

KALLYSTEN

A romantic scene featuring a man and a woman. The man is shirtless and looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The woman is leaning into him, her face close to his, and they appear to be about to kiss. The lighting is soft and warm, creating an intimate atmosphere.

Blurred
nights

Blurred Nights (1st in the Blurred Trilogy)
by Kallysten

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Chapter 1

The alarm blared through the ghost town, reverberating over piles of rubble and scorched ruins. Even the heavy fog that blanketed everything didn't muffle the deafening, high-pitched noise. Marc winced, and brought his free hand up to cover his left ear even though he knew it was useless. In two hundred and seventy two years, he had rarely regretted the increased acuity of his senses that had come in a neat little package along with his fangs, an appetite for blood, and near-immortality. Nonetheless, at that moment he would have given anything to have the imperfect hearing of a human. Then, he might not have felt as though his skull were about to split open.

"Three."

He read the word on Blake's lips more than he heard it, and nodded to show he understood: three demons coming their way. His fingers flexed and tightened over the hilt of his sword. Loose gravel and broken asphalt beneath his feet were hardly the best terrain to fight on, but he had seen worse. Next to him, Blake's entire body tensed, a clear enough warning that he could see the demons approach through the crack in the dilapidated wall they used as cover. It wouldn't be long now.

Blake looked back at him. With the moon's faint silvery smile piercing the fog at his Childe's right, Marc had no trouble seeing his expression. It matched the excited scent rising from him. Blake wore a faint, hungry smile—the smile

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of a hunter closing in on his prey. The years Blake had spent as a human had been wasted; he had been born for this, for the hunt and the fight, for ambushes on moonless nights and the thrill of killing.

A quick flash of Blake's free hand gave a familiar signal. Marc nodded again. Blake would attack first, trusting Marc to follow and guard his back. Marc had long since given up on pointing out that, as Blake's Sire, it was his privilege to lead. Certain things weren't worth the aggravation of yet another argument with his too-stubborn Childe—as long as it was understood that Marc granted him the privilege of attacking first.

The blaring alarm masked the sound of the demons, but not their smell. The stench of old blood and sulfur was unmistakable. At last, they broke past the edge of their cover. Demons towered over vampires and humans alike at eight and a half feet or more, and they had long arms reminiscent of a gorilla's. Blake slashed at the closest demon, cleanly slicing through the neck, where the battered metal armor joined the helmet. Decapitated, the demon fell to its knees then toppled forward. Before it had hit the ground, its two companions had turned to Blake and raised their weapons. Without the advantage of surprise, they wouldn't be as easy to kill: far from it.

Blake attacked the one on the left, both hands on the hilt of his sword to lend more strength to the blow. Marc didn't wait to see how the attack landed, and rushed at the demon on the right. Sparks rose when his sword, broader and shorter than Blake's, clashed with his opponent's axe; the

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sound, however, was drowned out by the alarm, as was the metal-on-metal ring of the blows that followed. He would be lucky to have any hearing left when the fight was over.

He thrust his sword at the demon's right forearm, hoping to disarm it. The demon deflected the hit by swinging its crescent-shaped axe widely. Marc scrambled back, just enough to avoid being hit, and immediately jumped forward again. He didn't have the protection of metal plates over his chest or even a helmet, but what he lacked in cover, he more than made up for in speed and agility.

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appearing through a hole in the helmet. Marc had often wondered if scientists, somewhere, were cataloguing the apparently infinite variations of demon bodies.

"It took you long enough," Blake said behind him.

The sound of Blake's slightly mocking tone made Marc realize the alarm had stopped. His ears still buzzed from the irritating noise.

"Maybe," he replied, his narrowed eyes running over Blake. "But at least I didn't let it touch me. Where are you hurt?"

The sharp, familiar smell of Blake's blood tickled his nose, and he absently rubbed it with the back of his hand.

"It's just a scratch," Blake replied with a shrug. He looked around him as though searching for more adversaries. The fog swirled lazily around them, transforming broken walls and piles of debris into menacing figures. "Why do you think the alarm sounded?"

Marc approached him and took hold of Blake's chin to tilt his angular face into the light of the moon. Blake rolled his eyes but let Marc assure himself he was all right. The cut was shallow, going straight down from just below his right eye to his jaw. It had already stopped bleeding, but the wound glared an angry red on Blake's pale skin. It would heal, and in a few weeks there wouldn't even be a scar left. A few inches higher, however, would have had a much different result. He had sometimes told Blake he was too pretty for his own good, but that didn't mean he ever wanted him to lose one of his dark, piercing eyes.

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Without a second thought, Marc leaned in and flicked his tongue over the drying blood along the wound. Blake stilled completely beneath his touch, and for once didn't say a word or ask silly questions. Marc had his answer ready, just the same. He was doing this because the demons' sense of smell was as good as their own where blood was concerned, and Blake's blood would give them away. His thirst was completely irrelevant, as was the wondrous taste of his Childe's blood. He didn't need to voice the lie.

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Marc struggled not to grin. He didn't want to encourage Blake's cockiness and boasting. Trust him to argue against retreating even if the odds screamed otherwise. He was too predictable, sometimes.

"We're not here to take on the demon army," he reminded his Childe. "We can't afford—"

He stopped abruptly and stared ahead into the fog. At his side, Blake did the same and took a deep breath in through his nose.

"Five?" Blake murmured, so low that no one but a vampire could have caught the word.

"Maybe," Marc replied, just as quietly. "At least three wounded. Can you smell any demon close?"

A few seconds passed before Blake answered. "No. But they won't take long, with that lot reeking of blood."

"Come on. Let's see if they need our help getting out of here."

He slipped his sword back into the scabbard hanging from his belt at his left and raised both hands to show he wasn't armed.

"Do we have to?" Blake complained, but he too put away his weapon in the scabbard on his back and raised his hands.

They walked together toward the cotton-cloaked remains of a house on their right, where quiet voices, hammering heartbeats and the mixed scents of fear and blood announced the presence of humans as clearly as a beacon. The door had long ago been ripped away from its hinges, leaving a gaping opening like a wound on the standing façade of the derelict building.

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"Stop or I'll fire," a man called from straight ahead of him just as Marc passed the threshold. "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

Marc obeyed and stilled. He took a discreet look around. On his right, in the corner formed by two almost-intact walls, a standing man held a ball of light in his hand. The light bathed a second man lying on the ground and a woman kneeling by his side, her hands busy over his leg. The smell of blood was stronger in that direction. A pile of debris hid the man who had spoken, with only his head peeking out. Sm of dark green and black camouflage paint covered his face, and the colors made his eyes seem brighter.

"Fire?" Blake snorted behind Marc. "Don't tell me they still think rifles can help against demons. Won't they ever—"

"Be quiet," Marc hissed, just as a second voice rose from the left, this time a woman.

"He meant he'll fire his crossbow. Wooden arrows. You ought to know he's a pretty good shot." She stood from her crouch behind a pile of rubble, and took a few steps toward them. The crossbow in her hands remained steady as she lined up a shot toward Marc's chest. "And so am I. So you'd better answer."

The woman had to be five foot four at the most, counting the thick heels of her combat boots. The black pants and black Kevlar jacket were standard for anyone fighting demons, since their eyesight wasn't too good at seeing dark colors. Like the man, she wore camouflage make-up. The end of a thick braid of hair rested over her shoulder. In addition to

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the crossbow, a sword hung at her left side, and knife sheaths sprouted on her right thigh and arm.

"My name is Marc," he answered, looking back at the man who had first asked him. "This is Blake." He tilted his head back briefly, indicating his immobile Childe, standing just behind him. "She's right, we're vampires. But there's no need for stakes. We mean you no harm. We heard you, and we thought you might need help."

He looked pointedly at the corner, where the second woman still worked on the wounded man. The mage looked a little unsteady, and the ball of light flickered for a moment before stabilizing. Marc was ready to bet he was turning green beneath his camouflage.

"How do we know you're not with them?" the man challenged.

Marc frowned at him, puzzled. "With whom?"

Before he had a chance to answer, Blake cursed and pushed Marc inside. "Fuck. Told you they'd smell the blood. You couldn't have chosen another time to chitchat?"

Marc stood on the left side of the door, his back to the wall. Pulling out his sword, he motioned for the girl to lower her crossbow. On the right side, Blake was ready as well.

"What's—"

Blake shushed the leader and replied in a whisper. "Demons. Four."

"Five," Marc corrected him. "They're almost here. How many of you—"

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"Daniel, we can't fight in here," the woman cut in urgently, addressing her leader and ignoring Marc. "Not with Sammy hurt. They'd slaughter him and Sasha."

"And me," the mage squeaked.

"Then we'll take the fight outside," Daniel agreed, finally standing up from behind his cover. "Simon, work on a glamour to conceal the three of you in case they come in. Kate, sword out."

Daniel limped around the rubble and swung his crossbow over his shoulder. When he stood in front of Marc, he gave him a serious look and held out his hand. Marc shook it.

"I still don't know what you're doing here," Daniel said, "but for now it seems our fortunes run together."

He didn't give Marc a chance to reply. With a look at the woman he had called Kate, he led the way outside; she followed, sword in hand.

"Human fighters," Blake sighed, his eye-roll all too clear in his voice.

"Quiet, Childe," Marc replied, starting after Daniel and Kate. "Take his back, I'll take hers."

"If you insist we've got to help them, you could at least leave the cute one to me."

For all his grouching, Blake went to stand by Daniel's side even as Marc approached Kate. She threw him a cool glance, with the smallest hint of a smile. Marc nodded at her before turning his attention to the demons. They were no more than twenty yards away and already raising their weapons, snarling to intimidate their adversaries. The fog added a surreal element to their frightful appearance, giving the

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illusion that they were appearing out of thin air. Marc rolled his shoulders and prepared. This fight would be a little different from the one earlier, with humans to protect and more demons to fight, but in the end, killing was always the same.

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Chapter 2

With sunrise less than an hour away and the lingering fog hiding the road only a few yards in front of the car, Blake was fuming. He pressed a little harder on the gas pedal and glared in the rearview mirror at the humans piled up on the back seat. Marc's car had received multiple custom modifications, but it had never been meant to accommodate seven people.

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"We're getting close," Daniel said from the back. "After that hill, there's a smaller road on the left."

Sam had argued with Daniel when he had accepted Marc's offer, much like Blake had argued with his Sire. However, while Blake's main argument had been that they had better things to do than baby-sit humans, Sam's had revolved on the fact that they shouldn't lead vampires to their base, not before they were 'checked,' whatever that meant. Neither Marc nor Daniel had listened to them.

Blake had to slow down to find the road Daniel had indicated. He could have easily missed it in the gray swirls that spread out over the landscape. The dirt road was uneven where the rain and passing cars had eroded patches of earth. The car swayed from side to side every time he was unable to avoid a muddy hole, and more than once Kate's small, warm body ended up pressed against his side before she could hurriedly pull back. He might have aimed for a few potholes on purpose. The feel of her wasn't particularly unpleasant. The oversized jacket she wore hid her body, but it seemed there were unexpectedly interesting curves beneath the aged leather.

"Blake, keep it up, and I'm taking the wheel."

He threw an annoyed glance in Marc's direction; he could always trust his Sire to ruin his fun. He couldn't see Marc's face with Kate between them, but the annoyed look she gave him made it clear that she had figured out his little game as well. Grinning impishly, he shrugged and returned his attention to the road. He could see faint glowing spots indicating buildings in the distance, camouflaged by the fog.

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"Is that it?" he asked, non-plussed.

The way Daniel had talked of his home base, Blake had imagined something more elaborate than the three warehouse-like buildings he discovered at the end of the trail. They were behind three successive barbed wire fences at least twelve feet tall. They wouldn't stop demons if they truly wanted to get in, but they might slow them down enough to give the humans a chance to run.

Armed guards pulled the gate open to let the car in after recognizing the passengers, and closed it again once Blake had driven through. More armed fighters approached when the humans extricated themselves from the back. Blake remained behind the wheel until Marc, who had stepped out to let Kate pass, leaned back in to throw him an annoyed glance.

"Shouldn't we get out of here before sunrise gets any closer?" Blake asked him when he got out of the car.

Standing by the open door, he kept a foot on the edge of the vehicle and rested his arms over the roof. On the other side of the car, Marc started saying something, but Daniel quickly interrupted him.

"I'm afraid I can't allow you to leave."

Daniel watched as two medics took away his wounded soldier, but he shrugged off the attentions of a third one despite his bleeding thigh. Standing in front of the car, he turned his eyes to Blake then Marc. He didn't draw the sword he had pulled from the trunk, but the way his hand came to rest on the hilt was ominous. Blake felt uncomfortably aware that he didn't wear his own weapon. Marc took a step

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forward, stopping at once when Kate, at Daniel's side, raised her crossbow.

"We've helped you and yours," he pointed out, his voice as tight as a bowstring.

"You did," Daniel said with a nod. "But for all we know, it was only a ploy to get us to trust you."

"Why in hell—"

Daniel didn't let Blake finish. "We know vamps have been working with demons. Nothing personal, but we've got to check you. This way."

He pointed toward the closest building.

"Check us?" Marc repeated. "What does that mean?"

"It means that you'd better not have killed humans recently," Kate answered.

She steadied her crossbow in the direction of Marc's chest. Behind him, Blake could hear steps on the gravel, and he had a feeling he was being targeted the same way. His eyes met Marc's over the hood of the car. His Sire's dark brown eyes held a warning that Blake knew only too well.

Don't do anything stupid now.

Swallowing a sigh, he closed the door and walked over to Marc.

"Told you we shouldn't have helped them in the first place," he murmured as they advanced toward the building, following Daniel's lead.

"We'll clear this up in a moment," Marc replied, louder than Blake. "And I expect our new friends will apologize when they realize their mistake."

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Blake didn't care about apologies, not any more than he cared about threats. If it had been up to him, he'd have seized Daniel already, and used him as a hostage to get out of this cursed camp. He was very aware, however, of Kate's presence behind him and Marc, and in his mind her weapon was pointed at Marc. He had no problem risking his own life if he thought the payoff was worth it, but putting his Sire in danger was entirely different.

As Daniel entered the building, he knew enough camp. -1.kwted6brn's

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there were also a handful of axes and a few crossbows. Several round practice targets were piled up on the floor.

"Straight ahead," Kate said shortly. "Sit down."

Blake gritted his teeth as he obeyed. He didn't appreciate being ordered around, especially by humans. Marc had to be starting to lose his patience too by now.

There were five wooden tables set near the back wall, each with eight chairs around them. The lingering scent of food hinted that this was where the humans took their meals.

Blake wondered if there were enough of them to fill up all five tables. Rather than sitting on a chair, Blake hopped onto the middle table and sat down with his legs crossed. He looked straight at Kate as he did, and while she raised an eyebrow at him, the barely there smile that pulled at her lips said she was amused more than annoyed. The other guard was a few feet to her side, his crossbow a little less steady than hers. Next to the table, Marc pulled a chair and turned it around to straddle it.

"So how will you figure out if we kill humans or not?" Marc asked.

He had addressed Kate, but it was Daniel who answered as he grabbed a chair and sat near Kate. He was limping heavily now.

"Magic," he said with a sigh. "Fast and harmless. If it says you're clear, you'll have my apologies and a safe place to wait for nightfall. If you've killed..."

The meaning of his shrug was clear enough.

For a few seconds, silence stretched between the five of them. Blake quickly grew bored.

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"You said vamps have been working with demons," he said, looking closely at Daniel. "You know it for a fact or is that just another rumor?"

For decades now, rumors about demons had spread like wildfire around the world, one of them disproved only to be replaced by a new one, each one as strange as the last. The most persistent alleged that anyone killed by demons came back as one of them the next night, much like vampires being sired. That rumor returned like clockwork every few years, but lately it was being surpassed by the claim that vampires were working side by side with demons. For vampires like Blake and Marc, who risked their lives just about every night fighting, it was the most upsetting of all.

"I haven't seen it firsthand," Daniel answered. He grimaced as he stretched out his injured leg in front of him. "But my sources are trustworthy. Vampires have been spotted fighting alongside demons at two different sites in the state."

"Where?" Marc jumped in.

The single word held enough tension that Blake looked at him, wondering what troubled his Sire so. It was just another rumor. Daniel seemed to have noticed the change of mood as well, but he didn't get a chance to answer.

Simon, the mage who had made a ball of light in the ruins, the man Daniel had ordered to perform protective magic while they were under attack but, strangely enough, not before, had entered the building. He was accompanied by Elliot, the soldier Daniel had sent to get him. Simon still reeked of fear, but the scent was stale, a remnant of his time

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on demons' grounds. He had to feel safe here. Clearly, he didn't realize how vulnerable this camp was.

"Blood spell?" he asked with a look back at Daniel as he set a leather bag onto the table on Blake's right.

"On both of them," Daniel confirmed.

Blake watched Simon unpack with a mix of curiosity and frustration. As a human, he had been fascinated with all things magical, and one of his deepest regrets had always been that he didn't have the smallest spark of magical ability in him. He knew himself enough to realize that was why he had sought the company of vampires until he had found someone to turn him; becoming a vampire was the closest thing to magic he would ever experience.

