepped back to give her room to do so.

She frowned at him but walked in, taking a few steps inside the small apartment and looking around her with undisguised curiosity. Wilhelm wondered briefly what she thought, whether she had expected grander accommodations than what she saw, but she didn't say anything and her face, when she turned to look at him, showed nothing but impatience.

Walking past her, he went to the kitchenette and picked up one of the reports he had been looking at earlier.

"Here," he said, giving her the paper. "Look at those."

She took the sheet, and Wilhelm watched as she scanned it. Her eyes tightened ever so slightly, even as she pinched her lips into a tight line.

"Some of these people were my friends," she said, her voice raspy, when she looked up at him again. "But it doesn't explain why you confined me to an office when I've trained for two years to be on the battlefield."

"You're stuck in an office so you won't end up on this list. That's all there is to it."

She blinked once, and her eyes widened in incredulity that soon transformed into indignation and anger.

"How dare you! You have no right... I can't believe you'd even think you can play with my life like that!"

"I'm not playing, Ariadne. I couldn't be more serious. I told you before that I didn't want you to join the cadets, and I feel the same about the Guard."

Her hand was shaking when she thrust the sheet of paper back at him.

"Too late for that. I'm in. And I'm not going anywhere, except to the front. And how well do you think I'll fight when we have a big attack and they call everyone to help? Do you think I'll still be able to fight, after spending my time seated behind a desk?"

For a moment, Wilhelm faltered; he had not thought of that possibility. He couldn't believe he hadn't thought of it.

"I'll leak the papers to the entire Guard," Ariadne continued when he didn't answer. "If you don't change my assignment, I'll let everyone know, and no one will ever obey your orders again without thinking twice about the way you show favoritism. Because you know that's how they'll interpret it."

Wilhelm's resolution hardened again. Couldn't she see he was trying to save her life?

"Threatening a superior is hardly the right way to have a long career in the Guard, child."

The edge of her smile could have sliced his throat. "You're not my superior. You don't even have a rank. You're just a man who thinks he knows better than the rest of us, and who ignores anyone he doesn't have a use for. But I am part of the Guard, I earned my rank and the right to fight, and while you can ignore me all you want, you can't take that away from me."

There was a final challenge in her wavering voice and eyes—a final reproach—and then she saluted him, her posture perfect, before she turned on her heel and walked out of the apartment. The door banged shut behind her.

After her parting words, Wilhelm was left to wonder what she had been most upset about—that he had arranged for her to have an office job, or that he hadn't said a word to her since he had, despite passing by her desk every day.

~

My threats, as he called them, did not change Will's mind. The only thing that happened was that the next time I looked in my file, the paper trail was gone. I hadn't thought of making copies.

I appealed to Bergsen, but with no result. He gave me a speech about how all assignments were equally honorable, and how others envied me, but he refused to let these others, whoever they might have been, trade their places with me.

That only left me one option.

All the members of the Guard who have office duty volunteer to take turns standing guard over the walls, usually one to two nights a month. It's a way to refresh their training in between active assignments. I started showing up there every night. I would finish my shift at the headquarters, go to the mess for a quick dinner, then change into combat uniform and be on my way. Every night, I made sure I reported directly to the commanding officer and gave him or her my name and official assignment. It wasn't long before they all knew me—and not much longer after that before they started muttering that my current assignment was a waste of my training.

Will showed up on the third night. He didn't look surprised to see me there, so I'm pretty sure he knew what I was doing. He stayed around all night, and came back every night after that. I know he was watching me. No, more than that, he was making sure I was safe. We were attacked fourteen times during the five weeks I spent pulling a double shift every night. And fourteen times, when I fought, Will was by my side. It was easy to get used to it, and even easier, when it stopped, to miss him.

I managed to fight well enough during this time to earn praises from all the commanding officers. And during the same time, I slacked off shamelessly during the day, sometimes even falling asleep at my desk. The other soldiers at headquarters knew what I was doing, and they picked up whatever duties I wasn't completing; it was their way to show that they supported my silent protest. Most of them had been taken away from the front lines after being wounded, or because they were deemed too old; none of them liked it any better than I did.

One morning—I remember I had fought my hardest battle yet that night, and had cuts and bruises all over my body to show for I—when I arrived at headquarters, I found a huge bouquet of white roses on my desk. I was curious, of course, but also a little uncomfortable; I was as superstitious as any other Guard, and roses this color were said to be a bad omen.

The blossoms were still tight, barely opening their soft petals to the world, but the scent was already heady. An envelope was nudged between two flowers. Inside it, I found a new assignment sheet; I was to report to the walls that same night. I also found a handwritten note, signed simply with a 'W'.

The elegant cursive letters gave a short message that I never forgot.

"Hopefully those are the only white roses I'll have to buy for you for a very long time."

Wilhelm walked by, that day, on his way to see Bergsen. I tried to thank him, but all he did was shake his head in reply.

I reported to my new duties later that night, more excited than ever and ready to take the entire demon army by myself. That's when I met Lorenzo.

Chapter 5

Hung high in the cloudless sky, the moon shone bright, casting a cold light over the plain. To Wilhelm and to all the vampires standing over the walls, everything seemed as bright as it was by daylight. It was the same for demons, of course. The Guard had known the attack would come ever since the weather forecast had warned of a beautiful night.

The first wave came from the north just after midnight. It took the demons a little more than four hours to trot down from the mountain. The trip did not even begin to tire them. The Guard's best archers greeted them with its traditional volley of arrows. A few demons fell; the rest of them marched on without slowing for an instant. They would reach the walls quickly, if they weren't stopped. The Guard would stop them—it had to.

Behind the walls, the first three streets had been evacuated. Wilhelm and Bergsen had argued about it again. Civilians had long since tired of the repeated evacuations, and it was more difficult each time to get their cooperation. Bergsen wanted to permanently evacuate these streets and declare them too dangerous for anyone to be there after nightfall; every time he raised the issue, Wilhelm predicted that such a decision would wreak havoc on the city. Each house, each apartment within the walls was already packed, and demanding that two hundred families leave their homes to live with strangers was asking for trouble.

Wilhelm was standing on the front line when the Guard clashed with the demon army. Five years earlier, Bergsen had stood at the front of the fight next to him, leading his troops through example. But age had caught up with him, and now he watched the battles from the walls. Wilhelm couldn't even stand the idea of not being part of the fight.

Within moments, his sword had sliced a first demon open from the shoulder straight down to the thick of the belly. Blood erupted, so dark it seemed black, its scent already thick in the night air. Wilhelm felt his fangs elongate, and instinct spurred him on. He did not wait for the demon to finish falling to the ground before he moved on to his next prey. He had fought demons, first on his own and eventually with the Guard for close to thirty years, and habit and training always took over as soon as the battle started. He remained completely aware of his surroundings—he couldn't afford not to be—but he also swung his sword, parried and moved through the crowd of demons, vampires and humans without ever hesitating.

The Guard was superior in numbers to the army of demons, but not all fighters were as adept with a sword or axe as Wilhelm was; few of them had even a tenth of his experience. It often took two or three soldiers to take down a single demon, so most soldiers worked in pairs or small groups, defending each other's back as they focused on individual demons.

In the past few months, during each battle Wilhelm had found his attention and his steps always drifting back toward one such pair of fighters. The woman was barely past eighteen; still a child, even if she had cut the long auburn hair that had danced free on her shoulders during all her childhood. Next to her, her partner was almost a full head taller than she was, and he moved with the sleek grace of a predator. Whenever Lorenzo caught his gaze, in the middle of the fight, it was to give him an eye roll that said quite plainly what he thought of Wilhelm's game. Ariadne, on the other hand, always pretended not to notice. She was a terrible liar.

In truth, they did not need Wilhelm's help. The girl had been born to carry a sword, and Lorenzo made up for what he lacked in experience with his vampire speed and strength. Together, they managed to carve a path through demons and remain, most of the time, unscathed. When blood was shed, it was always Lorenzo's; he never hesitated before putting himself between Ariadne and a demon's blade.

Wilhelm had long ago accepted that he couldn't prevent Ariadne from fighting, but he still didn't like to see her so close to danger. It might have helped if he had been the one keeping her safe, as he had promised himself he would when he had first met her as a child. Whenever he saw them exchange one of those silly grins they shared after a kill, Wilhelm found himself gritting his teeth and handling his sword with more vigor. They were too close, much too close. It was unwise for Guard members to become romantically involved as these two had. Unwise, and technically against the rules, even if they were not enforced.

The battle, this night, lasted just over an hour. The deep sound of a horn rang over the plain, and at once the demons retreated. There were few cheers from the Guard to herald this victory. They all knew that the demons would be back, the next night or the one after that, and this time with reinforcements. It wasn't time to celebrate; rather, it was time to heal, mourn, rest, and prepare for the next battle.

As he made his way back to the walls and the slowly opening doors that would allow him and the rest of the fighters back inside the city, Wilhelm was a hundred feet or so behind Ariadne and Lorenzo. They walked side by side, each with an arm around the other. Her head rested against his shoulder. Wilhelm could hear them murmur to each other, though he made no effort to understand what they were saying. If not for the sword in her hand and the axe in his, both covered in drying blood, they could have been a normal couple taking a stroll by moonlight.

Wilhelm's hand clenched on his sword's handle and he looked around him rather than ahead. He suddenly wished the demons hadn't abandoned the battlefield so fast.