Several jars of powders and plastic bags filled with herbs soon littered the table. Even closed, they each had a distinct smell. Close as he was, Blake felt his nose itch at the unfamiliar scents. He sneezed, drawing a surprised glance from Simon.

"You can sneeze?" he said excitedly. "I didn't know vamp—"

"Simon," Daniel called, on the verge of annoyance. "Focus. Blood spells first, you can chitchat later. If they're clear."

"Oh. Of course."

The back of Simon's neck was flushed when he leaned over his ingredients again, murmuring under his breath as he picked up a bag here, a jar there. He seemed to be rattling through a list that could almost have sounded like a recipe.

"Hawthorne roots ... thyme ... golden pepper..."

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After a few moments, Simon straightened again, looking at Blake and Marc behind him with a slightly apologetic expression.

"I ... I need your blood. If you don't mind."

"They don't," Kate said.

She gave her crossbow to Daniel and crossed the few steps that separated her from Marc. Her right hand slid the dagger strapped to her thigh out of the scabbard. Blake's body became rigid at seeing her approach Marc with a bared blade, and he would have jumped off the table if not for a sharp warning look from his Sir-0.00te sempedunmovpedbyd

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through his nose to catch the scent of his blood hanging in the air. It only made him more aware that he hadn't fed that night, and very little the night before that.

While Blake reined in his hunger, Simon came to Marc, holding a small, transparent jar filled with half the concoction he had prepared. His hand shook the tiniest bit as he stood by Kate. She had taken the dagger back from Marc and was wiping it on her sleeve as though she had done so hundreds of times in the past.

"If you would let a few drops fall in..." Simon said, his voice squeaking a little as he presented the jar to Marc.

Without a word, Marc closed his hand into a fist to draw his own blood. As soon as the first drop hit the contents of the jar, Simon began muttering some kind of incantation in what Blake supposed was Latin. He knew that was the usual language of magic, and had heard it spoken a few times, but he had no ear for languages.

After a few seconds, the jar filled with a soft, white glow. Simon let out a heavy breath.

"He's clean. No human blood."

"We should bottle you," Blake told Marc, chuckling. "We could sell it as the ultimate blackout remedy."

Marc rolled his eyes at him and muttered a quiet "Idiot" that the humans around them didn't seem to catch.

"Your turn," Kate said, coming to him.

With an exaggerated sigh, Blake held out his hand the same way Marc had. There was the same flash of hesitation as earlier in her eyes, but instead of giving him the dagger,

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she cut his palm, acting so fast that even vampire reflexes were of no use to Blake.

"Hey!" he protested, more surprised than hurt. The wound was barely deep enough to produce a few drops of blood. "Why—"

"He saved my life," she answered before he was even finished. "You didn't."

"Let's get it over with," Daniel said behind her. He sounded as though he were losing interest now that the spell had cleared Marc. "We've still..."

His voice trailed off when he noticed the red glow filling the second jar. Simon's hand shook so much that he dropped it, and it shattered on the floor in front of Blake's table. He stumbled backwards. The next instant, the two humans who had been standing at a distance behind Daniel rushed forward while Kate retreated to stand by him and take her weapon back. The six humans formed a line, and there were suddenly four crossbows aimed at Blake.

"What the fuck..." he exclaimed as he raised his hands and tried to look as non-threatening as he knew how.

Just two steps away, Marc stood. His expression was thunderous when he stepped between the humans and Blake, and shielded him from their arrows. Blake's hopes that his Sire would defend him, however, did not last long.

"What have you done, Childe?" Marc growled, turning his glare toward him.

It was strange, Blake reflected bitterly, how some wounds could reopen so quickly, even years after he had thought them healed.

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Chapter 3

The metal and wood of the crossbow felt warm and uncomfortable against Kate's palms. She tightened her grip, fighting the urge to wipe her hands on her pants and struggled to keep her aim on Blake steady. Her annoyance flared; she should have been prepared for this. When the spell had cleared Marc, she had started relaxing, certain that Blake would be clean as well. She wasn't usually so careless. It had to be her tiredness speaking, m -1.5cKwishred faand

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one who noticed. Daniel let out a long-suffering sigh and shuffled on his chair, leaning back to look at Simon.

"What is it?" he asked.

Simon's blush only darkened. "It's not my fault! You asked for a blood spell! I just—"

"Simon," Kate interrupted, certain that he would start rambling now if she didn't stop him.

He glanced at her and swallowed hard before hurrying through his explanation. "The spell just says he has human blood inside him."

Still sitting on top of the wooden table, Blake snorted. He leaned back, resting on his hands behind him. He seemed at ease, but his eyes remained pure fire. "Of course I do. I take blood from humans. Never said I didn't. But I have never killed one." His eyes turned back toward Marc. Rather than abating, the flames burned brighter. His words, on the other hand, were as soft and as cold as snowflakes. "I don't need to kill. I just ask. Nicely."

Kate's eyes traveled from his expressionless features to Marc's frowning ones and finally to Daniel. He met her eyes with a raised eyebrow. She shrugged. Blake's claims were entirely possible, but they hardly knew anything about him. He could be lying just as easily as he could be telling the truth. The silent exchange only took a second. Before either of them could say anything, however, Elliot waved his crossbow in Blake's direction.

"You really expect us to believe that?"

Grinding her teeth, Kate threw him a hard look. The shortest of the five men lined up in front of the tables, he was

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also the bulkiest. His habit of wearing t-shirts that clung to his torso and bulging biceps only emphasized his muscles. His mouth was set on a thin sneer, and his eyes glowered at Blake as though he had just announced his intention to kill them all. Then again, Elliott looked at all vampires the same way.

Blake returned his look, half scathing, half dismissive. "Expect?" He shook his head. "I don't expect *anything* from you. You can believe what you want. Why should I care?"

A rumble rose from Marc, so low that at first Kate didn't realize they were words. "Childe, that's enough."

If Blake's eye roll upset Marc in any way, he didn't show it. He turned to Simon, arms crossed over his charcoal jacket, a very intense look knitting his eyebrows and darkening his brown eyes.

"Do you know a spell that will tell you if he has killed humans?"

"I ... yes, I guess I could adapt—"

Daniel didn't let Simon finish. "Who said you could give orders to my men?" He stood and took two limping steps forward, crossing his arms to mirror Marc's stance. They stood facing each other, both imposing by their stature and presence, neither backing down.

"If Blake killed a human," Marc said, "I want to know."

"Why? So you can find him excuses?"

"No. So I can kill him myself."

A shiver ran through Kate at the coldness in Marc's voice. She didn't realize she had lowered her crossbow until Elliot hissed a warning. She glared at him before returning her

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attention to Marc and, behind him, Blake. The first wore the serious and implacable expression of an executioner. The latter, still silent, reclined on the table, hands behind his head, looking superbly unconcerned. It was hard to believe they were discussing his life and death.

Silent seconds ticked by until Daniel finally glanced back at Simon. "A spell to know if he killed. Get to it."

Simon hadn't even moved yet before Marc added: "And make sure it only picks up on him killing humans, not demons."

At the words, and especially at Simon's quick agreement, Daniel's back stiffened. His expression was grim when he came back to his chair, though whether in annoyance or pain, Kate couldn't have said. He should have had a medic check his leg as soon as they returned. She knew better than to say as much, however, or at least not in front of the others.

Simon was practically buzzing with excitement as he hurried to the second table, already rattling off ingredients under his breath. He often complained about the lack of challenges offered to him and his considerable magical talents, but at the same time he was deathly afraid of demons and could never do serious magic when they were under attack. He had to see this unusual request as a much more interesting—and safe—adventure than exploring the City.

For a little while, Kate, like Daniel, Marc and the others, watched Simon play with small jars of colored powders and bags of dried plants. Magic had never held much attraction for her, however. She had no ability for it, and to her Simon's

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muttering was no more than gibberish, his mixing of ingredients as strange and foreign as fine cuisine. Growing tired of the spectacle, she drew a chair away from the table where Blake lay and sat astride it. She had angled the chair so as to be able to keep an eye on everyone, from Elliot's sullen stance to Marc's intent observation of Simon to Blake's blatant disinterest.

She still held the crossbow, but she kept it pointed at the floor. She couldn't wait for the spell to give them an answer,

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At the foot of the table, Marc straightened and turned to observe her, then Blake. His nostrils flared, and he started frowning at Blake, who faced away from Marc, oblivious.

"Is that why you were in the City?" she continued. "To find demons?"

A peculiar gleam lit up Blake's eyes. He rolled onto his side, supporting his head on his closed fist. "We were looking for the breach," he said slowly, as though waiting for her to recognize the word.

Kate raked her memory, but came up with nothing. "The breach?"

"Some people call it a rip," he continued, now watching her intently.

Kate sat up straighter, her tiredness forgotten. She glanced at Daniel. His look of excited surprise matched what she felt. The other fighters between them murmured to each other, their feverish words no more than a buzzing in Kate's ears. They had been hoping for a break like this one for far too long.

"We heard rumors," Daniel said quickly, his eyes going from Marc to Blake, "but we never knew ... Is it really true? Have you seen one before?"

"I have," Marc replied. "Rips are real."

As unassuming as it was, Kate noticed his use of the singular. She looked at Blake again. He had lain down on his back again, and his eyes were now closed. She frowned briefly before returning her attention to Daniel. Back on his feet, he almost bounced despite his injury.

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"How do we close it? Have you done it before? Can you show us?"

Marc raised his hands, palms out, in a calming gesture. "Yes, but not so fast. We have to find the breach first. Was that what you were looking for tonight?"

Daniel glanced at Simon, a frown barely touching his brow for a second. "No. We were doing some reconnaissance."

"You're in charge," Blake interrupted him, sitting up on the table to throw a scornful glance at him, "and you risk your life on reconnaissance missions? Are you stupid or—"

Without thinking, Kate stood. She purposefully pushed the chair away with a scraping noise. She wanted Blake to look at her and notice she was pointing the crossbow at him again. He had no right to insult Daniel. At the same instant, Marc's voice thundered a single word.

"Childe!"

Blake fell quiet again. He gave Marc an infuriating little smile, before turning it to Kate. His smile widened just enough to reveal his fangs. She glared at him.

"I don't ask anything from my men that I'm not willing to do myself," Daniel said calmly, as though he hadn't noticed Blake's rudeness nor Marc's and Kate's interventions. "That includes reconnaissance."

That matter settled, Daniel addressed Marc again. "You were talking about closing the rip?"

Before Marc could answer however, Simon exulted.

"Got it! This should do just fine!"

"Should?" Daniel and Marc said at once.

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Simon ignored them. Holding a wooden bowl in his cupped hands, he walked closer to Blake and gave him a slightly anxious look. Blake snorted.

"More blood?" he asked, rolling his eyes. "By the time we're done here I'll probably be ready to do what you're accusing me of."

Despite his complaint, however, he held out his hand toward Kate, raising an eyebrow at her. She looked at his palm, a little taken aback to discover that the cut she had inflicted earlier was now no more than a dark pink line that matched the one on his cheek. She chided herself for her surprise. She should have known he would heal very fast. Switching the crossbow to her left hand, she pulled her knife out again and extended her arm toward Blake. She changed her mind at the last second and flipped the knife over, offering him the hilt rather than cutting him again. It was worth it if for nothing more than the surprised look that crossed his features. He gave a slight nod before accepting the knife and quickly reopened the wound.

Simon thrust the bowl toward him and received a few drops of blood. He started chanting even as he threw something inside the bowl. Thin gray smoke rose from the mix along with a vague smell of incense, but already Kate's attention had drifted away. She watched, both repulsed and fascinated, as Blake licked the blade clean before handing it back to her, hilt first. She took it with a grimace and wiped it on her sleeve before sheathing it again.

The smoke lifting from the bowl in sinuous volutes thickened as it surrounded Blake. It turned an almost blinding

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white. Blake batted at it ineffectually, and Kate had to bite the inside of her cheek so she wouldn't snicker at him.

"That's it," Simon said, staring at the smoke as though it held all the magical knowledge he hadn't learned yet. "He's clean."

With a mutter that could have been a curse, Blake scrambled off the table. The fog-like smoke clung to him a little longer before finally dissipating.

"You wanted an apology," Daniel said. "You have it. As well as our hospitality, if you want it."

Blake snorted quietly. "The sun is up," he pointed out. "It's not like we have much of a choice."

Apparently, learning that Blake hadn't killed wasn't sufficient to appease Marc. He glared at him. "Stop it. You complicated things quite enough already."

Blake's jaw clenched. He rolled his eyes at Marc, but he did remain silent.

"We'll take your hospitality," Marc said, glancing down at Daniel's thigh and his makeshift bandage. "And I'll tell you what I know about breaches once we've both had some rest."

Kate knew that hardening look in Daniel's eyes quite well. He was going to argue he was fine, and insist on talking about the breach now. He could be so stubborn at times.

"I'll show you two where you can sleep." She handed her crossbow to Elliot. He fumbled with his own as he finally lowered it. Kate didn't pay him any mind. "Come with me."

She didn't wait to see if they followed her; the sound of their steps behind her was enough. She thought quickly as she walked toward the back of the building. Even if Marc and

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Blake weren't killers, few soldiers would be comfortable sleeping with vampires nearby, so she wouldn't lead them to the sleeping barracks. Moreover, Daniel would want to talk to them before night fell again; having them stay in this building would be best, if not the most comfortable for them.

She led them through two storage rooms, maneuvering around or stepping over rickety piles of supplies. She picked up blankets and sheets from cluttered metal shelves before moving on to the farthest room, where three spare beds were lined up. She dropped the bedclothes on the closest bed and turned to the two vampires. Blake was looking around the small room, inspecting it with a frown. Marc, on the other hand, smiled at her.

"Thank you."

"No problem." She shrugged, looking back at the beds and feeling a little apologetic. The three beds filled the room almost completely, with barely any space around them.

"You'll have to share a room, I'm afraid."

"We're used to it," Blake said, sounding a little amused.

"Usually, the bed is larger, though."

She left them, closing the door behind her, but even as she made her way through the maze of the storage rooms, Blake's last remark stayed with her. She was no innocent, and she had a rather good idea of what he had meant. Just the same, she had trouble imagining them together like that. Somehow, it felt like a waste.

Shaking away the stray thought, she crossed the building again to go to Daniel's office. As she expected, he was in there, though judging by the smell of disinfectant permeating

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the small room, he had finally had someone look at his leg. She sat down across from him, letting out a grateful sigh as she sunk into the cushioned armchair. It had been a very long night, and it still wasn't over. On the other side of the metal desk covered in maps and reconnaissance sketches, Daniel was leaning back in his chair, fingers woven in front of him. His eyes remained closed when he asked:

"What did you think of Simon tonight?"

Another sigh rose to her lips. She grimaced. "He did about as well as I expected. At least he managed to do some magic this time."

Daniel snorted. "A ball of light and barely enough glamour to cover three people. And he let the other glamour slip so that we lost a truck. If he can hide the camp, he should be able to hide the entire squad when we attack."

"But he *did* magic in battle," Kate insisted quietly. "He'll get there. He just needs a bit more time."

Daniel let out a disgruntled noise but didn't answer. They'd had this conversation before. The squad was lucky to count one of the most talented mages of the region, maybe of the entire country, in its ranks. Unfortunately, Simon was deathly afraid of demons and froze in panic at the sight of one. They were working on that, but Daniel's patience was wearing thin.

He finally straightened up and looked at her over his linked fingers. He had washed away the camouflage paint, but his face remained dark. The circles beneath his eyes were deeper than usual, almost purple, and the graying facial hair he hadn't shaved for two days made his cheeks appear sunken, almost hollow.

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"So? What do you think of them?"

Kate snickered inwardly at the first answer that came to her. She doubted Daniel cared to hear that she thought they were both attractive. She settled on a more appropriate answer, smiling thinly. "They fight well."

"They're vamps," he said after a few seconds, his voice expressionless.

Daniel wasn't usually prone to stating the obvious, so Kate resisted her first impulse to tease him about it and tried to figure out what he wasn't saying. The spell they had used told them about their guests' past feeding habits, but it didn't predict the future. Still, if Daniel had believed they posed a threat to the camp, he wouldn't have offered them hospitality. She frowned, her fingers rapping lightly on the wooden arm of her chair. Was he changing his mind? It wasn't like him to go back on his word.

"The information they have—"

He shook his head, stopping her. "Of course. I said they could stay. I meant that. I'm just not sure how long to extend the invitation."

"Why? We can't afford to be picky. If they offer their help, we should take it. Especially if what they said about that ... breach is true."

He sighed. "I know. And I wish it were that easy. But some of the men are already grumbling about having vamps here, claiming it's all lies."

As soon as he said it, Kate was sure she knew whom they were talking about. She grimaced. They had lost a good ally

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before—a friend—because of irrational fears. Maybe it could be different, this time.

"Want me to talk to them?"

The shadow of a smile pulled at Daniel's lips. He raised an eyebrow. She grinned.

"Let me amend that. Want me to shake some sense into them?"

He chuckled. With time, he had learned to appreciate the very particular way she took care of discipline. "Not this time. We'll see if our guests decide to stay with us, and play it by ear. Keep an eye on them for me, though, will you?"

She didn't ask if she was to protect the vampires from the soldiers or the opposite. Both, she imagined. She was grinning when she left Daniel. Even the prospect of dragging a cot to sleep by the storage rooms didn't sour her mood. She had a feeling that life would be anything but dull with Marc and Blake around.

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Chapter 4

"I guess it will do for one day." Blake frowned in distaste at their surroundings before turning an almost suspicious look at Marc. "You don't plan on staying more than a day, right? You're not going to start spouting about your damn pacts again, are you?"

Ignoring him, Marc looked around the small room. Windowless, it couldn't have been more than eight feet by seven, with three narrow metal beds as the only furniture. Unlike in the main part of the building, a paneled ceiling towered at eight or nine feet above them. A dirty light bulb hung from it, flickering. They had slept in worse quarters. At least, they wouldn't need to worry about sunlight.

Blake groaned aloud, taking his silence for a reply. He shook his head and slapped his forehead with his hand in an exaggerated dramatic gesture. "Please, tell me we're not going to stay with this pathetic lot."

A stern look quieted him at last. He crossed his arms, sullen. Annoyed by his attitude ever since they had reached the fighters' camp, Marc threw a set of bed sheets at him, hitting him in the chest. Blake scrambled not to let the linens fall on the dusty floor.

"Make yourself useful instead of whining," he said, and, picking up the second set of sheets, turned to the closest bed.

"I'm not whining."

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Blake dropped the sheets on a bed and came closer. Standing of his full height, he tried to glare down at Marc. Wouldn't he ever learn?

"And you haven't answered my question. How long do you plan to stay here?"

Marc finished making the bed before turning to him and returning his glare. " *You* answer my question, Childe. When did you feed from a human?"

The smallest movement in Blake's jaw revealed he was grinding his teeth. It was his only reaction that Marc could see. Even his scent didn't change, but then, it had held the dry sourness of irritation ever since they had arrived at the camp.

"Last town we crossed," he replied. "That pretty blonde at the hotel. Not that it's any of your business."

A flash of white-hot anger raced through Marc. Crossing the short distance between them, he fisted his hand in Blake's shirt and pulled him closer until they were practically nose-to-nose. A thin thread of fear wove itself in Blake's scent, brittle as rusting iron.

"You are my business," he said, keeping his voice very low. "Everything you do is my business. Especially when you do something this moronic. I told you not to feed off humans, didn't I? I told you it'd get you killed. And then you go behind me back and lie to me? You idiot!"

Blake kept very still for most of the tirade, but those last growled words seemed to set him off. With both hands flat on Marc's chest, he pushed hard. Marc could have held on, but he chose to let go and took a step back. As angry as he was

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with his unruly Childe, this was not the time or place to fight with him and teach him manners—again.

"I did not lie," Blake said, spitting the words as though they were venom on his tongue . "I never said I wouldn't take from humans if they offered..—" He insisted on the word again, now almost shouting. "—never lied to you."

Watching the too familiar pain on Blake's features and the still outraged fire in his eyes, seeing just how tense he was, hands fisted at his sides and body poised on the edge of an attack, Marc understood at last what all of this was about. They weren't talking anymore about a too welcoming human girl and what Blake had done with her. His anger drained from him, replaced by a tired wariness. He sighed.

"Childe..."

Blake turned away and picked up the bed sheets again. Rather than making the bed next to Marc's, he threw the sheet over the third one, at the other end of the small room, as though putting distance between them, as little as it was, suddenly mattered.

"You still haven't answered," he said coldly without looking back at Marc. "How long are we staying here?"

"I have apologized," Marc said, addressing his back. "Repeatedly. Which is more than you deserved, given your attitude. I've been tolerant and let you get away with too much, too often. I've done everything I possibly could to make it up to you. And *you*—" He took in a deep breath and forced himself to lower his voice again. "You just won't let it go, will you?"

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Still not looking at him, Blake toed off his shoes and plopped himself onto the bed, arms crossed behind his head. "I have no idea what you're rambling about."

Marc snorted. "I hope that bed is comfortable, because we're here for as long as they'll let us stay. There's a breach in that town, and I'm closing it if it's the last thing I do. And if you've got a problem with that, or anything else for that matter..." He paused and waited until Blake had finally turned his eyes back toward him. He held his gaze, and willed him to believe that they were done playing games. "If you've got a problem," he repeated, "just go ahead and leave. Nobody's stopping you."

The words held the sour taste of an ultimatum, and Marc wished he could take them back as soon as he voiced them. He didn't, though, remaining quiet as he waited for Blake to respond. He flexed his hands at his sides, tightening his fists and opening them again a couple of times. For months, ever since he had come back, he had accepted Blake's antics, calling him to order only when his behavior had put someone in danger. He was done. He didn't want Blake to leave, but they couldn't go on like this.

"You'd love that, I bet," Blake said suddenly. He sat up on the bed. His teeth and fangs were bared in a grimace that could have passed for a sardonic smile. "Finally get rid of me so you can hunt yourself some one prettier, hey? Someone who won't give you as much lip as I do? That girl, maybe? What's her name ... Kate? I saw how you looked at her. Tired of having me in your bed, you'd rather—"

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"Sometimes," he cut in, not listening to Blake's inane ramblings anymore, "I really have a hard time remembering why I sired you."

He punctuated his words with an icy look and turned his back on Blake. The door made a satisfyingly loud noise when he banged it shut behind him. He leaned back against it. He wished he could have left the hurt and anger in that room with Blake. He wasn't surprised that Blake had noticed the few appreciative looks he had thrown at Kate; she was pretty, and she fought like a tigress. Blake himself had leered at her a little too overtly. They weren't anything more than looks, however—at least, they weren't on his part. Blake sometimes took lovers for a few hours or a few days, but Marc wasn't interested in that kind of thing. The only time it had happened ... He closed his eyes tight, pushing away the memory.

Had Blake really meant it, or had it only been one more jab, one more reproachful though indirect reminder of Jen?

Shaking his head, he pushed away from the door and wove his way through the clutter of the corridor. As tired as he felt, he didn't want to go back in there quite yet, not when they were both mad enough at each other to throw hurtful words as well as punches. He'd try to get his travel bag from the car, and see if he could find the washing area. Maybe that would allow him to calm down. He opened the last door and stepped out into the common space. At the very least, it'd give—

"Oh. Hey." Kate looked up from where she was setting up a camp bed not even four feet from the door. She had

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washed off the camouflage paint from her face, revealing delicate features. "Need something?"

Taken aback, Marc looked around, trying to figure out what she was doing there. The building was deserted, as far as he could tell, except for her. The bed she was manhandling into shape looked even more uncomfortable than the ones in the small room. She had dropped a crossbow and several stakes on the floor. Marc frowned as he noticed them, finally understanding.

"You're going to stand guard over us?" he asked, unsure whether to be amused or annoyed. "Why don't you just lock us up if you're that scared?"

"Because you're our guests," she replied with a shrug. "It wouldn't be very polite to lock you up. And for the record, I'm not scared of vamps."

He raised an eyebrow at her.

"Still," she continued, inclining her head as though conceding a point, "some of our people are nervous around vampires. I'm here for your protection as much as theirs." She paused, hesitating, then added with a rueful smile, "And while we're putting things out in the open, you should know that the walls are paper-thin in this building."

He was still wondering what she meant by talking about protecting them—surely, she couldn't believe that he and Blake feared humans?—and didn't quite understand her remark about the walls until he noticed the red spots high on her cheeks. How much of his argument with Blake had been loud enough for her to hear? Had she caught the bit about her?

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"Huh, right." He looked away , feeling more than a little foolish. He didn't usually care what others thought of him, but after seeing Kate on the battlefield and in her camp, he had the respect for her that only a fighter could have for another fighter. If he was going to stay with this group for a little while, he didn't want her to think badly of him, for any reason. "Thanks for the warning. I'll be sure to tell Blake. He can be ... rambunctious, at times."

She grinned. "I hadn't noticed. Not any more than I noticed you checking me out."

Marc stifled a groan. This wasn't going at all the way he expected. He gestured toward the outside door, fumbling over words.

"I'll just ... in the car ... travel bag."

Clamping his mouth shut, he hurried away. He wasn't used to women being so straightforward. He had been born in an age when men led the chase, and proper women resisted their advances. He knew, rationally, that things were different now, and he had no trouble accepting the presence of women on the battlefield, but one of them flirting with him just confused him to no end. It didn't help that she followed him.

"The sun is up," she pointed out, catching up with him. "I didn't think I'd have to protect you from yourself as well."

His confusion disappeared behind a roll of his eyes. "I'm not suicidal, if that's what you mean. The sun is low enough that the trees will give me cover."

"Are you sure?"

"Only one way to find out."

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He gripped the handle and flung the door open, ignoring her urgent, "Wait!" Had he been wrong, the early morning sun might have burned him—if the fog had lifted, that was. He had taken a good look at the surroundings of the camp when they had arrived, however, and there had been no doubt in his mind that he would be safe.

Kate muttered something that he pretended not to hear. She followed him out in the wispy fog, shrugging when he looked at her. "Need help?"

He shook his head as he opened the trunk. "Thanks, but I don't."

He pulled out his duffel bag and started tugging down the trunk door before changing his mind. With an inward sigh, he took out Blake's bag too, along with his sword. Kate eyed the sword dubiously when he turned around, both bags hanging from his left shoulder and the weapon in his right hand. The ornate hilt felt unfamiliar against his palm, heavier than his own weapons of choice.

"You know," she said, sounding as though she was weighing each word, "I don't actually believe anyone would be foolish enough to try to hurt you. I'm camping out there pretty much just for show."

He let out a dry chuckle. "Good to know. But that's not why I grabbed this. Blake is a pain when Seneca is out of his sight for too long."

"Seneca?" she repeated, the grin obvious in her voice. "His sword has a name?"

He opened the door for her, and she preceded him inside. "Not only does he have a name," he said, glad that she

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shared his amusement, "he has his very own character, if you listen to Blake."

She laughed lightly, the sound like silver bells. "I'll be sure to ask about that, then. I'm sure it has to be fascinating."

"I don't know about fascinating, but Blake can be very..."

His voice trailed off as he noticed the silhouette by the corridor's entrance, now looking toward them. Hands in his pant pockets, barefoot and head tilted to the side, Blake was a picture of relaxation. Marc glanced at Kate, wondering if the charade was fooling her.

"I can be very what?" Blake asked mildly as they approached him.

"Very strange," Marc replied, handing him his things. "I thought you'd be asleep by now."

"And I thought it might be nice to wash up before I do sleep." He turned a slightly too wide smile to Kate. "Could you maybe show me to the facilities?"

His tone was nothing if not proper, but Marc could hear a very different offer behind those pleasant words. He frowned, a little alarmed. What was Blake up to now?

Kate didn't seem to notice and merely nodded. "Sure. You won't have to go far. The men's washing room is down there." She pointed at the second door down on the same side as their room. "There are towels in there. First five minutes of water are hot. After that, you've either got to go to a different stall or finish washing up in cold water."

"What about if there's two people in the stall?" Blake asked, his grin turning almost lascivious. "Do you get ten minutes to scrub each other's backs?"

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It was an invitation if Marc had ever heard one, yet Kate didn't seem to take it as such. When she shook her head and laughed weakly, the same spots of color appeared on her cheeks as had been there earlier, and she looked quickly from Blake to Marc. She thought he was talking about showering with him, Marc realized, amused. Of course, she didn't know Blake anywhere near enough to read him as well as Marc did.

"Pity," Blake said, shrugging but never losing his smile. "Thanks for the directions, then. You don't mind if I leave my things here for now, do you?"

He was about to put his bag and sword down next to her cot, and certainly planning to chat with her some more when he came out of the shower, probably half-naked and displaying his perfect chest. An angry rumble started in Marc's chest that he had some trouble silencing.

"I'll take those to the room," he offered, his voice making it clear he was on to Blake's game.

Blake didn't seem phased. He handed Seneca and his travel bag back to Marc and sauntered to the washing room.

At Marc's side, Kate yawned audibly. "Sorry. I'll get some sleep now. Unless you need anything else?"

He assured her he was fine and went to drop the bags in the room. When he came back out, carrying two pairs of sweat pants and two t-shirts, she was curled on the cot beneath a thin blanket, her eyes closed, though he didn't think she was asleep yet. Just the same, he tiptoed by her and to the washroom. He quickly surveyed the room when he entered. A dozen shower stalls were lined up to the right of the door, with as many toilets stalls to the left. A line of

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washbasins and mirrors were back to back in the center of the room, dividing it, with a couple of benches against the back wall and piles of faded white towels on metal shelves above them.

He left the clothes he had brought on a bench along with his own and grabbed a towel before entering the stall to the right of the Blake's. A thin bar of unscented soap and an almost empty bottle of shampoo rested on a ledge beneath the showerhead. The stall looked very clean, and even vaguely smelled of disinfectant. He turned on the water and couldn't suppress a satisfied little groan when the jet hit his shoulders, strong and very hot. He washed away the grime of travel and battle. Not even a minute had passed before the water stopped running in Blake's stall. Seconds later, Blake was sliding in next to him.

"She wasn't kidding when she said five minutes," he said for an explanation, and proceeded to rinse the shampoo from his hair.

"Didn't she also say two people doesn't mean twice the time?"

"Did she? My mistake."

Marc sighed, a little louder than strictly necessary, and gently elbowed Blake to the side so that he could rinse the soap off before the water turned cold.

"Hogger," Blake protested.

He pushed back, and somehow managed to press his ass against Marc's cock, which was just starting to take notice of the proximity of a naked Blake.

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"Not ten minutes ago you were inviting her to join you, and now this?" Marc snorted, though he didn't move back. "What am I, the consolation prize?"

"You're the one who has a lot of make up fucking coming your way," Blake answered, deadpan.

Marc canted his hips toward Blake and trailed his hands over the smooth planes of his back. "Do I, now?"

Blake threw him a quick glance before angling his head up toward the water again. "Guess so, since she didn't take me up on it."

Snorting, Marc stepped out of the stall. "And you were accusing me of wanting her."

He picked up a towel and started rubbing himself dry, ignoring his cock that now stood at half-mast. Whatever Blake said, nothing would be happening in the small bedroom, not with Kate practically outside their door. He had never cared for having an audience.

A hissed curse in the stall was followed by the abrupt stop of the water. Blake came out, naked and dripping water all over the floor. He looked as annoyed as a doused cat. "Damn hot water restrictions."

Marc threw him a towel. "For your information, she heard you earlier," he said, keeping his voice low now that the cascading water didn't muffle it anymore. "So don't be too surprised if she thinks my bed is the only one you want to sleep in."

Pausing in the middle of toweling his hair dry, Blake looked thoughtful for a moment, then took the piece of information in stride. "I'll just have to correct that misconception, then."

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"Blake," Marc said warningly.

"What? You think she wouldn't be interested?"

The gleam in Blake's eyes announced nothing but trouble. Marc finished pulling on his sweatpants then his t-shirt and walked over to him, hoping he looked as irritated as he felt.

"I think she's not a game for you to play," he started, but Blake interrupted him.

"Who said I was playing? She looks good, she fights well, she's not an airhead, and you said we're here for a while. But maybe you were planning to get there first?"

The words were light and innocuous, concealing the steel blade beneath them. Marc had been waiting for just this kind of trick, though, and he didn't let it surprise him. Had he been in a better mood, he would have told Blake that he was an idiot and he was planning no such thing before taking him to bed. The wounds Blake had pressed on earlier were still stinging, however.

"Maybe I was," he said, his voice void of expression.

"Maybe someone who doesn't feel the need to argue with me about every little thing will be nice, for a change."

He started for the door and didn't slow down when he heard Blake laugh quietly.

"May the best man win, then, Sire."

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Chapter 5

The way Blake saw things, the worst part of the situation was that all he needed to do was extend his arm and he could reach Marc, on the other side of the empty bed between them. He didn't care that the mattress he was lying on smelled vaguely of mildew, or that the sheets felt starchy. He didn't care, or at least not that much yet, that the room made him slightly claustrophobic or that there only was one way out. He didn't mind either the noises that filtered through the too-thin walls after a few hours; humans sounded like a pack of chatty geese when they ate in groups. No, it wasn't any of these things that kept him awake. Instead, it was the cold and stony presence of his Sire, not even four feet away.

Marc had already been asleep when Blake had returned from the bathroom, or pretending to be asleep, his back turned to the door. Blake's first instinct had been to join him, wrap his slender frame around Marc's, never mind that the bed was so small. He had stomped on that idea as hard as he could. He hadn't done anything wrong. He had nothing to apologize for.

After hours of tossing and turning, and a few close calls at falling off the edge of the mattress, he hadn't changed his mind. He was convinced he was not at fault. Maybe, however, he had been a little too harsh with Marc. Maybe his Sire was truly repentant, and, if so, Blake had been a little unfair toward him. Maybe, just maybe, it was time to forget the entire mess with that harpy, Jen. Marc had never really said

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why he had come back, but he had all but promised she wouldn't return. Blake liked to believe that meant she was no more than ashes, although he would have liked to have staked her himself.