~

When Lorenzo entered Bergsen's office, a small smile was playing on his lips. Wilhelm repressed a disgruntled growl. Lorenzo had no way of knowing why the commander had summoned him, but he didn't seem worried in the slightest. Of course, if Wilhelm

allowed himself to become aware of the scent wafting about the younger vampire, the reason for his smile would be blindingly obvious. Wilhelm had no desire, however, to be reminded that Ariadne and Lorenzo shared a bed, and had shared it very recently.

“Sir. Private Cambria reporting.”

It wasn't the formal address Guard recruits were taught, and Lorenzo's salute was a little sloppy. Wilhelm had never cared about either thing, but now he wanted to snap at the man to stand straighter, and not to smile like a lunatic when he was summoned by the Guard's commander. Frowning, he settled a little deeper in his armchair and struggled to remain quiet. It was Bergsen's office, and Wilhelm was only there as an observer.

If he had been Lorenzo's Sire, he would have taught him better manners long before.

“Private Cambria. I was beginning to wonder if you would join us. I requested your presence almost half an hour ago.”

Lorenzo had the grace to look embarrassed, and his gaze left Bergsen, settling on Wilhelm for a second before he thought better of it and looked straight ahead of him at the wall behind Bergsen's desk. It might have been a trick of Wilhelm's imagination, but he seemed to be standing straighter, suddenly.

“My apologies, Sir.”

Bergsen did not say a word as he stood and walked around his desk to come two steps in front of Lorenzo. Hands clasped behind him, he observed the soldier for a few moments. The smile slowly faded from Lorenzo's face under the scrutiny in a most satisfying way.

“How long have you been part of the Guard, Cambria?”

Bergsen knew the answer to that question already. Everything he needed to know was in the manila folder on his desk.

“Fifteen weeks, sir.”

“Fifteen weeks. You had never belonged to a military organization before that. I only need to look at your posture to know that.”

Again, Lorenzo seemed to straighten, though it was much too late by now.

“You can't salute or stand properly,” Bergsen continued. “You are slow in answering a summons from a superior. You disregard the rules that forbid romantic relationships between members of the Guard.”

Lorenzo frowned at that last reprimand and his eyes flickered toward Wilhelm before Bergsen started talking again.

“Luckily for you, none of these matters so much in the Guard. What truly matters is that you are at your post on the walls on time every night. What matters is that you have shown exemplary leadership in the little time you have been part of the Guard, and your battalion leaders commended you for it repeatedly. You are not a soldier, Private Cambria, but you're a fighter. And these days, we need fighters more than anything else.”

Bergsen pulled a small box from his pocket and flicked the lid open. Light reflected on the silver sword when he pinned it to the collar of Lorenzo's uniform. Wilhelm closed his eyes, and let the thanks and promises to do better slide over him. It had not been his idea, and he had tried not to let his personal feelings interfere when Bergsen had told him about this. All he could hope was that this new responsibility would not prevent Lorenzo from fulfilling his other duties.

~

“So what did Ariadne say?”

“She wasn't too happy. She tried not to show it but I know she was wondering.”

Wilhelm kept his eyes on the horizon as he nodded. So far, there had been no signs of demons, but the night was still young, and they might attack before it was over. From the corner of his eye, he could see that Lorenzo was fidgeting, raising his hand to touch the pin at his throat, as though to assure himself that it was really there.

“I've been wondering too, actually,” Lorenzo said at last. “She's been in the Guard longer than me, and she's been cited by her superiors far more often. She should have been promoted long before me.”

He stopped there, but Wilhelm heard the question he wasn't asking anyway. He turned to face him, and could see, in the light of the rising moon, the same young vampire he had first met a little more than a year earlier and had convinced so easily to join the Guard. Lorenzo had been killing at the time, along with the other members of his clan. Without a Master to rein them in, they had been like children left unsupervised for too long. Wilhelm had jumped in and asserted his authority as easily as if they had truly been his Childer.

“No. I did not tell Bergsen to give you that promotion. You earned it for yourself.”

Lorenzo nodded at that, and seemed to straighten his shoulders a little, his pride evident. Still, Wilhelm's answer had not completely satisfied him.

“But Aria,” he started, and stopped when Wilhelm shook his head.

"She'll be promoted, eventually. But not before she reaches twenty. Bergsen's policy, and I can't fault him on it. She's too young to lead."

Lorenzo's lips twisted in a dry smile.

"She'd be pissed off if she heard you say that. She's still ranting on how you didn't help her join the cadets, and kept her in an office after she was sworn into the Guard because you thought she was too young."

Wilhelm shrugged. "I still think she'd be better off elsewhere, and I'm not going to change my mind about that."

"Even though she's a damn fine fighter?"

"Damn fine or not, fighters get hurt. Or worse."

"Not when I'm around."

"True. You've been doing a good job so far. Just keep it up."

Something on the horizon was stirring. Wilhelm picked up the phone at his waist and flipped it open. Others might have raised the alarm already, but he wasn't taking chances.

"Go find her," he told Lorenzo. "Keep her safe."

Lorenzo saluted him. "Yes, sir."

~

When I think back of the night I met Lorenzo, I can't help but seeing the scene through different eyes. Back then, I was a young girl on her first official night on duty at the walls, and the soldier I met that night, the man I soon realized was a vampire, was just sweet, funny and cute. Today, I know he was nice to me because Will had asked him to be.

I had thought I had won, when Will relented and obtained my transfer to active duty. But all he did was switch tactics. He couldn't lock me up in an office, so he gave me a babysitter. Vampire, so he'd have a better chance of protecting me. Relatively young, so we'd bond more easily. And bond, we did.

Lorenzo had my back from the first night on. It's something relatively common in the Guard; most of us can't afford to play alone. Will is one of the rare exceptions to that rule.

Lorenzo was new in the Guard, as I was, but I had the benefit of almost two years of cadet training behind me. The training for vampires is far less thorough than that. Honestly, when I saw him handling that sword, I started thinking that I had to look over him. It took me four nights to convince him to try an axe instead. With his way of swinging with all his strength in the blow, it just made more sense.

I had never had much interest in vampires before. The only vampire I knew was Will, and he was very...special to me. For years, I thought of him as a hero that was keeping me safe, and later... But I was talking about Lorenzo, wasn't I?

I was saying I never had an interest in vampires before meeting Lorenzo. In truth, I never did even after. When we started talking, on those nights when no demons showed up, or when I started showing him fighting moves, it wasn't a vampire I had in front of me. It was a young man, just a few years older than me, who was funny, and a bit dorky. A man, I learned after a few weeks, who kissed like an angel. A few weeks more, and I knew he made love like a devil.

The night after I first slept with Lorenzo, we crossed paths with Will over the walls. When he looked at me—at us—he seemed colder than I had ever seen him, but when the demons attacked, he fought with a fire come straight from hell. He'll deny it to the day he's ashes but I knew it from the first night. He was jealous.

I always wondered how he never saw coming that Lorenzo would start looking over me for a reason other than that Will asked him to do so. Or maybe he did anticipate we'd get that close, but he didn't realize it would affect him as much. It's one of those things he refuses to talk about.

I think—no, I know—that Lorenzo did more than like me. Love isn't a word he would ever have used, but like simply isn't enough. The most he ever admitted to was caring, and he proved it many times, in many ways.

I wasn't happy when I found out about why Lorenzo had first taken an interest in me, and Will and I had a shouting match about it. Well, I shouted, and Will just stood there. He can be so stubborn. He never apologized for it. He did understand I was upset, at least, and he tried to make things better by sending me roses. It confused the hell out of me. What kind of man plays matchmaker then sends the woman flowers?

Time has healed that wound for me, and today I can't regret having known Lorenzo, even if Will pushed him toward me. It might have started as an assignment for him, but what we shared was real. And without him, I wouldn't be here today. I wouldn't be what I am. And I wouldn't have Will.

Chapter 6

Twenty-eight years earlier, over the course of a week, miles and miles of fortifications had been constructed around the city. The mayor had launched a wide call for volunteers, and the population had responded beyond all expectations. Most people who had come to the construction sites had known nothing about building up walls but there had been enough people who did, and the multitude of hands had helped to create five-foot wide and twenty-foot high fortifications of stone and concrete, reinforced with steel. They weren't impenetrable, and the point of entry in particular was vulnerable despite huge doors that were replaced regularly, but they were enough. Engineers around the country now often based their reinforcement designs over what had come to be called the Newhaven model.

Leaning against the safeguard at the top of the walls, Wilhelm kept his eyes on the small troop of demons advancing toward the city. They'd be there in a few minutes. The Guard was ready, every soldier armed and focused.

Or rather, almost every soldier.

At the foot of the walls, two soldiers were talking, and demons or the coming fight seemed to be the last things on their minds.

"Aria, come on, drop it."

That was Lorenzo. Wilhelm could have clubbed him over the head. He wouldn't be getting anywhere with this kind of exasperated protest.

"Drop it? I tell you I love you, and the best answer you can come up with is that we should get ready for the fight! I am *not* dropping it!"

When they had started talking, Ariadne had been whispering, but now she didn't seem to care anymore who might hear. Lorenzo still did though; he shushed her and dropped his voice to an urgent murmur.

"You know I can't say it. I've told you vamps don't love, not like humans do. Would you rather I lie to you?"