As soon as they got up, he decided, he would tell Marc he didn't really care about Kate. Or maybe he would just ignore her and let Marc figure it out; yes, that was best. Marc would understand. He knew Blake's temper got the better of him sometimes. He would call him an idiot, probably, but they would be all right. He finally fell asleep on that thought, moving on to less complicated dreams in which he chased demons through a foggy labyrinth that might have once been a city.

When he woke up, too few hours later, his first thought was to wonder when Marc had left the room, and why Blake hadn't awakened when he had. Tired, hungry and his mood souring already, he threw clothes on and stepped out of the bedroom. He stumbled on a pile of cooking pots as he made his way through the corridor, and cursed at the clanking sound they made when they scattered behind him. He left them as they were and moved on. As soon as he came out, he saw that Kate's cot had been pushed against the wall, the blanket folded neatly over it. He felt relieved at the sight; a small part of him had been sure he would find Marc sitting there with her and recounting his most dangerous feats in an effort to woo her. The relief was short-lived, however. When he looked up, the two of them were in the middle of the building's open space, fighting.

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"Nice try," Marc said, on the edge of laughter. "Not quite good enough, though."

He pushed back her sword with his, and she took a few staggering steps back. She didn't lose her balance, however, and after only a couple of seconds, she charged again. The circle of onlookers around them cheered her on, but her entire attention remained on Marc. She was smiling, Blake noticed when he approached. She was having fun.

"You keep opening yourself on your right," Marc pointed out as their swords clashed again with the dull sound of weighted plastic. "It's as good as an invitation for a demon. You were doing it last night, too."

He twisted his sword around hers, forcing her to break away, and thrust toward that right side opening as though to demonstrate what he had just been talking about. Kate pivoted at the last moment, using her smaller size to escape the blow and move back.

"Funny," she said, slightly out of breath. "You keep finding gaping holes in my defenses, but neither you nor any demon has ever gotten through."

Both hands on the hilt of her practice sword, she spread out her feet in a defensive stance. Blake observed her carefully, finding no flaw in the way she held herself. Turning to the closest observer—if he remembered correctly, his name was Simon—he asked, "Is that true? She's never been hurt in battle?"

Simon did a double-take when he realized who was standing next to him, but he didn't move away. "She ... she hasn't, no. Not in almost ten years of fighting. I mean, she's

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had scrapes, and bruises, we all have—" He stood straighter and puffed up his chest a little at that, as though putting himself on the same level as her. "—but nothing that wasn't healed in a couple of days."

Blake nodded absently. He had figured out she was good the previous night when he had seen her fight demons, so he wasn't too surprised. Still, for a fighter to remain unscathed that long while confronting demons took a lot more skill than he had credited her with. Even he had a few fading scars to show after more than eighty years of this. He touched his face gingerly. The newest one didn't hurt, but he could feel the raised skin above his eyebrow and down his cheek.

Still thinking, he let his eyes trail over the audience. The dozen or so men and handful of women had formed a loose circle around Marc and Kate, giving them enough space to move freely. Most of them were smiling and clapping with both fighters' best moves, but a few stood with their arms crossed, stone-faced, their eyes rarely leaving Marc. They seemed ready to intervene at the first hint that Marc was about to truly hurt Kate. Blake snorted. Charming lot. He'd never understand what was so important about helping humans. It wasn't like there weren't enough demons for all of them.

He shifted his shoulders as he returned to watching the sparring match. He missed the weight of Seneca hanging at his back, and wished he had strapped the scabbard on before leaving the bedroom. He should have known better than to come out unarmed. After all, he had seen the previous night that their hosts were not without prejudice against vampires.

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As he looked on, he realized something. They were both fighting hard, both attempting complicated moves and feints, but they did so without ever playing dirty, something he had seen both of them do in battle. Instead, they seemed to follow some unvoiced rules of fair play, each waiting for the other to be ready before launching a new attack. On top of that, there were those praises they exchanged every so often, small words that brought quick grins to their faces in turn. Blake gritted his teeth. It seemed as though the game he had decided not to play had started without him, after all.

All of a sudden, things seemed to accelerate in the center of the circle. Marc and Kate each thrust and parried in turn, back and forth and again, each pushing the other harder every time. She was really good, Blake thought. It didn't look as though Marc was holding back—or at least, not much. It finally ended with a clever feint from Marc. Kate attacked high, striking toward his left shoulder. For an instant, it seemed as though Marc would be too late to parry. His foot slipped, and he fell down to one knee even as he blocked her attack from below. Using the odd angle, he pushed back her sword and immediately struck back.

The dull point of his sword stopped just an inch away from Kate's throat. Gasps erupted around the circle, but the most surprised of them all had to be Kate. Frozen in place, she looked at Marc with wide eyes, her sword still held high above her head. The standoff ended with a blink and a smile. Lowering her weapon at last, she held out her free hand toward Marc, seemingly unconcerned by the slightly wavering blade between them. He finally put down his weapon and took

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her hand, allowing her to help him up. Clapping rose through the circle, some observers already breaking away.

"Good fight," she said, still smiling. "You'll have to give me a rematch, some time."

She held on to his hand as he answered with a smile of his own. "It'll be my pleasure. It's rare when I find someone who's a good match for me."

Pushing back the scowl that wanted to burst through, Blake approached them. Rare, was it? So he didn't spar with Blake every other day, winning as often as he lost? And why wasn't he letting go of her hand, still? It looked as though he had gotten quite a head start already. Blake would have to catch up fast.

"It was a nice show," he said, standing by their sides. "It would have been more fun with real blades, though."

At last, their hands fell apart. Blake's fists, in his pockets, relaxed. Both of them looked at him, Kate a little amused, judging by her scent, and Marc wary. Neither had time to answer before Daniel did, however. He had been amongst the onlookers, seated at a lunch table, and had also come closer at the end of the fight.

"Training with real weapons is too dangerous," he said, sparing Blake a quick glance before turning his attention to Marc. "Will you talk to me about this breach now?"

Marc nodded. "Let me just put the sword back—"

"I'll take it," Blake cut in, seizing the hilt just below Marc's hold and pulling it free from his grip. He then turned to Kate and gave her his widest smile. "Kate, would you like to play?"

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She chuckled, shaking her head. "Another time, maybe. I'm beat. Plus, I've got a meeting to attend." She looked at Daniel at that and nodded once. "I'll join you in a minute. Your office?"

"Yes. Hurry up. And bring Simon with you."

Daniel pointed out the way to Marc, indicating a door on the opposite wall from their bedroom. Marc took a few steps with him before looking back at Blake, frowning slightly.

"Don't cause any trouble, Childe," he said very low.

Annoyed that Marc thought he even needed to say it, Blake didn't respond. Turning away, he followed Kate to return the sword to the wall rack, catching up with her before she got there.

"Are you hungry?" she asked as he was still wondering what to tell her.

He missed a step, taken aback. She couldn't be offering, could she? "What?"

"I asked if you're hungry. Or thirsty. What do you call it, when you need to feed?"

Having returned her sword to the hooks on the wall, she turned a curious look at him, her eyes bright and earnest. Humans were rarely so direct when they asked such questions, and his usual jokes felt out of place.

"Hungry, I suppose," he said, stashing the sword away. "Why do you ask?"

"Just playing hostess. Marc said he was fine, but if you're hungry, we've got blood in the kitchen freezer."

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He heard each word, understood the sentences, but it still made no sense. He frowned and repeated, "You've got blood in your freezer."

Her eyes sparkled in amusement at his confusion, and Blake couldn't help the stray thought that, as much as he had been trying to rile up Marc when he had said it, she *was* pretty. More than pretty, in fact.

"You're not the first fanged guests we've had," she explained. "We figured out long ago that there was no sense in throwing out medical blood bags when they expired if they could be used by vamps."

"Clever," he murmured. He had lost count of how many army camps, dying villages, and fortified cities Marc had dragged him to since turning him, but he was certain no more than a dozen of those over the years had had a supply of blood for visiting vampires. "A bit early for dinner, but I'll take you up on your offer later. When you're done with that meeting, maybe?"

"Sure. But don't you want to join us?"

He shrugged. "Marc's the talker. I'm more of a doer."

"If you say so," she said, the chuckle barely hidden in her voice. "Stay out of trouble."

While Marc's admonishing him had riled him up, words to the same effect from Kate only drew a bark of laughter from him. Did she know him so well, already? Clearly, she thought she did. His eyes followed her as she walked to the lunch tables. She stopped to talk to Simon, just a few feet away. He had been inching closer and closer as Blake and Kate talked, clearly listening in. Simon didn't look all too happy at having

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to go with her, and he threw a couple of hopeful looks toward Blake while arguing. What he expected from him, Blake had no idea, and before long, they both left toward the back of the building and that meeting with his Sire.

Left alone, Blake quickly regretted not having tagged along. He had no interest in Marc's crusade; all that mattered for him was hunting demons, and it was much easier to do when he and Marc didn't have a bunch of fragile humans to keep an eye on. Still, looking in on that meeting and adding a word or two might have earned him points with Kate. Definitely a bad move on his part there. Knowing how much Marc liked the sound of his own voice, that little talk might take hours. What was he going to do until they were done?

He looked around him. Many soldiers had moved on since the sparring session. Two pairs of them remained in the center of the room, practicing like Marc and Kate had been earlier. Another four, seated at a table, played some kind of card game. In the center of the table between them, a pile of small stones seemed to serve as currency. Blake was thinking of joining them when he caught the eye of a thick-necked man at the table furthest away from him. He remembered him from the previous night; this one had been particularly intent on getting rid of him. Even now, with no weapon in hand, he seemed ready to stake Blake on the spot. Unimpressed, Blake raised an eyebrow at him. The man seemed to take it as an invitation. He stood slowly, pushing himself away from the table with thick hands. His eyes never looked away from Blake as he approached. His combat boots

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hit the floor heavily, coming to a stop inches from Blake's bare feet.

He crossed his arms and looked Blake up and down. "So you wanted to fight with a real sword? Think you can handle one?"

Blake let a sliver of his amusement pierce through. If this guy thought he was intimidating, he was in for a cruel disappointment. "Why? You're offering to give me lessons?"

The man's smile bared his teeth and made a grand gesture toward the wall. "Take your pick, then."

"I've got my own, actually. Give me a minute to get him, and we can start the lesson."

He snickered on the last word. He'd no doubt get hell from Marc, but this was going to be fun.

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Chapter 6

If not for the metal desk, Daniel's office could have passed for another storage room. Marc's eyes followed the shelves around the walls, stopping here or there on unusual objects. The binoculars or walkie-talkies, he could understand. The empty terracotta flowerpot, however, or the horse figurine, its translucent blue glass reflecting the light from the bare light bulb on the ceiling, didn't seem all that useful in a soldier's headquarters. Marc tried not to wonder what kind of organization he and Blake had stumbled on. The army had long since lost all semblance of efficiency, and all over the country—all over the world—small groups had formed around improvised leaders to combat the demons. Some of them relied heavily on military experience, equipment and men; others were ... less adequate. The latter rarely lasted long. From what Marc had seen since the previous night, it was hard to judge how good this group was. Their leader had been trapped in demon territory with too few men for an apparently useless mission, but their camp seemed professional enough—glass figurines notwithstanding. All Marc hoped was that they'd be able to close the breach.

"Have a seat," Daniel said, pointing at the chairs in front of the desk.

Marc chose the armchair that matched the one on the other side of the desk, leaving the plain metal chair for whoever would join them. Rather than sitting as well, Daniel rummaged on the shelves for a moment, moving aside boxes

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and mismatched objects to reach the back. The dusty smell in the room only increased, and Marc rubbed at his nose absently.

"Here it is."

Daniel turned back toward the desk and sat down, placing a palm-sized voice recorder between them. Marc hadn't seen one of those in decades. The light humming of the device, along with a glowing red dot, announced that Daniel had already switched it on.

"I hope you don't mind," he said, leaning back in his chair. "My superiors will want to know about the breach, and I hate writing reports."

"No problem." Marc relaxed in his seat, matching Daniel's casualness. "The more people who know about this, the better. Where do you want me to start?"

Daniel glanced at the door as he answered, nodding at the two new arrivals. "Why don't you start with how you first learned about the breach?"

The group's mage, Simon, came to the stark chair by Marc's side, pulling it a little further away and angling it toward both the desk and Marc before he sat down very stiffly. His scent, when he walked by Marc, held the acridness of annoyance. He crossed his arms over his chest and scowled at nothing in particular. Ignoring him, Marc addressed Daniel as well as the recorder, very aware of Kate's presence on his right by the door she had closed behind her.

"I first heard rumors from groups like yours when I was on the East Coast six years back. I tried to follow the rumors back to the source, and found they came from a vampire. She

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had been held captive by demons and taken to their world for a while."

His right hand contracted at the memory, forming a fist that he consciously forced himself to open again. Her wounds had been healed, by the time he and Blake had tracked her down, but the scars had been proof enough of her captivity.

"Details," Daniel said, making use of Marc's pause. "They'll want to corroborate your story. What was her name? Where did you find her? How long was she held? What was the demons' world like?"

Marc grimaced despite himself. He had hoped he'd be able to skip over Jen's involvement as much as possible. "She goes by Jen Dwight," he said. Even now, her name made something twist painfully in his stomach. "She said she was held for more than ten years, but less than a month had passed in our world by the time she ... escaped." He continued without stopping, hoping they wouldn't wonder too much why he had hesitated. "She didn't like to talk about her captivity, but she described the breach through which she had returned. I convinced her to take me and some fighters there."

The words had the bitter taste of half-truths. The humans around him or whoever was going to listen to this didn't need to know these details. More than convincing Jen, he had bargained with her. Excited by the knowledge she had to share, flattered that, although much older than he was, she had accepted him as an equal, thrilled that she knew about the ancient Pacts and understood his desire to protect humans, taken by her simple beauty, he would have given

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her anything she asked for. The price for her cooperation had been unexpected, and Marc was still dealing with the consequences.

"Where was 'there'?" Kate asked, bringing him back to the immediate present.

He glanced at her, and she gave him an encouraging smile.

"In a swamp, down in Louisiana. We found it easily enough, but it took our mages a while before they came up with a ritual to close the breach."

He didn't elaborate on why it had taken them so long. It didn't matter anymore.

Across from him, Daniel leaned forward over the desk. His eyes gleamed with hope.

"Tell us more about this ritual. Would you be able to recreate it for us?"

Marc shook his head. He had some magical potential in him, but nowhere near enough to work on a breach. Daniel looked crestfallen for a moment, but he perked up again when Marc tilted his head toward Simon.

"I can't do it, but I'm sure he will be able to."

He pulled from his shirt's breast pocket the piece of paper he had put there when dressing and passed it to Daniel, who unfolded it and looked at it briefly before handing it out to Simon. Simon's lips moved silently as he read over the list of ingredients and description of the ritual. A small smile started tugging at his lips, but before he could say anything three loud knocks resounded against the metal door. The four of them looked at it as Kate opened it.

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"Sky?" She frowned at the young woman on the threshold.
"What is it?"

"Kate, you've got to come," Sky said, frantic. "They're going to kill each other!"

Kate threw a single glance at Daniel but didn't wait for an answer before hurrying out. With the door open, the distinctive sound of steel clashing on steel resounded through the room. Without thinking, Marc stood and followed Kate. It would be too much to hope for that Blake wasn't involved in whatever was happening.

* * * *

As she hurried out after Sky, Kate could already tell what was going on. It was difficult to miss. In the center of the room, Elliott and Blake faced each other, swords flashing between them as they attacked and parried. The sound of their weapons hitting each other gave it away just as well as the light reflecting on them or the cuts that adorned Elliot's body: they were fighting with real swords, not the training ones Kate and Marc had used earlier.

"Stop!" she shouted, now just a few feet from them.

Blake glanced at her for only a second, yet long enough for her to see the fire in his eyes and the mischievous upturn of his lips. He was enjoying himself, she realized with some shock. Elliott, on the other hand, didn't appear to have heard her. He took advantage of Blake's momentary distraction to launch an attack. Two steps brought him within striking distance and gave him momentum. With both hands gripping the hilt of his sword, he raised it high, then slashed down

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sideways at Blake's chest—or rather, at the spot where Blake's chest had been just an instant earlier. He grunted as the movement made him lose his balance, and he took a few stumbling steps forward. On his right, Blake's feet shuffled, angling his body for an attack. With Elliot's back to him, his next move could be fatal. As much as Kate disliked Elliot, she didn't want to see him dead, especially not in such a senseless fight.

"Stop it!" she said again.

Only when the words passed her lips did she realize Blake wasn't moving. He kept the same stance, guarding himself she now saw, but he didn't attack. Elliot didn't seem to have as much common sense. He had regained his equilibrium and was whirling back, his sword raised yet again. Kate crossed the last couple of feet that separated her from Blake and closed her hand above his on the hilt of his sword. He gave her a startled look, but when she pulled, he let go of the weapon. She faced Elliot with the sword in hand and scowled at him.

"You either put the sword down right now," she said, as calmly as she could muster, "or I'll first kick your ass with this, and then I'll kick your ass out of the squad."

Her words had the desired effect and Elliot's arm faltered. "You can't!"

He wasn't denying she could best him in a fight. They both knew from experience she was more than able to do it. His disbelief, she was sure, was at the idea that she would send him away for fighting with a vampire.

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"She most certainly can," Daniel said in a loud voice somewhere behind her. "And you still haven't put the sword down."

Elliot finally lowered his arm. Kate looked at the line of soldiers who had been looking at the fight. Sammy was there, fresh out of the infirmary. Next to him, Huan stood with his arms crossed and a slightly uncomfortable look on his face that matched Wally's, two steps away. The others were smirking or grinning, amused by what had happened. Idiots; she'd deal with them in a minute. At her nod, Huan stepped forward and took the sword from Elliot's hand.

"You just volunteered for a double shift on the perimeter," she told Elliot.

His eyes widened incredulously. "But I pulled a double yesterday!"

"And you also pulled a bare blade on the Major's guest. Go, before I assign you there all week." She gave him a once-over and amended her command. His clothing was torn and bloody on both forearms, shoulders and thighs, the cuts mirroring each other too precisely for a coincidence. "Swing by the infirmary beforehand. Last thing we need is for you to get an infection."

With a disgruntled grumble, Elliot walked away, head high and back stiff, his hands fisted at his sides. Shaking her head lightly, Kate looked again at the few soldiers that remained in the room. Her eyes went from one to the next, cold and reproving.

"So, no one but Sky thought there was anything wrong going on here?"

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A few of them looked away. A couple shrugged.

"They were just sparring," Sammy said, not quite meeting her eyes.

She didn't even dignify that with an answer. She merely pointed at the blood on the blade of the sword she still held. As she did so, she realized for the first time that the weapon wasn't one of the squad's. The finely detailed guard rested over thick steel. When she turned the sword lightly into the light, she could see words engraved in very small letters, though she had no idea what they meant—or even if they were really words.

"Can I have him back?" Blake asked.

He walked closer to her, holding out his hand. She glared at him. Her people should have known better, but Blake wasn't guiltless, either.

"What were you trying to do, exactly?" she asked, raising her chin to meet his eyes squarely. "Kill him? I thought we showed you last night we don't take well to vampires killing humans."

"He was only playing with your man."

Surprised, she turned her frown to Marc. Standing just a few feet away by Daniel, arms crossed, he was looking at Blake with a strange mix of anger and resignation.

"Playing?" Daniel repeated, his voice very mild. "Fighting with a sword is no game."

"I know that as well as you do. I'm afraid that Blake is still learning."

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"And Blake can damn well speak for himself," Blake said. He was looking at Daniel when he asked again, "Can I have my sword back now?"

"Kate," Daniel said simply.

She twisted her hold on the sword to hand it back to him hilt first. He took it with a shallow nod.

"Thank you."

She watched as he wiped the traces of blood that stained the blade of the sword on the dark fabric of his shirt sleeve before sliding the sword back into the scabbard on his back. Meanwhile, Daniel invited Marc to return to the office and finish their discussion.

"We'll talk about this later, Childe," Marc called out to Blake before following Daniel.

Blake reacted by rolling his eyes and took Kate as witness. "Do I look like a kid to you? Because honestly, sometimes I wonder if he thinks I'm twelve or something."

Despite herself, she cracked a smile. "It might help if you didn't act as though you *were* twelve."

She expected another roll of his eyes, but he surprised her by chuckling.

"Yeah, well, I've got to find my fun where I can. Plus, it's your fault. If you'd sparred with me, I wouldn't have been bored enough to take that guy up on his offer."

Kate mentally filed away the fact that Elliot had been the one to initiate this. She'd add another double shift guarding the perimeter for that. It was the assignment he liked the least, like every soldier who had joined the squad for

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'adventure,' as they called it. If the squad didn't always need more recruits, she would have weeded out a few of them.

"Yes, you would have," she replied. "After the workout your Sire gave me, I wouldn't have lasted two minutes against you. Then you'd have been bored, and I would have been humiliated."

He gave her a crooked smile, just this side of a leer. "Two minutes does sound much too short to do you justice."

She shook her head at the innuendo. If she hadn't heard him complain about the way Marc looked at her, she might have started worrying about his intentions by now. What she was really worried about, however, was what mischief he would get up to if she returned to Daniel's office. She'd catch up on what Marc had to say later, she decided. She already knew the most important—he had helped close a breach before, and he would be able to do it again.

She looked at Blake, considering. If they wanted Marc's help, keeping Blake out of trouble might be useful.

"Twelve years old or not, I guess I'd better keep an eye on you," she said, softening her words by making them teasing. "Is this still too early for you to eat?"

He shrugged, his nonchalance so much at odds with the smug glance he threw toward Daniel's office that she was sure she must have misinterpreted it.

"It's all right. I don't really have set eating hours."

"Let's do that, then. This way."

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Chapter 7

As Blake and Kate passed by Daniel's office on their way to the kitchen, Blake couldn't help throwing a quick glance in through the open door. He caught a glimpse of Marc leaning forward in an armchair and shaking his head, but didn't try to listen in. He knew Marc's intentions all too well; they had been the same since he had first met him, eighty-three years earlier. Help humans by combating demons. Blake's list of priorities was just a little different, with the fight against demons coming first and foremost, always. It was, after all, why he had asked Marc to turn him.

The kitchen was across the building from the bathroom and about as large. The fluorescent tubes flickered on when they entered, buzzing lightly, and their light reflected off the gleaming resin countertops all around the room. Kate walked straight to a large chest-like freezer and rummaged inside it for a few seconds.

"Sit down," she told him, her voice muffled as she dug a little deeper. "This will only take ... ah ah!"

Blake looked around, and, finding no chair to use, hopped onto the countertop behind him. His scabbard wasn't designed to work all that well when he was seated, and the sword stuck at an odd angle over his shoulder. When Kate showed him, triumphant, the bag of blood she had found, she raised an amused eyebrow at him but said nothing. As she turned away to the instant oven, he unhooked the snap on his chest that held the scabbard tightly in place before sliding the

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harness off one shoulder, then the other. He rested Seneca behind him and returned his attention to Kate. Standing by the oven, she briefly consulted a note taped to the side before programming the device.

"Do you do this often?" he asked, his curiosity piqued. "I haven't met many humans who know how to warm up blood for vamps, or who would care to even try."

She rested her hands against the counter behind her and leaned back against it. She was smiling as she answered, but her voice held a bittersweet note. "You're not the first vampires we've had here."

Blake had suspected as much; that windowless room, as claustrophobic as it may be, was just perfect for a vampire.

"So, you learned to warm blood for him, then?" he asked, fishing for more information. "I don't suppose you brought him breakfast in bed."

She gave him a small eye roll, then turned to the beeping microwave. "Not that it changes anything, but it was a she. And no, I don't do room service."

Holding the bag by a corner, she gingerly pulled it out of the microwave and turned to Blake. He placed his hands in front of him, palms up, and after a second of hesitation, she threw him the bag. He caught it easily despite her aim being a little off, and almost dropped it again the next second. It was indeed very hot. He passed it back and forth between his hands, quickly enough that he wouldn't get burned, waiting for the blood to cool down a little.

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"There are glasses in the cupboard behind you," Kate offered as she hoisted herself to sit on the counter opposite him.

"It's OK. Less clean-up if I just bite through."

The frown emerged on her forehead and was gone again in no more time than it took Blake to shift the blood bag from his right hand to the left.

"My friend always said the blood would taste like plastic if she did that."

Blake shrugged. "Not any more than water would if you drank it from a plastic glass. Maybe she just wanted to look more ... human."

"Maybe," she conceded, her eyes unfocused as she looked at a spot on Blake's right. "That would be like her." She shook her head as though chasing a memory and returned her eyes to him. "Something tells me you don't care about looking more human."

"Why would I? I'm not human, am I?"

The blood seemed to have cooled down enough by now; he brought the bag to his mouth and let his fangs elongate before he bit through in the upper corner. A light squeeze had a mouthful of hot blood flooding his mouth. He let it wash over his tongue, enjoying the rich, slightly metallic taste, then swallowed and pulled another mouthful from the bag.

"No, you're definitely not," Kate said, the sliver of a laugh warming her voice. "What does it taste like?"

Blake thought about it as he continued to empty the bag. He could tell her it was salty, and a little coppery, but he didn't think that was what she was really asking about. When

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humans asked that question, they were after something deeper than a description, even if 'taste' was the only way they knew how to ask. He soon had finished his meal. He caught a stray droplet on his bottom lip with the tip of his tongue and gave Kate the best answer he had ever come up with.

"Have you ever had fresh bread?" he asked. "Just out of the oven, so hot you burn your fingertips when you go to cut that first slice, and it tastes like heaven because you've been waiting for it to be ready, all the while breathing in the smell that spread all around your house?"

A corner of her mouth twitched in a slim half-smile. "My mom used to make bread," was all she said.

Blake nodded and held on to her gaze. "That hot, fresh bread? That's what it's like to take blood from a human. They burn in your arms, and their scent is all around you, and as much as you want to make it last, take it slow, you can't wait and just have to bite down. And then when you have to stop..." He chuckled. "Not any easier than stopping after that first slice of warm bread."

Kate's heartbeat jumped, and she blinked twice, very fast, hiding oversized pupils that almost swallowed the gray of her eyes. How had he never noticed until now what an unusual color her eyes were, Blake wondered, surprised.

"Drinking from a blood bag," he continued, sliding off the counter, "it's a bit like warming up that bread the next day. It's still good, but with each mouthful you feel like there's something missing." He crossed the kitchen, standing in front of her for a second. Her hands were gripping the edge of the

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counter, and he could have sworn she was shaking. "You remember what it was like before and..." He pitched the empty bag into the trash basket beneath the counter where she sat. "It's just gone."

She let out a bark of nervous laughter. Blake retreated back to his counter; it wouldn't help to make her uncomfortable.

"Does that mean you don't care for seconds?" she asked, her voice not quite yet back to normal.

He tried to give her his gentlest smile. "I've had enough. And it was fine, really. Much better than what I've had recently."

She raised an eyebrow at that, her nervousness receding. "Was it? I thought you had warm, fresh bread recently."

"If, by recent, you mean eight days ago, then yes. It's been animal blood since then."

She nodded slowly and observed him for a little while. Her feet swung back and forth in the air with the small movements of someone who wasn't accustomed to being still for very long. Blake merely waited for the additional questions he was sure would come. He didn't mind them. Better curiosity and questions than outright hostility and fear. He didn't mind staying here with her either, even if he was done feeding. The kitchen felt more intimate than the too-large space outside of it, without being confining.

"Marc was telling us about the breach," she finally said. "Did you work on closing it with him?"

Taken aback, Blake didn't react for a few seconds. He hadn't expected her to change topics so radically. When he

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replied, it was with deliberate slowness, each word detached from the others.

"I did not."

She tilted her head to one side, puzzled, then pushed herself off the counter. "Why not?" she asked while rummaging in the cupboard behind her. "From what I've seen, you're not opposed to a good fight. Can you give me a mug? Behind you."

In her hands, the canister of insta-coffee told him what she wanted the mug for. He slid off the counter and grabbed two of them in the cupboard, filling them both halfway up with water at the sink before he brought them to her.

"Thanks." She dropped a spoonful of powder in each mug before placing both in the instant oven. "You like coffee, then?"

He snorted. "Yes, I liked coffee. Real coffee. I doubt you've ever had any, though. It was already rare when I was still human."

She gave him a gauging look. "And how long ago was that?"

The oven beeped. They each took a mug, and Blake returned to his side of the kitchen.

"Let's just say if you add up my human life and my vampire years, I'm over a hundred."

She took a sip and pondered his words. "You don't look much older than twenty," she said thoughtfully. "So that would mean you were turned about eighty years ago?"

He raised his mug toward her. "Clever. Something like that, yes."

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The best thing that could be said about insta-coffee was that it had a taste. Beyond the name, though, very little remained of the actual beverage. Blake hid his grimace in his mug and kept taking small sips.

"You still didn't tell me how come you didn't fight at that breach," Kate said. "Or should I just drop the subject?"

Blake almost asked her to drop the question, but something very different came out of his throat. "He told you about Jen?"

She nodded.

"Let's just say she wasn't too fond of me. Said I had no respect for my elders. So I wasn't invited on that little trip."

He tried to wash away the bitterness with another mouthful of coffee. Across from him, Kate finished her mug and proved to Blake, with just a few words, that she was a fighter before anything else. He was suddenly more determined than ever to seduce her before he and Marc moved on.

"That's tough. To be left out of such a big fight..." She shook her head, smiling a little. "I would have raised hell."

Blake chuckled. "Why do you think I drive him crazy every chance I get?"

She laughed, head thrown back and exposing her throat. Blake's eyes caressed the lovely curve and he wondered idly if she'd let him bite her before the end.

* * * *

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"What I don't understand," Daniel said when Simon had left them and he had turned off the recorder, "is why it took you six years to try and find another breach."

Marc shifted on his chair, trying to find a more comfortable position. Try as he might, he couldn't manage to put any sort of feeling in his words, and they came out icy. In time, maybe, he would learn to look back on those years without a sense of failure sliding over him like cold mud.

"You misunderstood me. We didn't close the breach six years ago. We *found* it then. It took the mages four years of trial and error to come up with the right ritual. Then we stayed there for a little more than a year to clean off the demons that were left in the region and make sure the breach was closed for good. And after that..." He shrugged, not quite meeting the man's eyes. "I needed a break. We only started hunting for a new breach recently."

Daniel whistled quietly. "Four years of trying to get that spell right?"

"Yes. But none of the mages we had with us was above an average level. From what I saw of Simon last night..."

He left the rest unvoiced, waiting to see how Daniel would reply.

"Oh, yes, we're lucky there. Simon is very good." A brief frown crossed his face before he leaned in toward Marc, his smile taking a conspiratorial turn. "I have to be very careful what I tell my superiors, or they'd snatch him from my squad in a minute."

Marc grinned. "It'll be hard to hide what he can do once we close that breach."

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"Maybe," Daniel said, standing and turning to the shelves behind him. It took him only seconds to turn back toward the desk and unfold a map over it. "I'll worry about that once we're there. But before that..."

He smoothed out the creases with a hand and leaned above the map. Marc's armchair creaked in protest when he pushed off the armrests and stood to see better what Daniel was looking at. The map was old and outdated, showing perfectly lined streets where they had seen only the previous night that piles of rubble created a dangerous maze.

"This," Daniel said, his index finger following a large avenue on the western edge of the map that divided the town in halves roughly from west to east, "is where we met last night." His finger stopped at an intersection not even a quarter into the city and tapped lightly. "All this—" He indicated the southern part of the city up to the intersection. "—we've explored. There's no breach there."

Marc surveyed the rest of the map. Those few lines and colored masses seemed deceptively small, laid flat out on a desk: small and easy to explore. The reality would no doubt be somewhat different.

"I think we came this way," he said, pointing at a secondary road that came from the southeast to meet with the one Daniel had indicated. "There were a few demons, but not enough that I think the breach was close by. The closer we get to it, the more demons we'll meet."

Daniel nodded absently. "Yes. That makes sense. They hide in the ruins by day, and by night they usually go and attack the next town over. The town is fortified, and the

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fighters there resist pretty well." He gestured at the northern edge of the map. "That's why we've been exploring at night—"

"And that's what we've got to continue doing," Marc finished for him. "If we follow the main road through and do it methodically—"

"We'll find the breach. And then we'll close it."

Daniel looked up from the map. Grinning, he held out his hand toward Marc, who shook it with a smile.

"We've got ourselves a plan."

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Chapter 8

During the more than seven years Kate had spent with Daniel's squad, she had lost count of how many times she had entered what, decades before she had even been born, had become 'the City.' It was as though, a century and half earlier, when humans had been driven out by demons surging out of the night, they had left behind their possessions, their lives—for too many of them, literally—and the name of their city as well.

Even in the next town, Claremont, where the refugees had run in droves, where they had built fortifications with equal parts mortar, stones and blood, where they had formed civilian battalions to fight back and died in astounding numbers, the lost town was known by the same generic name.

As many times as she had entered the City, however, she never put into words the oddity that was the fog until Marc asked about it.

"No, it's pretty much like that all year round. I never really thought about it before."

Behind them, John chimed in, catching up with them so he would be able to whisper, as they had.

"That's because you're not from around here. All the kids in Claremont grow up hearing about how demons come out of the fog and why you should never to be out at night. The stories say there never used to be fog around here until the invasion."

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Kate glanced back at him, a little annoyed. It was her own fault, though, she admitted after a few seconds, if she had never made the connection before. Now, it seemed obvious that there was something unnatural going on with the fog.

"If the fog and demons are linked," she said, looking around her at the gray patches that seemed to hide treacherous terrain along with lethal adversaries, "maybe we should look for where it's the thickest. That might be where we'll find the breach."

"I was thinking the same thing," Marc said, flashing a quick smile at her.