Before she could answer, the call to arms sounded, three short tones that announced the imminent attack of demons. The archers on the walls put themselves in position; they wouldn't shoot until the next bell rang. At the foot of the walls, the troops lined up. Wilhelm glanced down at Ariadne and Lorenzo. Her position was perfect, her eyes on the approaching demons; at her side, Lorenzo was fidgeting, alternating glances at the demons and at her as though he were waiting for her to answer his question.

Wilhelm looked again at the demons. There were barely a dozen of them and the fight would be no more than a skirmish. He had other places to be, other things to do. He should have left and let the Guard do what it did best—fight. But when he descended the stairs, just as the last warning echoed over the walls, it was to pass the doors right as they were being closed, a sword already in his hand. Lorenzo and Ariadne were both distracted and it wasn't the way to start a fight, any fight, even one that didn't promise to be too arduous.

The demons charged. First blood was drawn on both sides. Wilhelm focused on the task at hand, allowing only a tiny part of his attention to remain on Ariadne and Lorenzo. Usually they fought side by side, protecting each other, but tonight she kept advancing and leaving Lorenzo behind. Every time he caught up with her, she changed course, turning her back on him and on his help until he gave up pursuing her and began paying more attention to the ax in his hand and what damage it could make. Wilhelm growled. Lorenzo should have known better than leave her on her own.

He started weaving his way closer to her, slashing at demons but not fighting any given one long enough to kill it. Even so, he wasn't quick enough. All he could do was shout when a lance pierced Ariadne's armor and plunged into her abdomen. At the same instant, her sword connected with the demon's neck and her momentum finished the blow, almost severing its head, and then she was down.

In the middle of the battle, Wilhelm didn't know if anyone else had noticed. He couldn't take the risk that no one had. He ran to her, picked her up and carried her to the doors, banging on them until the small entrance carved in the middle of them opened, the metal locks clanking as they were pulled.

“Medics!”

The shout hadn't finished passing his lips before the gurney was there and hands were prying Ariadne from his arms and laying her down. Her eyes opened as the medics pulled her toward the ambulance and a look of panic crossed her face as she looked around her, a look that disappeared when her gaze found Wilhelm walking next to the stretcher. Her hand rose toward him.

“Stay with me.”

She coughed; her lips became flecked with blood. The medics urged her not to talk as they hoisted the cot into one of the waiting ambulances, but she didn't seem to hear them.

“I don't want to die alone.”

Wilhelm climbed in after her. Someone started saying he couldn't come but he looked at the man coldly, and before long the human was turning away, flustered. He jumped out

of the ambulance and swung the doors closed. One bang on the side of the vehicle and at once they were in motion.

There were two medics busy over Ariadne. Wilhelm tried not to look at them or at the various things they poked or prodded her with. Instead he sat on the edge of a box by her head and reached for her hand. It felt too cold between his, colder than it had been, a lifetime ago it seemed, when she had taken his.

“Is it true that vampires can't love?”

The words slid over Wilhelm, almost too foreign for him to comprehend. But her eyes were waiting for an answer, and he struggled to find one that wouldn't upset her.

“It's what all vampires are taught,” he said, his voice wavering slightly.

“But is it true?”

The ambulance came to a stop, the doors were flung open and he tried to let go of her hand so she could be wheeled away. She held on to him, however, and he had no choice but to follow and try to answer when she repeated her question again.

“In my experience, no, it's not. But when you've been taught otherwise, it can be hard to see.” He paused for a second, to try and make his voice firmer. “It can be hard to admit too when it's a human you care about, because humans are so fragile and you know they'll probably die long before you.”

Someone was trying to slide a mask over her face, she pushed it away with her free hand long enough to ask in a small voice, “Am I going to die?”

“No. I'm not going to let that happen. Not now, not ever.”

Her eyelids fluttered closed, even as the hand clinging to his became limp. Wilhelm ground his teeth and turned to the medic at his side. She was a vampire and one of the best surgeons the Guard could count on. She met his eyes with steely determination and he nodded.

“Don't make me a liar.”

~

Wilhelm had been pacing in the deserted waiting area for half an hour when Lorenzo rushed in.

“Where is she? Is she going to be all right? Did she—”

His gasp of pain when Wilhelm punched him in the stomach was the most beautiful sound.

"Where were you?" he growled. He had to struggle with himself not to punch Lorenzo again.

"The battle just ended, I couldn't get here—"

"Where were you when a lance was thrust into your charge?"

Lorenzo's head snapped up and his features darkened. "She didn't want me anywhere near her! What was I supposed to do?"

"Keep her safe." Wilhelm's words were ice. "I don't care about your excuses. I don't care that she didn't want you there. All I know is that you have a job to do, and if it takes lying to do it, then for heaven's sake *lie!*"

With a frustrated shout Lorenzo turned away, fingers raking his hair furiously.

"I won't tell her I love her. You can't ask me to do that."

"Why not?" Wilhelm snapped. "It's true."

Lorenzo started laughing, the sound on the edge of hysteria, but he stopped abruptly and whirled back toward Wilhelm. There was a new light in his widening eyes, and Wilhelm didn't like it at all.

"I get it," he said, sounding as though he had just come across a surprising revelation. "You're not upset because I won't tell her I love her. You're upset because *she* said she loves *me*." His laughter now was mocking. "You're jealous!"

Wilhelm shook his head, but it didn't stop Lorenzo.

"Why don't *you* tell her you love her?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Wilhelm scoffed. "Vampires can't love."

~

I've heard that phrase so often over the years that it has lost all meaning as far as I'm concerned. It's true that all vamps are taught they can't love; it's usually one of their first lessons. It was one of mine. But it's also one of the biggest myths that surround us, one that scares humans a little; if we can't love, then we have to be more different from them than we look, and if we are, then what else are we hiding?

When I woke up after the operation, the first thing I remember was a scent. Roses. I opened my eyes and they were there, on a table just by my head. White roses. Even in the glaring hospital light they were beautiful, and if I had ever thought that white roses were unlucky, I stopped believing it at that moment. There was an envelope propped against the vase and I tried to reach for it. That small movement awakened pain in my entire body and I cried out. The next second, a nurse rushed in.

“Don't try moving,” she advised me at once, and came to look at whatever machines were hooked up to me. On her way, she frowned at the roses. “I don't know who was insensitive enough to bring these. I'll take them away as soon as I'm done here.”

“No.” My throat was parched but I pushed the words out anyway. “I like them. Can you give me the note?”

“No. I told you not to move. But I'll read it to you.”

The note wasn't signed, but of course I knew who had written it. All it said was, “Never scare me like that again.” Will is a true poet, sometimes.

I kept expecting him to visit me, kept remembering his hand in mine and his voice promising I'd be OK. But he didn't come, not for the entire time I was in the hospital. That was just one more thing for me to yell about when I saw him next.

A doctor came in, sat down with me, broke the news that I'd never be able to have children. I just stared at her when she was done and wondered how to tell her that I had never wanted to have any to begin with. All I could think when she left me alone was that Will would have understood. Better than anyone else, I thought, he knew how much the Guard meant to me. It was more than a career, it was my life. If the doctor had said I'd never fight again, then I would have had reasons to be upset.

When Lorenzo walked in, the first thing I felt—the only thing I felt—was guilt. Because I had thought about Will since waking up, enough to wonder where he was and when he would come to see me, but I hadn't given a single thought to the man who had been my boyfriend for the past four years.

He pulled a chair and sat down next to me.

“I need to tell you something. Something very important. When I arrived in this town, I had nothing. My clan was in tatters, our Sire was dead, and we didn't know where to go or what to do. Will came to us, gave us a choice. Gave me a purpose. Protecting you.”

I would have stopped him, then, but he didn't let me. He just kept talking, as though he needed to get it all out. He probably did, I suppose.

“It was just a job at first and then we started talking, and you taught me to fight better, and I began to...care. I felt something I hadn't felt since I was turned, something I

thought I could never feel again. Something I wasn't supposed to feel. And it stopped to be a job. It became just natural to protect you, like you protected me. And today on the field, I felt...naked without you at my back, and seeing you lying there, hurt and bleeding...it was like dying all over again, except more painful this time."

When long minutes passed and I still hadn't said a word, he stood. Truth is, I didn't know what to say. What do you say to someone who tells you the past four years have been based on a lie? What are you even supposed to feel?

"I understand," he said. He was smiling, but it was the saddest smile he had ever given me. "I'll let you rest, now."

I caught his hand as he walked by. Moving hurt my abdomen, and I gasped. He looked back at me.

"It hurts." There were tears in my voice. I always hated crying so much.

"I'll get the nurse."

"No, that's not... What you just said... that hurts. I thought you..." He didn't want to say love, so I wasn't going to either. "...cared about me from the start. I did."

"Not from the start, maybe. Not like that. But now I do, more than I should."

I squeezed his hand. "So do I."

I was in the hospital for three weeks. Lorenzo practically moved in with me. He went to fight at night, of course, but he always came back to me. The nurses complained but in the end they gave up. He slept in my bed during the day, curled up against me, always so very careful not to hurt me. I spent my time stroking his hair and thinking. It took me time but I decided during these three, long weeks, that words only have the value you attach to them, and that I could live without being told I was loved. I knew I was.

When I got out of the hospital, my first stop was at Will's office.