His hand brushed against her arm, sending a jolt through her and getting her attention before he pointed at the façade of a dilapidated building on their right. They angled their path toward it while John stayed back as cover with Aaron, the last member of their team.

Without breaking his stride or looking at her, Marc leaned closer, brushing against her sh oulder, and whispered, "We should talk to Daniel about it."

Marc and Blake had been with the squad for two weeks already: two weeks of almost nightly patrols, infrequent sparring, and growing camarade rie and frustration because they had found nothing so far.

Kate nodded rather than answ ering aloud, certain he would catch her answer. She had stopped being surprised at how well Marc could see at night, even with the fog around them, even when, like now, they entered a structure whose torn walls still towered over them, blocking whatever light the moon had offered them so far. A couple of times, he had

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caught her staring at him when she had been sure he wouldn't be able to notice. She had learned to be more careful.

Glass debris crunched beneath her boots, and she winced. She doubted this was the place they were looking for, but demons could be anywhere. Her sword raised in front of her to parry an attack if it came from the darkness, she fell back two steps behind Marc and three steps to his left in a formation that had become second-nature to her. She tried to remain as silent as he was, breathing as evenly and quietly as she possibly could when adrenaline raced through her. Eyes wide open, she swept her gaze all around them as they continued to advance, looking for any little clue, aware that if anything was to be found, Marc would find it before her. She wished Daniel would lend her the squad's only pair of night vision goggles, sometimes. Either that, or make another request to his suppliers to find more of those for him.

"It's clear," Marc said, lowering his sword.

Kate trusted him, but she couldn't bring herself to imitate him, not when the shadows around them still seemed to wait for the right time to attack them.

"Are you all right?" he asked suddenly.

Startled by the question, she looked at him. She tried not to, when they patrolled like this. Not only did she have too many things to pay attention to, he was also too much of a distraction.

"What? Yes. Of course."

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"Your heartbeat..." He shook his head and came a little closer. He gently took hold of her wrist, his thumb pressing into her pulse point. "It's been getting faster and faster."

His touch only made things worse. She wondered if he could tell that she was blushing. Shrugging, she pulled her wrist free and tried to calm down.

"Just tired, I guess," she lied. "Let's get on with it."

They walked out of the building, finding John and Aaron where they had left them, and resumed their stealthy walk through the blurry city. Kate let herself fall back a little behind Marc to get herself under control. She knew the small touches and smiles didn't mean anything. She knew it, because Blake acted the exact same way. It was just the way they were, and she ought to know better by now than to give meaning to every little thing. She just didn't seem to be able to stop herself. Part of her tried to reason that it had simply been a long time since she had taken a lover, and her body was reacting to innocent things as though they were less than innocent. It just didn't explain why she couldn't treat them like every other member of the squad, like comrades in arms, almost brothers, and definitely unsuitable partners.

"Demons."

She froze at Marc's quiet word, as did John and Aaron. Weapons raised and ready, they looked around them, searching the fog and ruins for what Marc had sensed. He raised his hand, fingers spread out. Five demons, then. As a rule, they tried to avoid direct confrontation, especially if they were outnumbered. The same hand pointed at the shell of a house on their left, just feet away. As silently as they could,

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they hurried to it and hid, John and Aaron crowding close to the wall still standing on the right, Marc and Kate crouching to find cover on the left behind a mound of bricks and debris half as tall as she was.

She could hear the demons now. Heavy steps that seemed to echo in the meandering streets, harsh grunting that had to be some kind of communication form, metal grating on metal as the pieces of their armor moved together ... They were passing just feet away, and at any moment they might catch the squad's scent. Her hand tightened over the hilt of her sword, firming her grip despite her sweaty palm. It was only when Marc's hand rested on her back and he leaned closer to murmur into her ear, "Breathe," that she realized she was holding her breath. She nodded and exhaled through her nose before forcing herself to breathe in more regularly. A few moments later, the demons had walked down the street. She signaled for John and Aaron to remain where they were a little longer. It was only a precaution, she told herself, and it had nothing to do with Marc's still hand on her back.

At last, the demons were gone. She stood up and joined John and Aaron, Marc following just a step behind her.

"We should go," Aaron said. "Fast. Before they come back."

"We've got two more streets to go," Marc replied. "If we don't finish this sector, this night will have been for nothing."

"If we get killed—" Aaron started.

"This is not up for discussion," Kate cut him short. "We're finishing this sector. Let's go."

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As she passed in front of them, she noticed the look John and Aaron exchanged. She didn't let herself dwell on it. She was as tired as they were after hours of careful exploration, but that didn't mean she intended to shirk her duties. If they disagreed, she'd give them other assignments from now on.

They returned to their previous formation, with Marc ahead, Kate a little behind, and John and Aaron bringing up the rear in a triangle. They hadn't reached the end of the street yet when the demons found them.

* * * *

"They're late."

None of the humans replied, so Blake said it again, a little louder this time. "They are late."

"And thank you for stating the obvious twice," Daniel said dryly. "Yes, they are late. Yesterday, it was us, the day before that, it was Mike's team, today it's them. We'll just wait for them. They won't be long now."

Blake pushed away from the truck and rolled his shoulders, feeling the weight of his sword. Ahead of him, the fog spread over the street, revealing and hiding the City in turns. He had a pretty good idea where the other group had been headed, and once he got their scent, he'd find them. Daniel caught up with him and stood in his way before he had taken more than a few steps toward the City.

"Wouldn't you know if he was in trouble?" he asked. "I thought vamps—"

"The only thing I'll know is when he dies. Not planning to wait for that."

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He sidestepped Daniel, who again planted himself in front of him. "I said we *wait*."

"I heard you," Blake said, meeting his eyes squarely. "I'm not stopping you and your lack of eyes from doing nothing. And you're not stopping me from going to find them."

Behind him, said lackeys grumbled at the name but, like good lackeys, did not intervene.

"Marc told you to listen to me."

Blake couldn't help laughing at that. "And you haven't noticed yet that I don't listen to *him*? Why makes you think I'll listen to *you*?"

"You've done just that for two weeks!"

"No. I happened to be walking in the same direction you did for two weeks. Now..." He looked Daniel up and down. He had seen him fight, and he was good at it, but he was no match for Blake. "Are you going to get out of my way or do I need to—"

He stopped abruptly and looked over Daniel's shoulder. He was sure he had seen something move. Unless it had only been the wind pushing the fog around—but no, there it was again. A silhouette appeared behind the fog, bulky, maybe big enough to be a demon. Blake started warning Daniel, but two slimmer shapes appeared around the first, these definitely human. Someone moaned in pain. Blake cursed. Pushing past Daniel, he rushed toward the incoming silhouettes. Behind him, exclamations rose as the others finally saw what he had.

His eyes jumped from one shape to the others as they became clearer. The first one he recognized, he dismissed immediately. He had nothing against John, but he didn't care

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much about him either. The next was Kate. He slowed down and looked at her more carefully. Nothing in her walk hinted that she was hurt. A small smile pushed up the edges of his lips. He was glad she was all right. When he turned his eyes to the last shape, he was walking. He knew what he would find. The scent coming toward him was one he knew as well as his own mixed with a less familiar one that was tinted with anger, blood and pain. He stopped a dozen yard away from Marc and watched him, an eyebrow raised in amusement. He had Aaron in a fireman carry over his shoulder, his arm over his legs to secure him in place. Every so often, Aaron kicked with his left leg. The right seemed immobilized with a makeshift splint. His moaning now alternated with curses, and by the time Daniel and the other two reached Marc, running, he was full out accusing Marc of murder.

"Is he trying to set the demons on us?" Blake asked Kate as she approached him.

She shrugged. "I can't blame him. He kept it quiet as long as he could."

Blake gave her a once over again. She looked tired. "What happened?"

"Five demons happened. That's pretty much the only thing we found. You?"

"The same. Without the demons. Pity."

She gave him a sharp look and opened her mouth, ready to lash out, he was sure. She seemed to think better of it and simply shook her head. When she looked at him again, the shadow of a smile lit up her face.

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"Kate!" Daniel called out. He was almost at the truck, helping his men carry Aaron. "Take the wheel."

With a light groan, she started toward the truck. Blake let her distance him and joined Marc, who had slowed down after being relieved of his burden.

"Not only do you get to hunt with her," he complained, "but you also get all the fun."

"Blake..." Marc sighed, very much like Kate had.

Blake's smile faltered. He looked away and dropped his voice. "I know. Not a game, people die, blah, blah. But nobody did die. And you're fine. Good enough for me."

They kept on walking to the truck. Blake glanced in as they passed the back end of it. The nine men were in, beneath the heavy tarp tented above the bed of the truck, and Kate had already started the engine. Before they reached the cabin door, Marc grabbed the back of Blake's neck, his heavy fingers tangling into his hair. Blake started protesting, but didn't manage to say a word. Marc's mouth pressed against his, harsh, demanding, a promise of things to come.

"Idiot," he said when he pulled back, and climbed into the truck.

Grinning, Blake followed.

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Chapter 9

The small bedroom door hadn't finished closing behind them that Blake was pushing Marc against it, already tugging at his clothes. Marc started protesting at his roughness, but thought better of it. Two weeks had passed since Blake had decided that Marc was more interested in Kate than him. They had not slept apart for so long in quite a long time. As tired as he was, Marc certainly didn't mind seeing an end to his forced celibacy.

Fumbling a little, he unzipped Blake's jacket and pushed it off him before finding the edges of his t-shirt and tugging it over his head. Blake had gotten rid of Marc's jacket and shirt already, leaving his chest bare, too. He leaned in close and trailed his mouth over Marc's shoulder. A low, hungry growl rose from his chest. Later, Marc thought, weaving his fingers in Blake's hair. Later, he would share blood with him, if Blake behaved himself. He tugged on the strands curled around his fingers, leading Blake down. To his surprise, Blake complied at once and licked a path over his collarbone and lower. He stopped over his left nipple, teasing it with blunt teeth until it was tight and hard. Sparks of pleasure shot through Marc's body.

"Can I get a taste?" Blake murmured before flicking his tongue over his right nipple.

Forgetting his decision to make him wait, Marc hissed his approval. He closed his eyes and his body tensed in anticipation of the bite he knew would come. Except it didn't.

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Blake continued to touch him with lips, tongue, and just a hint of blunt teeth, distracting him just enough that Marc didn't pay much mind to the hand undoing his jeans buttons and tugging them down. When the same hand wrapped over his hardened cock, however, he started paying attention. Blake had asked for a taste; he hadn't said what he wanted to taste. Even as he realized that, his, Blake knelt down and nuzzled his cock. He flicked his tongue along the length until Marc's hips started bucking forward. Then, placing both hands on Marc's hips, he held him in place as he closed his mouth over the tip of his cock. Marc moaned very low at the feel of tight lips moving over him, and again when a sneaky tongue slid against the very tip and along the slit to hunt down a bead of precome.

Shaking, he tried to push forward again. All of a sudden, Blake's hands and lips were gone.

"Got my taste," Blake said, standing again, laughter coloring his voice. "That's all I wanted."

Marc stared, too caught up in his lost pleasure to understand at first. When he did, he flashed a glare and his fangs at Blake.

"Strip."

He expected Blake to argue and be his usual annoying self; instead, he kicked off his shoes and scrambled out of his pants. He was on Marc's bed, wearing nothing but an impish grin and a hard on, before Marc could add a word.

"Well?" he said, stroking his cock slowly. "You don't need an invitation, do you?"

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Marc started taking a step forward and almost tripped on his bunched up jeans.

Blake snickered. "Need help?"

"Sure." Marc leaned down to pull his shoes and pants off. "Hold your legs up. Show me what a pretty ass you have."

Blake's grin turned into a grimace at being called pretty, but he continued to surprise Marc. He grabbed the back of his knees and pulled his legs up, exposing himself. His scent was pure, raw lust. Marc licked his lips as he approached, his cock in hand, spreading the precome over the tip. Desire coursed through him, a wildfire spreading over parched land.

Kneeling on the bed in front of Blake's open legs, he let go of his cock to take hold of Blake's instead. It twitched in his hand, as hard as his own, the tip leaking precome already even though he hadn't touched Blake yet.

"If you wanted to fuck this much," he whispered, his voice rough with need as he traced his fingertips down Blake's length and to his balls, "all you had to do was say it."

He squeezed Blake's balls lightly in his hand. They felt heavy, the skin tight over them. Blake moaned very low, and his thighs started shaking a little.

"I didn't," he said, clenching his teeth. "I don't."

"Right." Marc's fingers continued their way down, stroking beneath Blake's balls on their way to his hole. "You're doing this only for me, because you're always so selfless. And you haven't been jerking off every day either."

He circled the puckered ring of flesh with his thumb. It twitched when he breached it, and contracted as though trying to hold him in when he pulled back. Letting his eyes

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roam over Blake's body, open and waiting for him, he sucked on his index and forefinger and coated them with saliva. He caught Blake's eyes and held his gaze as he pushed the slick fingers inside him, reaching and twisting until Blake blinked several times, his mouth falling open as he started panting. He always forgot he didn't need to breathe when they had sex.

Marc couldn't wait any longer. He grabbed Blake's legs and shuffled forward on his knees. He pressed his cock to Blake's ass and entered him, slow and unyielding. Blake groaned loudly, arching his back. At once, Marc stilled and covered his mouth with his hand.

"Not a sound," he murmured.

Kate had stopped keeping guard on their door after a few days, but they never knew who might be at the tables or practicing in the main room.

Blake tried to give him an exasperated look, but it ended up looking needy more than anything else. Pulling his hand back, Marc grabbed Blake's thighs again and pushed them a little higher.

"Touch yourself. Show me what I've been listening to for two weeks."

Eyes blazing, lips pinched together, Blake dropped his right hand to his cock and started stroking it. Marc followed his movements with his eyes and hips, accelerating his thrusting along with him, slowing down when Blake did. When Blake caught up with what he was doing, he fell into a fast and steady rhythm. The pink of his cock looked darker against the pale skin of his fist. With each stroke down, he exposed the

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tip, shiny with clear wetness that he wiped on every slide up before spreading it down along his shaft. The sight was entrancing, much more so than what Marc had imagined, in the past few days, while listening to Blake masturbate just feet away.

Pressure was building inside him, tightening in his cock and balls as he pushed inside Blake a little harder, a little deeper, to the rhythm of flesh hitting flesh. There was just one thing missing. He let go of Blake's leg and leaned forward, resting on his forearms and trapping Blake's hand and cock between them. With this new angle, he couldn't thrust as much, but he never stopped moving.

He shushed Blake's protests with a quick kiss before bending to his neck. Blake angled his head away, giving him space even as he closed his arms around him. Marc ran his tongue over the silver scars from his very first bite, the one that had made Blake a vampire, then dropped his fangs and reopened the marks. Taste filled his mouth, intimately familiar and yet always surprising even after all these years. He bucked in one last time as he pulled deep on his Childe's blood. The feel of his flesh beneath him, around him, inside his mouth, the taste of his blood and lust, the scent of his pleasure, his moans, all of it overloaded Marc. He came with a growl muffled against Blake's neck, pleasure rolling over him in strong waves that washed away everything that wasn't them and now.

Blake was trembling under him, close but not quite close enough. Feeling a little groggy, Marc bit down on his own tongue. Blood spurted into his mouth, the flavor mixing with

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remnants of Blake's blood. He found Blake's lips and covered it with his own while he reached between them to tighten his hand over Blake's on his cock. He kissed him again, deep and slow this time. Blake moaned when their tongues met. He drew Marc's into his mouth and sucked lightly on it, drawing out more blood. Another louder moan and he came, shuddering violently beneath Marc, his cock pulsing in their joined hands.

For a few more seconds, Marc held on to Blake, as always enjoying the feel of his Childe's body trembling against him. When Blake, with a satisfied little hum, ended the kiss, Marc rolled off him and they fell apart. Grinning smugly in the darkness, Marc closed his eyes and stretched.

"You were worried for me," he said.

Blake huffed as though he had been offended by the idea. "Of course not!"

"Just admit it. I saw the way you looked at me when I walked out of the city."

"I told you, I was just jealous you got to fight and I didn't."

Marc rolled onto his side, facing away from Blake. He yawned.

"You've always been such a crappy liar."

"I'm not—I don't—"

Blake punched his shoulder, not quite hard enough to actually hurt but Marc growled in warning anyway. He thought things would take a turn for the worse when Blake got out of the bed, but after flipping off the light switch by the

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door, he returned to lie next to Marc. For a little while, he remained silent and Marc started falling asleep. Until...

"Any progress with Kate?"

Marc's eyes opened again, sleep sliding out of his reach. He forced himself not to move, knowing Blake was waiting for him to react.

"I don't know what you mean by that," he said very calmly, hearing his own lie ring clear as a bell in each word.

Blake chuckled. "Who's a crappy liar? I thought you'd have something to share by now. You've been with her just about every night."