Chapter 7

The phone rang. Wilhelm started. He had been intently reading through a report about the state of energy supplies in Newhaven, a document so dry that unless he made a deliberate effort to remain focused, his attention drifted every few lines. He glanced at the identification display. It was the hospital. He picked up the receiver before the second ring had ended, fumbling a little in his haste. He had been expecting this call for the past couple of days. He was somewhat surprised Ariadne had remained in the hospital this long, she had to be bored out of her mind by now.

“Wilhelm.”

“It’s Laurie, Will.”

Wilhelm’s anticipation dropped back at once but he tried to put as much warmth in his voice as possible out of respect for one of the strongest women he’d ever known. As Bergsen’s wife, she had needed that strength daily for the past twenty-five years.

“How is he?”

“Better.” Relief echoed in that simple word, but it didn’t completely mask the underlying tension. “He woke up this morning. He was disorientated for a while, but I just talked to him and he’s lucid. He wanted to talk to you, but the doctor vetoed it, said he needs more rest.”

For a brief moment, Wilhelm closed his eyes. In times like this, he sometimes wished he had had a God to pray to, and to thank.

“I’ll come by later, if that’s OK.”

“As long as it’s not to throw him back into work.”

“Just to say hello, I promise.”

They said their goodbyes. Wilhelm was smiling when he hung up the phone. Forty-nine hours earlier, Bergsen had suffered a heart attack. His wife, his doctor, two nurses and Wilhelm were the only ones who knew. If he recovered completely, there was no reason to tell the public and start a panic in the city. If he didn’t...there would be time to think about it then.

On the desk in front of him, the energy report still waited, but Wilhelm ignored it a little longer. Since he was going to visit the hospital, maybe he would stop by Ariadne’s room. He had last seen her when she had come out of surgery, and since then whenever she came to his mind, it wasn’t as a young woman full of life, nor as a skilled

fighter. Instead, it was a pale face he saw, closed eyes circled by pain and forced sleep, and a too-still body on the bleached white sheets of the hospital bed.

If he went to see her, however, the reasonable part of his mind pointed out, it might attract the attention of too many people, and the last thing Wilhelm wanted was to cause gossip.

With a frustrated sigh, he returned his eyes to the papers he ought to be reading. Unlike Bergsen, Wilhelm wasn't good with these things. He knew fighting, training, strategy. He could see trends in the numbers of wounded or dead and could organize fighters, but taking care of civilians was a whole different matter. And so were women.

There was a sharp knock, and before he could answer, the door opened. Ariadne entered and closed the door again behind her. Wilhelm sat up, blinking in surprise, and watched her. Her strides were steady when she approached the chair in front of his desk, but he noticed a flash of pain as she sat down. It had been three weeks since she had been hurt, and she was wearing her Guard uniform, but there was no way she was fit to return to combat yet.

"Shouldn't you be in bed, still?" he asked, foregoing civilities since she was doing the same.

She was sitting very straight, almost too much so. Her eyes seemed calm. If he knew her at all, it wouldn't last. She was fire and quicksilver; anything else she might show was a mask.

"The doctor said I was fine. Didn't you get the call yet?"

Just as she finished talking, the phone rang again. As before, the display identified the hospital, and Wilhelm picked it up. On the other end of the line, a nurse informed him that Ariadne would be discharged in the evening.

"So maybe I left a bit early," she answered his raised eyebrow when he hung up. The calm in her eyes was turning into smugness. "Why did you want to know when I left the hospital?"

He didn't bother asking how she knew he had requested to be informed, just like he didn't bother calling her on her attitude. He was getting used to her barging in on him with questions and demands.

"You were badly hurt," he pointed out. "I was concerned."

She snorted at that, the small sound accompanied by a shake of her head. "Soldiers are hurt every day. Are you concerned about all of them?"

Wilhelm didn't like the direction her questions were taking or the rising volume of her voice. Accompanying her to the hospital had been a bad idea, as had been the roses. Who knew what ideas he had put in her head? He should have known better. At least, he hadn't gone to visit her.

"Not that it's any of your business, but I get daily reports about anyone from the Guard who enters or leaves the hospital."

"Individual reports?" she challenged. "And do you assign babysitters to all Guard members as well?"

She leaned forward. A flash of pain coursed over her features, but she didn't back away. Her gaze was pinning Wilhelm to his seat.

"I don't assign babysitters to anyone."

"What do you call Lorenzo, then? He told me everything."

Wilhelm clenched his teeth and kept quiet. Lorenzo was an idiot, and the next time they met they would have a small discussion about what part of 'don't tell her' Lorenzo hadn't understood.

"So? Why aren't you saying anything?"

"You just said you know everything, so I don't know what else you want to hear."

There was no trace left of her earlier calm when she stood. A muscle was ticking in her jaw, and the frustration and anger in her scent were too tightly wound to distinguish.

"How about why you asked him to shadow me? Or whether you suggested to him to get closer to me—"

"Never."

She didn't even seem to hear him. If anything, she stood even closer to the desk, looming over Wilhelm.

"I just don't get it. You go through all this trouble to keep me safe, you bring me to the hospital, and then you don't even visit me."

For a second, Wilhelm had a feeling that this last point was what angered her most—but that couldn't be. It wouldn't make any sense. She was waiting for an answer, though, and he struggled to find one.

"I can hardly visit everyone who gets hurt."

“But you send flowers to all of them?”

Wilhelm had had enough. Nothing he could say now would satisfy her. Standing, he walked around the desk and went to open the door to his office.

“Night will be on us before long,” he said once she had turned to look at him. “I have things to do. It’s time for you to leave.”

She took slow steps toward him, staring at him the entire way as though she could get the answers she wanted straight from his mind.

“This is not over.”

The warning was clear in her tone, but Wilhelm didn’t respond as she left his office. Returning to his desk, he picked up the phone and dialed the number he had taped to the base of the receiver. The eager voice that answered greeted him by name.

“Yes. The usual. Six. Pick up the note in my office.”

He pulled out a small envelope and blank note card from a drawer and put the tip of a pen to it. When the florist knocked half an hour later, the card was still as blank as Wilhelm’s mind.

~

I still have that piece of paper, like I have every single note Will ever wrote to me. That one just held one word. Sorry. I’m not sure what he was sorry for. I asked him, once, and he said he was sorry for ever thinking he could keep me safe despite my own wishes, and sorry he couldn’t. That didn’t answer anything, but that’s Will in a nutshell for you.

I guess all his notes tell as much about us as anything he ever said to me. I have quite a few now. I hold them in a wooden box carved with roses I’ve had since I was a child. Even after all this time, I can remember my father bringing the box back from one of his trips out of town, an old, brown thing, with hinges so rusty it was difficult to open. I remember sitting in the kitchen, hands flat on the table and my chin resting on them, and watching him slowly, delicately, almost tenderly sand away the paint until the wood was pale and smooth. He rubbed in wax, made the box shine. Then he unscrewed the hinges and put in new ones, gleaming like silver. That’s the most vivid memory I keep of my father. I can still smell the warmth of the wax when he handed the box to me, still see his smile when I thanked him.

That day, the flowers were already there when I got back to the two-room apartment I shared with Lorenzo. I had taken a slow walk after talking to Will—if you can even call what we did ‘talk’. The flowers were there, and so was Lorenzo, but the note wasn’t.

“Nice flowers,” I said. And it was true. They always were beautiful.

“White roses are bad luck.”

His tone was my first clue that he was sulking. Then I looked at him, stretched out on the small sofa that took an entire length of wall. His eyes were on the ceiling, looking at nothing in particular, at anything but me. After my argument with Will, the last thing I wanted was to have an argument with Lorenzo as well, so I pretended not to notice his bad mood. Returning my eyes to the small bouquet of flowers, I looked in vain for the white envelope that should have been there.

“Was there a card?”

Lorenzo sat up abruptly, startling me. “You went to see him, didn’t you?”

I didn’t even think of asking whom he meant, nor did I consider refusing to answer.

“I did. I tried to get an explanation, but he barely talked to me at all. He can be so stubborn.”

He laughed at that, a harsh laugh I wasn’t used to hearing from him, and that surprised me.

“He’s stubborn,” he repeated, “and you’re blind. Can’t you see why he’s doing all of it? Why he didn’t want you to join the Cadets, why he didn’t want you fighting in the Guard, why he asked me to have your back? Come on, now, Aria. You can figure it out.”

I shook my head, because no, honestly, I wasn’t figuring it out. Or maybe I didn’t want to. Maybe it was too scary to think that—

“He’s in love with you.”

He stood and came to me, so fast I was a little alarmed and took a step back despite myself. I wasn’t afraid of Lorenzo, I have never been, but he looked angrier at that moment than I had ever seen him. Angry, and I couldn’t understand why.

“Don’t be silly.” I tried to laugh, but my throat refused to cooperate. “You said it yourself: vampires can’t love.”

But even as I said it, I remembered what Will had told me on the way to the hospital. According to him, vampires could indeed fall in love. And now that I thought back on the way he had said the words...

“Leave with me,” Lorenzo said suddenly. “Let’s get out of this town, go to a place where demons—”

I didn't let him finish and shook my head. He knew me better than that. I'm not sure why he even asked. I guess he was more jealous—more afraid—of Will than he would have admitted. He didn't look upset, or surprised. Just resigned.

"I've got to go. I can't be late on the walls. Don't wait up."

He kissed me, before he left the apartment, hard and long and with the edge of anger still cold on his lips. The entire time, I couldn't help wondering if it was true. If Will truly loved me. I loved Lorenzo more than I had ever cared about anyone, and still I couldn't help wondering.

That night, I stared at the crumpled note I found by the sofa for a long time, smoothing it out between my fingers. In the end, I couldn't help it. I had to know. I went to Will.

Chapter 8

The night had been long; the fight, fierce. These big fights had been taking place more often in the past few months. It seemed that the demons had decided that skirmishes weren't worth the effort, and that larger fights were more likely to deliver the city to them. There would come a day when they brought enough troops to the walls to finish the town, and then nothing but the sun would stop them. There were too many cities, all over the world, that had fallen like this. Wilhelm knew that it was only a question of when Newhaven would fall as well, not if.

He had returned along with the Guard soldiers, riding in the same truck, walking by their sides, taking the same elevator to his apartment. It wouldn't have been any different if he had been alone. He had noticed the pointed looks at his injured arm, but no one had asked if he was all right, no one had suggested that he go to the hospital. No one had dared. No one ever did.

Something stopped his hand just as he was about to swipe his card key in the lock. Tired as he was, he needed a few seconds to recognize the scent lingering on his doorstep.

"Ariadne."

He only realized he had spoken the name aloud when it seemed to echo down the deserted hallway. If he listened intently, he could hear a heart beating behind the door and he knew, without the shadow of a doubt, it was Ariadne's.

Immobile on the threshold, he hesitated. He had no desire to see her at that moment, not after the way their last encounter had unfolded hours before. She was asking too many questions, questions he didn't know how to answer, and he was too tired to play this game now. Maybe he would just go back down to his office and... And wait for her to hunt him down. If she had found her way inside his locked apartment, he doubted she would give up so easily. He might as well get it over with.

Finally swiping the card, he pushed the door open with his good arm and walked in. He found her right away, sitting on the sofa. She was reading one of his books, but she looked up when he entered. Her gaze and slightly raised eyebrows seemed to challenge him to say anything about her breaking into his apartment. He wanted to scold her, but the words vanished before passing his lips. Shaking his head, he walked over to his bedroom and sat down on the mattress with a slight groan. When he looked up again, she was by the bedroom door, arms crossed and looking annoyed.

"Go home, Ariadne. I have nothing to say to you."

"Do you ever?" She snorted. "Doesn't matter. You can listen."

Once again, her eyes held that challenging look that she seemed so fond of. Wilhelm wondered, as she started rambling about Lorenzo, and Guard assignments, and unwanted interferences in her life, if she looked at demons the same way on the battlefield. When he had fought by her side, guarding her back before he had asked someone else to do so for him, he had always been too intent on keeping her safe to pay much attention to the way she looked at their enemies.

From there, as she kept talking, more animated now but still just past the threshold, his thoughts drifted toward Bergsen. Wilhelm had gone to see him before heading to the walls, and he had not liked what he had found in that hospital room. People were beginning to wonder where Bergsen was. The excuse that he was taking a few well-earned vacation days was shaky at best, and it would never hold once he reappeared, looking weaker, paler, thinner. Questions would be asked, and asked again until they received satisfying answers. Wilhelm doubted that anything but the truth would do.

That was what he had been thinking about, during the battle. That was what had been distracting him from the demons in front of him. That, and Ariadne, her words and anger still ringing in his ears. That distraction had cost him. He should have avoided that axe blow; he hadn't. He couldn't let himself be caught off guard like this. With Bergsen already weakened, Newhaven needed Wilhelm more than ever—as much as he hated that fact. They needed to train better replacements, build failsafe people into the system so that if either of them was incapacitated—or both—the Guard and Newhaven would keep running and remain safe. The chain of command, as it stood, would never hold. Wilhelm didn't know why he had never realized as much before.

He didn't know either why he had never realized that Ariadne was too much of a distraction.

He focused his attention on her again, blinking to adjust his vision. She had fallen silent and her lips were pinched into a thin line.

"Did you even listen to a word of what I said?"

There was no reason to lie. "No."

She shook her head, but strangely enough her features softened, almost to the point of a smile. "Of course you didn't listen. That's just like you."

Annoyance flashed through Wilhelm. It was the first time in all the years he had known her that he had blocked out her words rather than listened to her, because he was tired and because he didn't know what she wanted to hear.

"You know nothing of me. And I know nothing of you. We'll both be better off if we keep it that way."

He stood from the bed, ready to show her out, but couldn't help groaning as the movement jostled his arm. Immediately, her eyes widened and she looked him over, her gaze stopping at his arm where blood made his jacket and shirt adhere to his wound. On the black leather, the blood barely showed.

"You're hurt." Her hand rose toward his arm, hesitating before she reached it. "What happened?"

"It's nothing. You need to go now."

He blinked, taken aback, when she turned away and left the room. He wouldn't have thought it would be that easy. And indeed, it wasn't. When he followed her out, he found her in the small bathroom, rummaging beneath the sink for the standard-issue first aid kit.

"Ariadne," he started, but she interrupted him before he could say anything more.

"Take off your shirt and jacket."

His protests that he was fine didn't help in the slightest. When he didn't do as she asked, she simply stepped forward and took matters into her own hands, pushing at the collar of his jacket. He stepped back, trying to evade her, but the wall behind him stopped him. He caught her wrist.

"Stop that. I don't need your help."

"Maybe not, but you want me out of here. Let me look at that wound and I'll leave."

Too tired to argue anymore, Wilhelm gave up. The sooner she left, the easier it would be. He shrugged out of his jacket, then pulled off his shirt, wincing when the fabric pulled at the edges of his wound where the blood had started to dry. When he glanced up, Ariadne's eyes were not on his wound, but on his chest instead. He watched, a little bemused, as she bit down on her bottom lip. When she noticed he was watching her, she blushed, her cheeks turning bright red, and cleared her throat before turning away to grab a wet washcloth.

Trying to ignore the way her heart was beating faster suddenly, Wilhelm let her do as she pleased. She cleaned the bloody slash, muttering the whole while that stitches would have been a good idea, then disinfected it before starting to wrap a bandage around his arm. Wilhelm was aware that soldiers of the Guard were trained into giving first aid; he had never known until that moment that gentleness was part of the curriculum.

Her touch was careful, almost delicate. It had been a long time since anyone had touched him like this. It had been a long time since anyone had touched him at all. With

each of her movements, the urge to touch back rose in him, to brush his fingers to her hand or cheek.

He remembered a child whose hand he had held, and suddenly wondered when he had stopped seeing that lost child when he looked at Ariadne, and when he had started seeing this strong woman instead. Years earlier, her teenager's antics had amused him, but even then they had announced her future strength. A strength that would have complimented his own so well if he hadn't pushed her into someone else's arms.

He looked from her hands to her face. She was looking straight at him. Something passed between them, something Wilhelm couldn't have described or explained, but something that he knew she felt too when her hands stilled on his arm. Years of making sure Ariadne would be safe suddenly had a new meaning as the world shifted just enough to make everything clear.

Ariadne blinked and the moment ended, but it wasn't over. She leaned in and pressed her lips to his in a kiss that was warmth and sugar. A kiss that was sunlight and life itself. A kiss that was everything Wilhelm could not afford to want.

A gently as he could, he broke away and steeled himself when her eyelids fluttered in confusion.

"You should go, Aria," he said very low, not trusting his voice to remain steady if he tried to speak any louder.

To his surprise, she left, without a word, without a look back.

~

You know who was surprised? I was.

I never intended to kiss him. I never imagined I'd feel something if I did.

But I did feel something. Something I couldn't describe either back then, something I still can't explain today. Something I had never felt until that day, and that I never felt since, except with Will.

I was also pretty sure I wasn't the only one who had been shaken by that kiss. Will could deny it all he wanted; I knew now what was going on. I knew the reason for years of protection. I knew whom he had been talking about when saying that vampires could love. I knew the reason for the roses.

There was just one problem. Lorenzo.

I had told Lorenzo I loved him, and I meant that. My feelings for him hadn't changed. Nonetheless, they paled in comparison to one simple kiss.

I couldn't go back to my apartment—to Lorenzo—with my heart still beating too fast and too wildly. I couldn't go back to him until I understood what was going on.

The sun was just rising when I walked outside. At this hour, there wasn't anyone in sight. The air was fresh, cool; exactly what I needed to clear my head. Except that when I started walking around, I could smell their scent, carried by the soft wind: the roses from the Remembrance Wall. I followed the scent of fading roses to the lists of my fallen comrades, and stared at the names without really seeing them for a while. Too much was going on in my head for me to know what to think or feel. And as time passed, as I walked through Newhaven, painful step after painful step, the stitches on my abdomen pulling more and more, it didn't get any better. Nothing made sense anymore.

It was midmorning when I returned home. I was exhausted. All I wanted was to slide into bed next to Lorenzo and pretend that nothing had happened. But I couldn't do that, because Lorenzo wasn't in bed. When I unlocked the door as quietly as I could, he was there in an instant, pulling me in and drawing me into his arms, holding me so close I gasped at a twinge of pain. He didn't let go.

"Don't leave me. Please, Aria, say you won't leave."

His words were a broken whisper against my neck. Before I knew it, almost before I understood what I was saying, I was promising that I wouldn't leave him. Not ever.

I held on to that promise. He's the one who left. Four years passed before he did, though. Four years of being near Will almost every night, of feeling his eyes on me, of trying not to look at him in return. Four years of pretending, from both of us, that nothing had passed between us, that nothing had changed when everything had.