"I've been with her, *working*," Marc said, gritting his teeth. "And we're not exactly alone. And even if we were—"

He cut himself short. He should never have played Blake's game to begin with, and he didn't want Blake to guess it wasn't a game for him anymore. He liked Kate. He liked her a lot, more than he would have expected. There were many things about her that reminded him of Blake—of the human Blake had been. Her determination, her sense of humor, her loyalty, how single-minded she could be about keeping her people safe, the way she could be so clueless, at times, when something she didn't expect was thrown her way ... All these things, Marc had enjoyed in Blake; some of them, he now missed. It was disconcerting to find them again in a different person.

"Doesn't matter," Blake said with a yawn. "You can find all the excuses you want, she'll be mine."

Marc rolled onto his back, eyes still staring at the darkness. "If you wanted to teach me a lesson," he said, each

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word quiet and deliberate, "I heard it, loud and clear. You can stop."

"Stop? I've barely even started."

"You're going to hurt her."

Marc winced even as the words passed his lips. He shouldn't have said this, shouldn't have given Blake any reason to believe that—

"You care about her that much?"

The bitter triumph in Blake's quiet words twisted something inside Marc. He didn't respond. Nothing he said would make anything better now, not when he had inadvertently confirmed Blake's suspicions. He closed his eyes and tried to find sleep, all too aware that Blake, when he rolled onto his side, severed all contact between them.

* * * *

Hiding a yawn behind his hand, Marc emerged from the bathroom and stepped over to the lunch tables. Seated at the end of the first one, Kate was cutting an apple into quarters with one of the knives she carried on her at all times. She flashed him a quick, tired smile as he sat across from her.

"Afternoon," Marc said, yawning again.

"Didn't sleep right?" She cut a thin slice from the quarter she was holding and looked at it as though unsure what to do with it. "Me, neither." She finally ate the bit of apple, already cutting a second slice, just as thin as the first. "Aaron's leg is broken in three places. The docs put a metal plate along the bones. Screwed them in. He'll need to see Healers soon or he won't be fighting for months."

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He watched her for a little while. At the rate she was eating the apple, it would take her quite a long time to finish. Her eyes never left the fruit as she cut it, not to look at him or at the people around them. They left space around her, he noticed, four of them crowding the other end of the table for a game of cards but leaving enough space for two people next to her and Marc. They were all as careful not to look at her as she was to pretend she was alone.

Their scents, as a whole, had a subtle pepper smell that tickled Marc's nose. He recognized it easily, even if he couldn't understand it. They were wary of her, the same way they had been wary of Marc and Blake when they had first arrived. Kate's scent, on the other hand, was all too easy to grasp. It held the unpleasant sourness of guilt.

Marc leaned forward over the table, catching her attention. "It wasn't your fault," he said quietly but with all the confidence he could summon.

She shrugged her shoulders and returned her eyes to the apple. Another thin slice came off. "Of course it's not. I didn't slam him into that wall. A demon did."

He had expected her to argue. This simple acceptance left him at a loss for words, especially since it contradicted so clearly her scent. *That* did not lie; she did. He didn't know how to call her on it, though.

"If anyone is to blame—" he started, very low.

She cut in, raising her head to look behind him. "Simon, there's a free seat right here."

From the corner of his eye, Marc saw Simon freeze just a step past him, then slowly turn toward Kate.

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"Oh. Yes, there is. Thanks, Kate."

He didn't sound all that thankful, and even looked a little reluctant as he walked around the table to go and sit next to Kate. He placed a lunch tray in front of him and picked up his fork, sniffing lightly at the mash of indistinct vegetables on his plate. Like the other fighters, he was very careful not to look at Kate directly, though his eyes fluttered toward her and back every so often. Kate didn't say a word to him or acknowledged his presence. It was all too clear she had only called him to sit by her to stop Marc from trying to comfort her. He held back a sigh. Stubbornness was yet another trait she shared with Blake, though this one wasn't all that attractive.

Long minutes passed. Kate continued cutting her apple into paper-thin slices. Juice dripped from her fingers and onto the plate in front of her where the other three quarters waited. The sweet green apple scent slowly covered hers, but the sourness remained at the forefront of Marc's thoughts. Like her, he had led others to battle and felt responsible for their injuries. He knew how she felt. He also knew nothing he could say would help, especially if she didn't want to hear it.

When both Kate and Simon looked up and past him, Marc glanced back to see what had attracted their eyes. His lips tightened into a thin line when he saw Blake, bare-chested and barefoot, walking on to the washroom. At least, Marc thought as he turned back toward the table, Blake was wearing pants. With him, that was never a given.

Kate's eyes were back on the fruit and knife in her hands, though it seemed to take her a little longer to cut her next

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slice, and there were two spots of color high on her cheeks. Simon continued to look for a few more seconds, presumably until Blake had disappeared into the bathroom. He noticed, then, that Marc was observing him and let out a little squeaking noise before busying himself with his food again. Marc frowned, slightly taken aback. He had never noticed Simon's interest for Blake until now, but neither his furious blushing nor the thread of lust in his scent could be anything else. It was almost too perfect.

"He likes men, you know," he said softly, keeping his eyes on Simon but all too aware that Kate looked up at the same time he did. "And I'm pretty sure he'd be flattered by your interest."

Simon squeaked again, his blush redoubling as he looked around him to see if anyone was listening. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said very quickly, and before Marc could add a word he picked up his tray and hurried to sit elsewhere.

"Still want to talk to Daniel about the fog?" Kate asked out of the blue.

She popped what was left of the apple quarter into her mouth and raised an eyebrow, waiting for his answer.

"Sure. Don't you want to finish your snack first?"

She speared a second apple quarter with her knife and took a bite from it, then a second one. It took her only moments to finish the apple. Still chewing the last bit, she stood and wiped her knife, blade then handle, onto a napkin before sliding it back in the sheath on her thigh.

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"I'm ready," she said, wiping her hands as well, before dropping the napkin on the table. "He's in his office. Let's go."

Exposing their theory to Daniel I took only seconds. He was nodding before Kate even finished.

"I've thought about it myself, " he admitted. "But I'm not too sure how to use that to our advantage."

"We could start noting how thick the fog is in each street," Marc suggested. "And when we have some data we can use that to guide us."

"I suppose," Daniel said slowly , "although it might be hard to quantify the fog. We'll try tonight and see if it works."

He looked down at the maps he had been examining when they had entered. The dismissal was clear, though it left Marc a little surprised. Daniel rarely was so abrupt.

Kate saluted him even though he wasn't looking, before stepping back to the door, her head very stiff as she looked ahead of her. Marc was about to follow her out when Daniel said behind him:

"Marc?"

He stopped and looked back. Daniel was still standing by his desk, his hands now behind his back in a posture that made him look like a soldier more than ever.

"Something wrong?" Marc asked cautiously.

"Not really. I just wanted to tell you. We're changing teams tonight."

Marc blinked in surprise. This was the last thing he had expected. "We are? Why?"

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"Because Blake won't listen to me," Daniel said with a grimace. "But he and Kate are friendly enough. He'll listen to her."

Eyes wide in incredulity, Marc laughed. "You actually believe that?"

Daniel didn't reply, merely fixed Marc with unwavering eyes for a few seconds before he said, "We might not look like much, but this is an elite military unit, you know."

Marc's amusement faded. He wondered what had brought on the remark. "I figured as much."

"All my soldiers trained since they were little more than kids. They know how to fight. They also know when *not* to fight."

Marc started to understand where this was going. He walked back to the desk, standing directly across Daniel. His scent reflected the same determination as his direct gaze.

"What happened last night..." Daniel paused and sighed. "Three weeks ago, Kate would have called the recon off when those demons went by. Last night, you said go on, and she followed suit. I don't like the influence you have on her."

"And you think Blake will be any better?" Marc asked very slowly.

"I think Blake is too wild for her. If he suggests idiotic moves, she won't fall for them."

Marc thought about it for a little while. He could see Daniel's point, but he could also see the flaws in his plan. Blake had had no reason to play nice for Daniel; it would be different with Kate. She probably wouldn't have to deal with head-on opposition, but what she would get instead would be

much more confusing than a few stupid and easily dismissible suggestions.

"I hope you're right," he said with a shake of his head.

"For all our sakes, I really hope you are."

If he had thought it would make a difference, he would have argued with Daniel's decision. Ever since the very first days, however, Daniel had made it clear that, even if he was grateful for Marc's help, he intended to remain in command. He would have to see for himself what a terrible idea this was.

Giving Daniel a mock salute, he started for the door.

Again, Daniel stopped him before he could pass it.

"I've seen the way you look at her."

He sounded tired now. Marc glanced back at him.

"And she's starting to look back. She's my best fighter. She's my friend. And I'm not losing her to you. Just so we're clear."

Marc didn't reply and just walked out, shaking his head in disbelief. He could hardly believe it. Daniel was afraid he would seduce Kate, and his answer was to pair her up with Blake. He could have laughed at the irony of it, if he hadn't been so sure it would only mean trouble.

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Chapter 10

Caught between amused and mildly exasperated, Kate forgot her dinner to observe yet another one of Simon's doomed attempts at seduction. For the past three days, he had been finding random excuses to talk to Blake, and didn't seem deterred in the least by Blake's blatant lack of reaction.

This time, he had crept closer to the far corner of the room where Blake was sharpening his sword. Patrick, whose age kept him away from fighting, had trained as a medic to stay at the camp, and had also become their de facto sword smith. He spent a couple of afternoons every week sharpening the squad's weapons. He usually did so outside as the sound of the sharpening wheel was less than pleasant, but Blake had asked to use it inside, away from the sun. Patrick had offered to sharpen his sword for him. Blake had almost seemed offended at the idea. In the end, they had put the wheel in a corner of the main building. After five minutes, most members of the squad had deserted the place, taking their dinner trays elsewhere. The grinding sound resonated in the large room and was simply horrible.

Kate didn't mind; for once, she didn't have to pretend to listen to casual conversations the members of the squad tried to include her in despite her reluctance. Every time she met someone's eyes, she wondered if they still thought about Aaron and were afraid that they would be hurt next because of her. She was afraid of the same thing every time she

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looked into a mirror, and didn't need to read the same question on their faces.

She would need to talk to Simon, though, she mused as she watched him make yet another attempt to catch Blake's attention. She couldn't hear what they were saying, but she could tell Blake limited his answers to a word or two, rarely taking his eyes off his sword as he ground it against the sharpening wheel. Maybe it was time for Simon to get a clue before things started becoming uncomfortable. Romances in the squad were never a good thing, in any case.

Her mouth twisted at the thought. It was much easier to apply that principle when she wasn't in the equation. No, that wasn't true, she realized. It had always been easy—until the arrival of their vampire guests. It was only now, after she had patrolled without Marc twice, that she saw how easily she had become used to having him around as they patrolled the City, and how much she missed his presence. Part of her wanted to ask Daniel to change the teams back, but she didn't want to have to explain to him why she wanted Marc with her.

"Your dinner is getting cold. What are you thinking about so intensely?"

She jumped, startled and more than a little embarrassed to find that the very same person she had been thinking about had sat across the table without her noticing. Trying to pretend she wasn't blushing, she shrugged and tilted her head toward the infernal machine in the corner of the room.

"Hard to think with that—"

Abruptly, the wheel stopped. Blissful silence fell on the room.

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"—noise," she finished, her voice dropping to a normal level again. She glanced at Blake and saw that he was inspecting the blade of his sword. "God, I hope he's done."

He looked up toward her across the room and said loudly as he stared toward the table, "All you had to do was tell me to stop."

She winced and turned her attention back to her plate. She hadn't expected him to hear her comment. Without much enthusiasm, she picked at her food. The cook had been serving green beans for the past four meals; she was more than tired of them, even if fresh vegetables were always a treat. She hadn't eaten more than a couple of the tender beans before Blake sat down next to Marc, shouldering him in the process. He placed the sword on the table in front of them. Kate looked up at him; he was beaming.

"Seneca hasn't been this sharp in years! I hope we find demons tonight!"

Next to him, Marc caught Kate's attention and rolled his eyes. She hid her grin by taking another bite of food.

"Do you really?" Simon asked, slightly awed. He pulled up a chair and sat at the end of the table, very close to Blake. "But demons are so dangerous!"

Blake turned a light frown on him, clearly wondering why Simon was still there. "That's the point," he said slowly, as though talking to a child. "If they weren't dangerous, it wouldn't be any fun."

The concept seemed too foreign for Simon. He mouthed the word 'fun,' his brow furrowed in confusion, and looked at Kate, then Marc, expecting one of them to explain. Kate

busied herself with pushing her food around the plate rather than meet his eyes. She refused to admit to anyone but herself that she understood Blake's thinking. The fight became easier, if you looked at it that way. The idea of losing became easier.

After only a handful of seconds, Simon threw himself into the breach yet again. He leaned forward to look at the sword on the table, his hand rising to touch the hilt. Blake made a hissing sound, and Simon snatched his hand away. The back of his neck turned scarlet as he leaned a little closer, his mousy bangs hiding his eyes.

"Is ... is that Latin?" he asked, his voice squeaking a little. Without waiting for Blake's answer, he read aloud the inscription below the hilt. "*Quemadmodum gladius neminem occidit, occidentis telum est.* Nice."

He gave Blake a tentative look, and was rewarded with the shadow of a smile.

"You understand what it says?"

"Of course I do! Most magic spells use Latin, but even if they didn't, I'd have learned it. The structure of it is—"

Blake's raised his hands, palms out. "I just thought the quote was cool," he said, the hint of a laugh in his words. "I can't even pronounce it properly myself."

Simon seemed to deflate right in front of Kate's eyes. She felt a little sorry for him. No doubt he had thought he finally had something to talk to Blake about, only to be proven immediately wrong. She glanced at the inscription, wondering, yet again, what it meant. Maybe she would ask Simon later.

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"Still no blood?" Blake asked, looking back at Kate, Simon already forgotten. He picked up the sword from the table and slid it back into the scabbard on his back in a fluid movement.

She shook her head. "We're having trouble getting a supply delivery from Claremont. They've been under an increased number of attacks, and they can't spare the manpower to send us anything. We'll send Aaron to recover there in a couple of days, and we'll get blood in return, but until then..."

She finished with an apologetic shrug. Short of opening a vein—Blake had jokingly suggested it when he had finished the last blood bag, and she had merely rolled her eyes at him—she couldn't do anything about it.

"Don't worry about it," Marc said with a faint smile. "We'll go hunting again after tonight's recon. Or Blake will get his wish, and we can feed from demons."

Blake made a disgusted noise. "I can't stand demon blood."

"Don't be silly, blood is blood," Marc replied coolly. "You'd better go get your shoes; the sun is going to set soon. And while you're at it, bring me my jacket, will you?"

Throwing Marc a suspicious look, Blake stood. He winked at Kate before walking away. "See you in a bit."

With Blake gone, Simon wandered off, muttering under his breath about herbs and supplies, hands in his pockets and shoulders hunched. Kate's sudden awareness that she was alone with Marc sent a flash of warmth through her body. She cleared her throat and returned to her studious inspection of her food.

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"I swear, we'll be just fine," Marc said after a few moments had passed in silence. "You don't have to starve yourself in sympathy."

"I'm not—" She raised her head and realized from his grin that he was teasing her. She gave him a playful kick under the table. "I'm just not very hungry," she explained, putting down her fork and pushing the tray away from her.

Marc shook his head and inched the tray back toward her. "Funny how you haven't been hungry since Aaron got hurt."

She blocked the tray, frowning at Marc. "It has nothing to do—"

"I've been in your place, Kate. I know how you feel. Blaming yourself won't mend Aaron's leg any faster."

Given how quietly he spoke, she looked around to see if anyone was close enough to hear. Only a couple of soldiers played cards at the table behind them, though neither seemed to be paying attention to their conversation.

Annoyed, she turned back to him.

"Don't tell me how I feel," she hissed. "And while you're at it, stop pretending you know better than I do!"

She regretted the words as soon as they passed her lips. The wounded expression that settled on Marc's handsome features didn't help. Why did he have to be able to press her buttons so easily?

"I've never said ... If my attitude—"

She stopped him with a wave of her hand. "No. Your attitude is fine. I'm just..." She sighed and gave him a pleading look. "Let it drop, OK? I know you mean well, but it's not helping."

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He held her eyes for a few seconds before glancing down at the tray. "You finish your dinner; I keep quiet. Deal?"

He held out his right hand toward her. She raised her own somewhat reluctantly. "Deal."

A shiver passed through her when she shook his hand. The cool strength surprised her, and she found herself unable to let go. His raised eyebrow and slight smile only added to her confusion. He squeezed her hand lightly before releasing it. Troubled, Kate looked down at her tray and picked up her fork with a shaky hand. It might be a good thing that they weren't in the same recon team anymore, after all. She'd have to thank Daniel about it, though she doubted his reasons had anything to do with her growing crush on Marc.

* * * *

"You two check inside that building. We'll stand guard."

Elliot nodded and stepped toward the ruins Kate had indicated first, Sky on his heels. Before they even entered the building, the fog swirling around them had made them disappear. Kate turned her back to the ruins and swept her eyes around her. She couldn't see more than a few yards away, but that didn't stop her from trying to see, or hear, approaching demons.

"Anything?" she asked in a whisper.

Just feet away to her right, Blake took in a deep breath.