Chapter 9

“Let’s put everyone on high alert tonight again. No R&R permissions, all Guards including reserve ready to join the walls if needed until midnight.”

On the other side of the conference table, Bergsen didn’t react in any way to Wilhelm’s suggestion. Leaning back in his armchair, he turned to the two Guards sitting on his left on the long side of the table and merely raised an eyebrow, inviting them to comment.

“The Code Red has been in effect for four nights.” As usual, it was Carter who spoke first. She had a few years more experience than her counterpart, although they shared the same rank. “If we declare it yet again and no attack comes, morale will continue to decrease. I think we should lower it to Code Yellow.”

By her side, Stevenson kept his eyes on the notes in front of him for a few more seconds, tapping a pencil against the table the entire time. The sound seemed louder than it really was in the large conference room, empty save for the four of them. They had tried meeting in Bergsen’s office at first, but it was too small for a four-way discussion that sometimes lasted five or six hours. When it had been just the two of them, Wilhelm and Bergsen had rarely taken more than two hours to make the same kind of decisions that were on the table today, but then the entire point of having Carter and Stevenson there was to train them so that when the time came, they would be able to do their job.

“There haven’t been any demon at the walls for six nights now,” Stevenson said at last, his voice slow and steady.

“My point exactly,” Carter jumped in. “It’s unlikely—”

“Major, please, let Major Stevenson finish.”

She pinched her lips tight and inclined her head. Stevenson picked up where he had left off as though he hadn’t noticed the interruption.

“The last time a situation like this happened was seventeen years ago. When they finally attacked after eight days, they came in such numbers that they breached the walls and went as far as Ninth Street.”

“We fought them all night long,” Bergsen continued grimly when Stevenson stopped. “And by morning, the sky was covered enough that they didn’t retreat as we expected them to, so we had to continue the fight without the vampires. It was a butcher field.”

“But it hasn’t happened for seventeen years,” Carter argued, “so we don’t know that it will now.”

“We don’t know that it won’t, either,” Wilhelm shot back. He didn’t like the woman; she had been Bergsen’s choice, and Wilhelm had never agreed with it. “Are you ready to take that chance?”

She held his challenging gaze—for three seconds—before lowering her eyes.

“Major Carter does have a point about morale, though,” Bergsen intervened. “See what the kitchen can do on such short notice to make something special. Then announce the Code Red is extended.”

Carter and Stevenson seemed startled to be dismissed so early, and Wilhelm was as surprised as they were. There was still a lot to discuss. They stood without a word however, and saluted before leaving the room.

“You want to tell me what’s going on?” Bergsen asked after a few moments. His fingers were drumming lightly on the armrest of his chair. “She was just giving an opinion, which is what we’ve asked them to do, so what was the point in chewing her out like that?”

Wilhelm blinked, surprised. He hadn’t realized that he had, indeed, been past the point of rudeness with Carter, but now that Bergsen had pointed it out, he couldn’t deny it.

“I’ll apologize to her. I guess I was a little distracted.”

“Distracted, huh? The same kind of distracted that sent you to the emergency room five times in the past seven weeks? And it would probably have been more if we hadn’t had these few quiet nights. You’re not trying to get yourself killed, are you?”

Wilhelm scoffed. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Then what’s going on, my friend? If you need time off, we can give you that. God knows that a couple weeks in bed did wonders for me.”

There was an edge of derision to his words. He had enjoyed his stay in the hospital no more than Wilhelm would have.

“It won’t be necessary.”

Bergsen didn’t miss a beat. “Is it about the girl?”

The question was the last thing Wilhelm would have expected. He tensed. “What girl?”

“The one who showed up here, years ago, and wouldn’t leave until you talked to her. The one you stuck into a desk job the day she graduated. The one every group leader we have says we should promote and you’ve tried to convince me isn’t leadership

material. The one you asked a nurse to tell you about when she was in the hospital. That girl."

Closing his eyes, Wilhelm leaned back into his chair. "Aria," he murmured. "Her name is Aria."

"So, it is about her, then."

Wilhelm remained silent as he thought. He had known Bergsen for longer than anyone else in the city, possibly longer than anyone still alive on the planet. He was the closest thing Wilhelm had to a friend. "Yes. It's about Aria."

Bergsen stood and walked to the cabinet on one side of the conference room. It contained plans, maps, reports about past battles, and—at the back of the cabinet, behind everything else—two glasses and a bottle that was as old as Bergsen. He brought them to the table and poured a finger in each glass.

"I thought that was off the menu for you," Wilhelm commented as he accepted a drink.

Bergsen raised an eyebrow. "Do you plan to tell Laurie?"

"No."

"What she doesn't know can't hurt me. And speaking of Laurie... She has been telling me for years that you needed a woman in your life." He paused to take a sip of his drink and grimaced lightly. "Please tell me you waited until that child was of age."

Glaring, Wilhelm finished the glass in one long gulp.

"Don't be crass. I haven't touched her. Nor do I plan to."

"That explains the bad moods."

Wilhelm continued to glare and reached for the bottle to help himself again, this time more generously. "What are you implying?" he grunted. "I'm not a lovesick teenager."

After barely wetting his lips from his drink, Bergsen laughed quietly. "When's the last time you were in love?"

The glass made a soft clinking noise when Wilhelm set it on the table again, his movements very slow and deliberate. "Who said anything about love?"

"You're over three centuries old, Will. I hope you wouldn't put yourself in such a state if all you needed was to get laid."

Said so bluntly, the words were like a slap. Wilhelm was too stunned to react.

“Why don’t you go to her?” Bergsen insisted.

The confession was almost shameful to make. “She has a boyfriend.”

“Isn’t she worth fighting for?”

Wilhelm could have sworn Bergsen was rolling his eyes at him and he felt slightly offended. “I’ve been fighting for her every night for more than ten years.”

“Then get her. Or try to. At the very least, you’ll be able to tell yourself you tried.”

The dry retort on Wilhelm’s tongue was never voiced. Instead, he looked at Bergsen with some resentful surprise. “You know, usually I like it when you make sense.”

Once more, Bergsen laughed. This time, Wilhelm laughed with him.

~

Sometimes, Wilhelm hated to be right.

The massive scale attack he had predicted had finally happened, and although the walls hadn’t been breached yet, every single member of the Guard was there and fighting. Wilhelm was only concerned about one of them, however. On the extended battlefield, he hadn’t seen her for hours, but every move he made was for her, to go back to her, and to finally tell her.

After his talk with Bergsen, he had decided that he had to at least try to talk to her. He wasn’t sure what he would say, but if she would only let him kiss her again, then he knew everything would be all right. What they had felt when they had kissed before was bound to be there again, and neither of them could deny its existence. He wouldn’t let her deny it the way she had let him. He didn’t know what would happen next—he had never felt this way for anyone—but he would figure it out. They would figure it out together. He was conscious that he was avoiding thinking about Lorenzo, but he would cross that bridge when he got to it.

A long, strident note echoing over the battlefield made Wilhelm’s knees want to fold beneath him in relief. This was it. The demons were retreating. Newhaven would endure a little longer.

His relief was short lived, however. When he followed the ebb of fighters back inside the walls, one of the Guards who were in charge of opening and closing the wounded doors caught his attention. At once, he knew something had happened to Aria. That was the only reason why the Guard would talk to him.

“How long ago?” he asked. “How bad?”

“Less than an hour. Pretty bad, I think.”

The medics gave Wilhelm dirty looks when he hopped into an ambulance, but they let him ride with them back to the hospital. He jumped out before the ambulance had come to a complete stop and ran, stopping only at the nurses' desk to ask where Aria was. He was relieved when they gave him a room number and hurried away without listening to anything more. She couldn't be hurt that badly, not when he had finally decided to tell her.

Lorenzo was there when he entered the room. Of course he was. Wilhelm would talk to him later about letting her get hurt yet again. Dismissing the man from his thoughts, he turned his attention to the bed and the pale woman lying in it.

He had to grab the door to hold himself upright, and only after a few seconds did he manage to step back and leave. There was no heartbeat in that room.

~

The door just a few feet to Wilhelm's right kept opening and closing with the flow of visitors, an incessant ballet to which he was all but oblivious.

At first, most were going in. Wounded humans who had realized that the small cut they had wanted to put a bandage on might need a few stitches after all. Friends, humans and vampires alike, who were coming to check on those Guards who had been taken from the battlefield before the end of the battle. Parents called in to say goodbye to their loved ones, or to hold their hands and wish for the best. Regular visiting hours wouldn't start until ten in the morning, but nurses and hospital personnel had stopped trying long ago to keep visitors out of their ward after visiting hours on battle nights. All they asked them was to be quiet, and to keep their visits as short as possible.

Eventually, the stream reversed, and patients and visitors started leaving. Most were silent as they went, but the salt of tears was heavy in the air.

An overhang a few feet long protected the entrance of the hospital, but from where he sat, Wilhelm could still see the sky. The inky darkness lightened as he watched without really seeing, the blue coming from behind the hospital and spreading toward the horizon. It slowly turned from the color of a stormy sea to that of the purest mountain lake. Occasional clouds drifted through as light as foam, and just as ephemeral. At noon, the sky was so blindingly white that Wilhelm had to close his eyes. But behind his closed eyelids, the white persisted, shifting from one moment to the next until it took the form of a sheet drawn over a still body. Wilhelm jerked, his first movement since he had sat down on the concrete with his back to the hospital wall. When he opened his eyes again, the sun was drawing a thin line just beyond the edge of the overhang.

The line thickened as the sun started moving lower toward the horizon. Then it lengthened. Wilhelm kept his eyes on it, and to him it barely seemed to move at all. Only when he blinked did the sunlight appear to jump forward. Jump toward him. It did so until there were only a couple yards left, and minutes were all that separated it from Wilhelm.

“Hello, Will. You missed our afternoon meeting.”

Blinking slowly, Wilhelm looked up, following the pressed uniform pants and shirt until he found Bergsen’s face. The man was looking at him through a barely smiling blank mask, the same mask he wore at Guard funerals. Wilhelm didn’t know what to reply, so he kept quiet and lowered his eyes again. Just behind Bergsen, the line had leapt again.

“Will...” Bergsen sighed as he squatted down; his eyes were now almost level with Wilhelm’s. “What do you think you’re doing here?”

Wilhelm shrugged. After hours of remaining still, his muscles protested loudly, but he silenced the pain and kept it out of his voice. “Nothing. Just enjoying some fresh air.”

Shaking his head lightly, Bergsen snorted.

“Fresh air? It smells like burned meat to me.”

It took a few seconds before the words slid far enough into Wilhelm’s mind to begin to make sense. He sniffed, and the scent clinging to the air—burning flesh—made him frown.

“Come on, now, my friend, you’re scaring the nurses.” Bergsen’s hand closed over Wilhelm’s right shoulder and he squeezed, pulling up lightly. “Let’s go in, and they’ll put some bandages on these burns.”

When Bergsen looked down, Wilhelm followed the movement with his eyes, and was surprised to discover that his left hand was red and blistered. His face felt tight and sore too.

“I didn’t go in the sun,” he protested, taking Bergsen as witness. “Why...”

He couldn’t finish. It didn’t make sense that he would be burnt. He hadn’t moved all day, remaining by the wall beneath the overhang.

“Of course you didn’t go in the sun,” Bergsen said, gently pulling up on Wilhelm’s shoulder again. This time, Wilhelm stood at the prompt. “If you had, I wouldn’t be talking to you now. But you were close enough to sunlight to do the trick. What the hell were you thinking?”

Bergsen's hand remained on Wilhelm's shoulder as he led him inside, past those doors that had opened and closed so often during the day. Wilhelm wondered suddenly if anyone had come to see her. He stopped in the middle of the lobby and turned his face toward Bergsen. The words tore his throat like crushed glass but he pushed them out anyway.

"She's dead."

Bergsen looked away and nodded. "I know, Will. I know."

He motioned for a nurse, and she showed them to an examination room. Wilhelm sat down on the table, and at last Bergsen let go of his shoulder.

The words kept coming now, despite the pain, despite the uselessness of it all. After hours of silence, they refused to stop rising. "I was going to tell her... I had decided, after we talked. I was going to wait until the fight was done, and I would have told her. I would have told her I...I would have...but it doesn't matter now, does it?"

The nurse cleaning his hand wasn't giving any sign that she had heard a word he had said. He looked at Bergsen, who as before turned his eyes away. Bergsen never did that, some part of Wilhelm's mind supplied. Not unless he was keeping something from someone.

"What is it?"

Wilhelm refused to hear Bergsen's protests that nothing was going on and simply asked the question again until the man sighed.

"Well, maybe you'll get another chance to tell her."

At Wilhelm's blank look, Bergsen sighed yet again and passed a hand through his thinning hair. "Cambria. When the orderlies went to take her body, he wouldn't let them. He said he turned her."

~

I woke up with the dying day. I can't remember much of what I felt or thought. It's all very blurry in my mind. What I do remember is that the first thing I saw when I woke up was Will. He was punching Lorenzo, and Bergsen and a doctor were trying to stop him. I sat up on my bed and I must have said something—I must have called for my Sire, I guess, like so many new vamps do when they first awake—because Will stopped, and turned toward me. His hand was bandaged, and the side of his face was burned. His eyes were red, as though he had cried, but I couldn't imagine why he would have. Of course, with my mind as fuzzy as it was, there was a lot I didn't understand. I started raising my hand toward him. I wanted to ask what had happened, but I couldn't manage to form words. Lorenzo walked in front of him and took my hand, sat next to me on the bed. He spoke, but I'm not sure I heard what he said. I do have this distinct memory of

watching a bead of blood slide down his chin from his split lip. It was the most fascinating thing I had ever seen. And then Lorenzo cupped my cheek in his hand, and said my name softly until I looked up into his eyes.

"It'll be all right, Childe. You'll see. Everything will be all right."

The door banged shut on Will, and I jumped, startled. The sound was too loud, the displacement of air too intense on my skin. Lorenzo got my attention back by offering me his wrist and asking me to bite and feed. I did just that before I even understood what he was saying.

I never knew until now that Will had decided this was the night he would tell me. If anything, he was more distant after that. I could still feel his eyes on me, was still sure he kept as close a watch on me as he had before, but he felt farther away from me than ever.

And then, there was the way he acted around Lorenzo. It was a surprise that none of the heated, angry looks he threw at him ever set fire to my Sire. It was even more surprising that he never staked him. There were a couple of occasions when I thought he would, but after I asked him not to kill him, he never touched Lorenzo again. I doubt he ever forgave him, though. Even with the way things turned out, even though he and I have been together for decades, he'll never forgive Lorenzo for killing me.

Chapter 10

In the stillness of the late night, the sounds of flesh hitting flesh, of grunts and groans seemed louder even than the clash of battle had been earlier, metal against metal and battle cries echoing over the walls. And yet, it was only another battle taking place, another fight, like the ones that happened nightly in Newhaven—or almost. The difference, this time, was that both adversaries were vampires, and neither held a weapon.

For three nights, Wilhelm had tried to avoid having anything to do with either Lorenzo or Aria. He had tried not to look at her, when she first came back to the walls, raw energy bubbling out of her and shouting to the world what she now was. He had tried not to listen as the two of them sparred on a slow night, Lorenzo giving advice and pointers to a fighter who proved herself, as she always had, better than he was. He had tried—and failed miserably. Everywhere he looked, he saw Aria, her hair, her eyes, her smile. Her blood.

Tonight, Wilhelm had reached his limits. He had seen Aria walk away with friends, human friends, encouraged by Lorenzo, and he hadn't thought twice about what he would do. Waiting for the right time had been one of the most difficult things he had done in years. It was fitting that he had finally caught up with Lorenzo in front of the Remembrance Wall. Above the bouquet of white roses laid on the pavement, Aria's name was still on the list of recent deaths, the V next to her name announcing her fate. Few Guard members were turned on the battlefield, but she was hardly the first.

"You were supposed to protect Aria." He punctuated his words with a punch that Lorenzo managed to avoid. "Not let her die." Another punch; this one made contact. "Not turn her."

Lorenzo took a couple of steps back, and was stopped by the wall behind him. He ran a hand over his mouth, wiping away some blood. His lips twisted into a wry smile.

"I never heard you call her Aria before."

He spat some blood and took a step forward again, raising his hands in an unconvincing defensive gesture. Wilhelm barely noticed, too caught in his own thoughts. When had he started thinking of her as Aria? He had never cared for nicknames. He didn't mind people calling him Will, better than them butchering his name, but he wasn't one to call anyone by anything other than their given name.

"Do you think she became someone new when I turned her?" Lorenzo continued, his voice turning more and more bitter even as he spoke faster. "She didn't. She was born to be a fighter. Haven't you seen her on the battlefield? She's increased her speed and

skills, when she learns to use them fully she'll be one of the best fighters out there. She might be better than you, someday. Is that what you're afraid of?"

Wilhelm never answered, at least not in words. He started punching again, adding kicks every so often. He had been angry before, but now he was enraged. As much as he had tried to ignore Lorenzo's words, to ignore them like the babblings of a fledgling who knew nothing—since that was what Lorenzo had proven himself to be, after all—the words had slipped through his defenses and torn at his mind. Of course he wasn't afraid that Aria or anyone else for that matter might become a better fighter than he was; the town needed more skilled fighters. But the rest... So long, he had tried to keep her safe, and in the end, it had all been for nothing. Maybe it had been too late already the day he had met her, a lost child who thought she could fight with a stake too big for her small hand.

Lorenzo clearly was tiring. For a while, he had managed to block part of Wilhelm's blows, and even return some of them. Now though his movements were becoming slower, sloppier. One last blow threw Lorenzo back against the wall, hard enough that his head hit it with a dull thud. He collapsed, sliding sideways until his temple was resting on the pavement.

The stake inside Wilhelm's pocket felt heavier, suddenly, the familiar shape and weight of it overwhelming. It wouldn't take much, and with Lorenzo knocked out, he would never even know what had happened.

Wilhelm heard the running steps, but they didn't register with his conscious mind until she was there, between him and Lorenzo, arms extended on each side of her. Aria. She didn't even spare a look for Lorenzo, focusing entirely on Wilhelm right away. Her voice had that breathless quality of newly turned vampires who forgot they didn't need to breathe anymore.

"Please don't."

Behind her, Lorenzo stirred a little. His eyes opened and he blinked, undoubtedly realizing who was in front of him. He didn't try to get up. Wilhelm was sure Lorenzo was listening, and trusting Aria to keep him safe. A Sire hiding behind his Childe—the rage roared louder inside Wilhelm, and he had some trouble keeping it from his words.

"Get out of the way, Aria."

She didn't move an inch. "I'm not going to let you kill my Sire."

Wilhelm's fists clenched and he forced himself to release them again. His eyes remained on Lorenzo, still lying on the pavement. Blood was staining the corners of his nose and mouth, and he raised a slow hand to wipe them off. The scent of blood did nothing to appease Wilhelm's anger.

"I don't plan to kill him," he said, realizing at once that his tone was less than convincing.

Aria snorted. At last, her arms dropped, but she crossed them in a defensive manner.

"You could have fooled me. What are you trying to do, then?"

"This doesn't concern you."

Another snort. "Really? So you're not kicking his ass because he turned me?"

Long seconds trickled by, leaving Wilhelm unable to answer her. At her back, Lorenzo struggled to sit up, his back to the wall, and very carefully looked at anything but the woman protecting him. The way he was avoiding to look at his own Childe sent a jolt through Wilhelm. He refused to be that much of a coward. For the first time since she had risen as a vampire, he made himself meet her eyes. He was almost surprised to discover they hadn't changed and were just as deep as he remembered them. His anger vanished all at once.

"Aria," he started pleading, "don't—"

He wasn't sure what he was pleading for. It didn't matter. She didn't let him finish.

"No. *You* don't. I am what I am, and you have no right to beat Lorenzo for it. He's not your Childe or your minion. He has no explanation to give you."

Deep down, Wilhelm knew she was right. Still, every fiber of his being demanded that he take revenge on Lorenzo. "You have no idea what you're talking about."

A muscle in her cheek twitched. She took a small step toward him, her eyes sharp as daggers. "Don't I? I'm a vampire now. My Sire has been teaching me."

It was Wilhelm's turn to snort. "What does your Sire even know?"

That seemed to give her pause. Was she realizing only now that her Sire was little more than a fledgling himself? She started turning to look back at Lorenzo behind her. She stopped mid-movement however, and her eyes came back to Wilhelm. The hesitation that had flickered through them was gone.

"He knew at least that I wouldn't be upset if he turned me."

Wilhelm refused to consider even for a second that she might be telling the truth. "You don't know what you're saying."

"I always knew I wanted nothing more than to fight. I never expected to become a vampire, but it makes sense."

"Aria—"

“Once in my life, Will!” Her voice had risen, both in volume and intensity, brimming with exasperation, anger, and even—was it pain? She took a deep breath in, and when she spoke again, her words were quieter, calmer, although still as intense. “Once in my life, have faith in me. Believe that I know what I want.”

Memories rushed to the front of Wilhelm’s mind, other conversations he had had with Aria—other confrontations. They all seemed to mix together. Hadn’t it always been about the same thing?

“I never doubted you knew what you wanted.” He sighed. “That’s why I was always afraid for you. You’ll get yourself... no. You got yourself killed. The man who was supposed to keep you safe—” His voice wavered for an instant; he was this man. “—he failed you.”

He expected her to argue. She always did. This time though, all she did was stare at him. She seemed smaller, suddenly, not standing quite as tall as she usually did, and the scent coming from her, for the first time he could recall, was laced with fear.

“You’re right,” she said no louder than a whisper. “He failed me.”

Arguments, shouting, her usual word games, Wilhelm could have taken without blinking. These quiet words, however, pierced his heart better than a stake would have.

“I lost my life,” she continued. “Don’t take my Sire from me as well.”

Unable to keep holding her gaze, Wilhelm averted his eyes. Behind Aria, Lorenzo had finally gotten back on his feet. The blood on his face had dried, but the hair on his temple was matted and wet. He couldn’t have died from a wound to the head, but Wilhelm had been so close to staking...

A phantom pain awakened in his chest, and he brought a hand to his heart. It had been more than fifty years, but the memory of the pain that had surged through him when his Sire had died was still vivid, a burning brand on his flesh, and yet he had been a Master himself when she had met her end. He couldn’t imagine what it would have been like for Aria to lose her Sire only a few days after she had been turned, when she needed him so much.

He wished she had needed him that much.

He wished he had been her Sire.

The thought struck without warning, taking Wilhelm by surprise. He hadn’t had a Child in decades. He was so tired of being alone.

He looked back at Aria's face. He wanted to touch her cheek, take her where they would be able to talk without Lorenzo standing at her shoulder, and finally tell her...tell her...

He had turned away from them and was down the street before he even knew what he was doing. He found his way to the bar the same way, his body functioning purely on instinct. He hurt too much. He needed numbness. Oblivion. He needed to be able to sleep without dreaming of Aria.

~

The pounding in Wilhelm's skull finally began to lessen. It didn't stop—he had drunk far too much for that—but it relented just enough that he pushed the pillow off his face. Everything was dark in his small bedroom when he opened his eyes. Darkness was a blessing—while it lasted. The abruptness of the lights flicking on caught him by surprise and made him groan in pain.

"Turn 't off."

He fumbled for the pillow and pulled it back over his head. The lights were turned off again, and slow steps traveled on the side of the bed to the chair tucked in the corner. For a few moments, Wilhelm caught himself dreaming. It was Aria, sitting there, close enough for him to reach out to her. All he needed to do was turn to her, and let it all out. Ask for her forgiveness. Ask for her friendship, if she could give no more than that. For more if she could.

The regular beating of a human heart, so regular, so loud against Wilhelm's temples, put an end to that fantasy.

"The walls were breached, last night." Bergsen's voice was too loud, even though it was no louder than a whisper. "The demons spilled in, went as far as Fifth Street. Human Guards were fighting until five this afternoon."

For the second time, Wilhelm pushed the pillow away. His mind was bubbling with questions, but none of them came through. All he could do was try to figure out how long he had been lying there, with empty bottles still where he had let them fall.

"I won't presume to think I know how you feel," Bergsen continued after the silence had stretched into wordless accusation. "But I do know we can't afford to have you lost to the world when we're under such an attack. Do you want me to send her away? There are other towns where—"

"No."

Strange how his throat could feel so parched after he had drunk so much.

“No,” he repeated, louder, and struggled to sit up. The bells in his head started ringing louder than ever. “We need her here.”

“I know that. They tell me she was exceptional last night. But she has no experience leading, and that was what we needed. A leader.”

“You are a leader,” Wilhelm tried to argue, but right away Bergsen was shaking his head.

“I can’t lead from a hospital bed. And Carter and Stevenson aren’t ready yet. If you can’t be on the battlefield next to her...”

Bergsen didn’t need to finish. The alternative was all too clear in Wilhelm’s mind, even as murky as it was. However hard it was, he had to pull himself together.

If nothing else, he needed to make sure Aria lived beyond her fledgling years. She would make a great Master, some day.

~

It’s funny. Even as Bergsen was toying with the idea of sending me away, Lorenzo was trying to convince me of the same thing.

I remember that battle; it was the biggest we had had in some time, bigger even than the fight that had led to my Siring. It was sheer torture at dawn to have to leave the field to my human peers, chased away by the sun and unsure whether the demons would be stopped before they ravaged the entire town. Lorenzo had to drag me away and I raged all the way back to the Guard’s quarters. Only when he had closed the door of our tiny apartment did he say what was on his mind.

“Let’s go away. We don’t need to stay in a town that demons attack every night. There are still safe places in the world. Quiet places. We could go there.”

The offer took me by surprise, and I needed a few seconds to answer, not only because it was unexpected, but also because I didn’t believe anywhere could be much better than Newhaven.

“I can’t leave. Everything, everyone I know is here. Newhaven is home.”

Days after my turning, I would have done anything for him. All he had to do was demand it, and the instinct, deep inside me, to obey my Sire would have left me no choice. But all he did was suggest, and I could say no to a suggestion. Will was right, in a way. If Lorenzo had been older, if he had had any experience as a Sire, he might have used the power he had on me. As it was, all he did was look disappointed, even a little hurt.

"It's because of him, isn't it?"

He didn't say Will's name. He didn't need to.

"Don't be ridiculous. You're my boyfriend. My Sire, now. I have no interest in him."

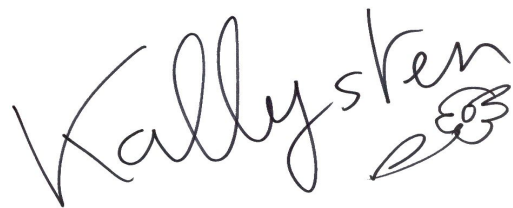
Will is the only topic I ever lied about to Lorenzo. If I had truly had no interest in Will, I wouldn't have been so worried that he hadn't showed up for the battle.

Still, I tried to convince myself that I truly wanted to stay in Newhaven for other reasons than him. I went to see my mother, two evenings later, just after sunset, before I had to take my post on the walls. I didn't intend to talk to her, but she noticed me, lurking outside, and she came out to talk to me. Or rather, to argue with me, as she did every time she saw me. She had never forgiven me for becoming a Guard against her wishes. This time again, she let me know what a disappointment I was to her, and as she ranted, as she told me that Paul had left Newhaven a month earlier and that she would join him soon, she never even stopped to realize something had changed.

I never got news from her or Paul after she left. She never knew what I became, and maybe it's better that way.

When I got to the walls that night, Will was there. He didn't speak to me, and when he looked in my direction he was very careful to keep his face blank. He looked like hell, but he was there, and that was all that mattered.

to be continued...

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kallysten". To the right of the name is a small, stylized circular emblem or monogram.

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