"Citrus shampoo," he said after a moment. "Lavender soap. Minty toothpaste."

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The words made no sense. Kate turned to him, frowning in confusion. His impish smile clued her in as to what he was talking about—her. Her frown turned into a glare.

"Blake! Can you be serious for a minute?"

"I can. Just not when you stand upwind from me. You're too distracting." He took a few steps forward and breathed in deeply through his nose again. "Nothing recent. The freshest trail is at least a day old."

Still miffed, Kate didn't reply. Her back very straight, she kept watch as attentively as though he had announced that an entire army of demons was advancing on them. She felt suddenly very self-conscious, and couldn't help bringing a strand of hair to her nose. She couldn't smell a thing. She hurriedly let go of her hair when Blake turned halfway toward her, but his fleeting smile made it clear he had noticed. She looked back toward the building. She could hear Elliot's voice, though not enough to understand his words. He seemed to be coming back out.

"I'll check the building across the street. Be right back."

Her heart jumped in her chest at Blake's words. She whirled back toward him, but he was already disappearing inside the ruins on the other side of the street—again. Couldn't he understand the simple idea of not going anywhere alone?

"Stand guard," she said quickly to Elliot as he and Sky emerged from the building. "We're checking across the street." She hurried after Blake, her hand clenching over the hilt of her sword. This time, she was going to kick his ass.

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She had to stop just at the entrance of the building. Outside, the gray fog echoed the light of the almost full moon, bathing everything into a penetrating light. With the roof of this house for the most part intact, her eyes struggled to adapt to the sudden darkness. She stepped inside cautiously, her eyes darting around her in search of Blake.

"This way," Blake whispered somewhere ahead and to her right.

Blood thundering into her veins, she advanced a little faster. Had he found the breach? Could it be—

The attack came from the side, swift, silent and unexpected. Just as she passed through a doorway, a hand closed over her fingers on the hilt of her sword and pulled her forward. She tried to resist, but found herself with her back to a wall, a strong body in front of her, her arm pinned to the side, the sword useless and out of her control. The first flash of fear receded when she realized who had attacked her. This time, Blake had gone too far, she thought. She started telling him as much, but before she could say more than a word, his mouth brushed against hers. She froze in shock, eyes going wide in the near darkness. Blake leaned in again, caressing her lips with his with more gentleness than she had imagined him capable of—not that she had ever imagined how he kissed. His left hand remained on her right, holding her sword away, though not as tightly. The right cupped the back of her head, his thumb caressing her cheek lightly.

"I've been wanting to kiss you since the first night I saw you," he murmured, his mouth so close to hers that she felt the words as well as heard them. "Can I?"

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Kate wanted to push him away and punch him for daring take her by surprise like this. She wanted to glare at him, call him a moron, curse him, laugh at the sheer ridiculousness of what he was saying. Yet she didn't move, and all she managed to say was a stuttering, "Wh—what?"

"Can I kiss you?"

His lips brushed against hers again. Kate shivered, goose bumps erupting all over her body, both at the touch and at the hesitation in his quiet words. He was joking, she was sure of it, but she still wasn't pushing him back. What was wrong with her?

"You..." Her lips felt dry enough to crack. She licked them before she continued, her voice shaking in outrage. "You've put me under a thrall! How dare—"

She fell silent as he laughed quietly.

"I don't do thralls, Kate. I ask. Nothing more. And you still haven't answered."

His thumb stroked her cheek again. Kate closed her eyes and tried to focus. What was wrong with her? Why couldn't she simply push him away?

As though responding to her thoughts, his hands suddenly left her and he took a step back.

"Damn it!"

His sword almost whistled with the whisper of metal sliding smoothly against metal as he drew it from the scabbard. The sound sent a jolt through Kate, pulling her out of the confusion he had plunged her into.

"Demons?" she asked, already striding behind him toward the entrance of the building.

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"I think so."

They met Elliot and Sky just inside the building.

"Demons," Sky whispered urgently. "We can hear them, but we're not sure how many."

She looked at Blake at that . He stepped to the entrance and held himself very still for a few seconds.

"Three, I think," he murmured. "Definitely coming this way."

Three pairs of eyes turned toward Kate, heavy in their expectation. A bead of cold sweat slithered down her back. Indecision paralyzed her. Three demons against the four of them; they could do it, couldn't they? Blake fought better than she did, Elliot was on a level with her, Sky ... Her eyes ran over Sky, gauging her. Would she be OK? Kate wouldn't forgive herself if something happened to her.

"Kate?" Elliot said quietly. "What do you want to do? We can take three."

"We can," Blake repeated.

To hear the two of them agree on something broke through her fears.

"We fight," she said, her resolve firming. "Wait until they pass the door, then rush out at them. Try to separate them so we don't bump into each other. Elliot, Sky, stay close together."

Firm nods answered her. They remained by the entrance, waiting. Kate tried not to tense in anticipation of what was to come, and tried equally as hard not to wonder what had been going on in Blake's mind just moments earlier. She found it hard not to think about it when he stood inches from her,

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looking out, ready to give the signal. His hand rose, closed into a fist. Kate's breathing accelerated along with her heartbeat. A few more seconds, and his hand opened, fingers spread out. He ran out first, followed by Elliot, then Kate and Sky.

The three demons roared in surprise, then again in rage when Blake's sword sliced through the closest one's throat. Blood gushed out, dark as ink, rushing past the demon's fingers when its hand covered the wound. Already, Blake was attacking a second demon, while Elliot swung his sword at the third. Kate didn't hesitate. Wounded demons could still kill. She hit the first demon's arm, drawing a gurgling cry from its throat. It dropped its axe. Without waiting, she attacked again. Demon armor left their sides vulnerable. Her sword slid into the demon's body, scrapping against bone. She withdrew her weapon. The demon fell to its knees, then face down in the fog with a loud thud. At once, Kate raised her sword again, ready to help put another beast down. She looked around her. A few yards to her left, Blake was wiping his sword on a fallen demon's pants. On her right, Sky thrust her sword up through the last demon's jaw and brain. It was over in seconds.

"We were lucky," Blake said. He sounded almost disgusted. "These three were already hurt. Probably coming back from battle or something."

Frowning, Kate looked at the demon at her feet. Through the swirling fog, she could see the deep, bloody slash on its forearm, where neither she nor Blake had hit it. It didn't calm down the adrenaline flowing through her.

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"Lucky or not," Elliot replied, "that's three demons that won't kill anyone else."

Kate could feel the tension rising as the two men glared at each other. She should have known they couldn't agree on anything for very long. "Let's move on and finish exploring this street. Fast."

On the next building, she paired Blake and Sky while she stayed outside with Elliot. Blake threw her a mocking glance that said he knew exactly what she was doing. She tried her best to ignore him. She had a job to do, and she couldn't let him distract her. Still, she caught herself, a couple of times, running her fingers over her lips, where his mouth had touched hers. Whatever had been going on through his mind, he wouldn't leave it there, she was sure of it. She wished she had an idea of how she would respond. She wished, also, that her heart would stop racing at the thought of him trying to kiss her again.

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Chapter 11

With every bump and pothole in the road, the truck jumped, sending the ten people sitting in the back bouncing against each other. Blake didn't mind one bit, not when Kate was on his left and found herself leaning against him all too often. She pulled back every time as fast as she could and clung to the edge of the bench with both hands. It didn't help her much, however. Across from them, Marc's glare only added to Blake's fun.

"What about the fog?" Daniel asked, oblivious to the tension in the back of the truck.

"No difference," Kate said.

The truck turned and pushed her yet again against Blake. He flashed a grin at her and swung his arm behind her, resting it on the back of the bench. She did her best to ignore him, but the hint of red in her cheek didn't lie. He turned his head toward her and breathed in her scent. The shampoo and soap in the men's bathroom were both generic and scentless. As far as he could tell from the other women's scents, their bathroom wasn't stocked any better. He found it a little amusing that the strongest, toughest woman in the camp was also the one who managed to procure scented bathing products. Every time he thought he had her figured out, he noticed something else about her that made the chase that much enjoyable.

"Those demons we fought, though, they were already wounded. Weren't they, Blake?"

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The ice in her voice when she said his name brought him back to the present. Blinking, he replayed her last words in his mind.

"Oh. Yes." He turned his eyes to Daniel, who was frowning at him, his brow deeply furrowed. "The three of them were hurt. The wounds seemed pretty fresh, too."

He glanced at Marc. His rising eyebrows gave away that he was figuring out the same thing that had come to Blake's mind earlier. He continued, explaining his theory before Marc could steal his spotlight.

"Demons retreat from the battlefield when they're hurt. No one has ever seen any sort of medic with them. That means they might have to go to him—"

"On the other side of the breach?" Daniel finished. The spicy smell of excitement peaked in his scent, but his voice remained even as though he were reining his hopes in. "So these three might have been returning to it."

Another bump in the road sent Blake against Kate this time. She pushed him back almost absently, clearly thinking along the same lines as Daniel.

"If that's right, we're getting closer," she said, a little breathless.

"If," Marc repeated. "Let's not get too hopeful."

The truck slowed down and soon came to a halt. Daniel jumped out first, rambling about changing his plans and continuing along the street Kate's team had been following that night. Marc hurried after him, arguing again for caution. Kate stood and waited as the rest of the soldiers climbed out of the truck. Blake caught her hand just as she was about to

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follow them. She tried to pull away, but he held on until she turned to him.

"Let go," she said. Small, angry lines pulled at the corners of her mouth. They disappeared along with her frown when Blake obeyed.

"Did you think about it?" he asked, tilting her head to one side and smiling.

Her body tensed and uncertainty flickered over her face. She *had* thought about it, Blake thought, his smile deepening, even if she tried to play coy.

"Think about what?"

"You know what."

He raised his hand to her face, but she leaned back, avoiding his touch. She didn't step away, though, he noticed with some satisfaction.

"What I know," she said, her voice shaking a little, "is that you're making fun of me. I thought we were friends—"

Blake's smile wavered. "Wait. What? How am I making fun of you?"

She crossed her arms and glared. "I know you like men," she said slowly. "So whatever little game you think you can play with me, I'm not interested."

He should have made things clearer from the start, he realized. It didn't matter, though, not when Kate had just given him his counterattack.

"Does that mean you'd be interested if I liked women?" he asked, trying to remain very serious.

She blinked. Her arms fell to each side of her. "Another game—"

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"Not a game," he assured her, sliding just a little closer to her. He dropped his voice very low, almost to a whisper. "I like women just as much as I do men. And I happen to like the woman in front of me very much. Enough that I want to kiss her just about every time I look at her. But I still don't know if she'll let me. Think I should try and see?"

With each of his words, Kate's heartbeat picked up speed until Blake could hear nothing else. The drumming drew him forward toward her parting lips. He pressed his mouth against them and delicately traced her bottom lip with the tip of his tongue. Her body leaned forward, so faintly she might not even have been conscious of it. Blake rested a hand on her face as he had earlier in the City and deepened the kiss. She shivered when his tongue touched hers, and a quiet moan rose from her throat. She tilted her face and pressed in a little more, stroking his tongue gently. He could feel the warmth of her body even though they barely touched yet. He slid a hand around her waist and pulled her forward. The top of her thigh bumped into his cock, hardening already from the sweet, minty taste of her lips, the heat of her body, the desire spiking in her scent...

She pulled back abruptly. Blake had just the time to frown in confusion before she slapped him. He watched her, saw how flustered she was, and couldn't help chuckling.

"Now, before you say something you'll regret, answer this. You didn't dislike that one bit, did you?"

She blinked several times. Her fists closed at her sides. Bristling, she turned and stalked away, nearly tripping out of the truck in her haste to get away from him. Blake grinned at

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her departing back. It had gone better than he had expected. Not only had she answered his kiss, she hadn't threatened him or demanded that he stay away from her. Much better than he had hoped.

His smile faded when Marc appeared in front of the truck, arms crossed in front of him.

"Are you coming to hunt?" he asked. His voice, like his features, remained expressionless.

Blake jumped out of the truck and stood by his Sire. "Lead the way, then."

Marc didn't say a word as they walked out of the camp, answering the sentries' greetings with nods. He also didn't say a word as they ran through the woods that surrounded the camp, following the scent of deer. Only after they had caught their prey, a young male with thin, white antlers, and each drank their fill from its blood, did he finally say what was on his mind.

Standing up to his full height in front of Blake, he spoke with slow yet strong words. "You will leave her alone, Childe."

Blake had been waiting for something of the sort. He forced himself not to react, even as his fears were confirmed.

"If she asks me to, I will," he replied, meeting Marc's eyes without flinching. "Until then, you stay out of it."

Marc took a half step forward until only a couple inches separated them. "I'm warning you, Blake—"

"Warning me?" Blake cut in with a dry laugh. "And what will you do if I don't listen? Leave me behind?"

For the first time, Marc didn't flinch at the reminder of the past that Blake couldn't forget, try as he might.

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"I won't leave." The beginning of a growl echoed in his words. "I'll kick your ass and remind you who sired you."

This time, Blake laughed aloud. "Kick my—"

The punch took him by surprise, catching him right in the gut and leaving him to clutch his middle for a few seconds. When he straightened again, his fangs had extended again in his mouth. With slow, deliberate movements, he unfastened his scabbard's harness and pulled it off his shoulders. Never taking his eyes off Marc, he rested the scabbard, with Seneca still inside it, against the deer they had killed together. Marc imitated him, unbuckling the scabbard from his belt and throwing it aside. It had been a long time since they had fought—really fought, as opposed to sparred or played. Blake had no doubt how things would end this time again; three centuries made quite a difference in a vampire's speed and strength. Just the same, he cracked his knuckles and balled up his fists. If Marc thought a few blows would be enough to take Blake's mind off Kate—to make him forget just how protective of her Marc was—he was in for quite a disappointment.

Baring his teeth, Blake growled and launched the first blow.

* * * *

Kate had thought that a shower would help clear her reeling mind before she went to bed. If anything, it did the exact opposite. She wasted her precious few minutes of hot water simply looking at the thin bar of soap in her hand. The lavender scent filled the stall, reminding her of Blake. What

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had he been up to? Was it all his way of messing with her head, or was there any truth to his words? He had said he liked her. He had kissed her.

And she had kissed him back.

She touched her lips with her fingertips at the memory, her vision blurring.

If she was honest with herself, she could admit that she had started using the lavender soap when she remembered that vampires had such a keen sense of smell. She had expected Marc to notice, however, not Blake. She had imagined Marc kissing her, not Blake. She had a crush on Marc, not Blake.

Or did she?

The water turned cold, and she yelped. In her haste to shut off the spray, she dropped the soap. Shivering, she watched it slide on the white tiles and follow the last of the water to the drain. She started leaning down to pick it up but somehow ended up sitting on the floor of the stall, her arms wrapped around her knees. With her eyes, she followed the grout line of the small hexagonal tiles in front of her toes.

Only one other stall was occupied: Sky's. The water shut off abruptly, and the door creaked open. Wet footsteps moved around the room. Then Sky dressed and left. Kate barely noticed any of it.

At her feet, the line seemed to meander without clear goal, like her thoughts. She knew getting too close to anyone in the squad was a bad idea. It didn't matter if it was a vampire or human; the simple fact that they fought side by side made

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the whole thing dangerous. It could only be worse to have a third person involved.

Of their own accord, her fingers returned to her lips. She could hardly remember the last time she had kissed anyone. It had been back when half the squad had been granted a few days of leave and they had gone to Claremont. Alcohol was supposed to be outlawed, but small underground bars operated throughout the city. She had gone to one of them on her own, dressed as a woman, for once, rather than a fighter. She had decided not to be too picky, but she had found a fresh-faced young man who talked about joining the army that defended the city. She had listened to him for hours, hearing his voice more than she did his words. Alcohol had blurred her senses, and what had happened, after she had asked him where he lived, remained clouded in her mind. She thought she had kissed him first. She wasn't sure anymore.

"Kate?" Daniel called. "You in here?"

She jumped, startled, and bumped the back of her head to the wall behind her. Scrambling to her feet, she peaked over the stall door. Daniel was standing at the threshold of the bathroom, his back turned to her.

"What is it?" she called back, biting back her annoyance. What was so important that it couldn't wait?

"Come by my office when you're done, OK?"

Before she could reply or ask what this was about, she heard the bathroom door shut with a bang. She remained frozen in the stall, a single thought obliterating everything else. Daniel knew about the kiss. Someone must have seen

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her and Blake, and he knew. He was going to remind her where her duty lay. He might change her assignment or even forbid her from socializing with Blake. Once the flash of guilt that she had disappointed her leader had faded away, she realized she felt relieved. It would solve everything, she thought as she dried herself and slid into fresh clothes. She wouldn't need to try and sort out her feelings. It wouldn't matter whether she had a crush on anyone once she was under direct orders not to act on them. Her relief, however, was short lived.

"Well?" Daniel said, leaning forward over his desk. "What do you think?"

She slunk into the seat of the armchair, not quite meeting his eyes. "I ... I don't know."

His eyebrows drew closer together, his boyish excitement from only a minute earlier vanishing. "Come on, Kate. If we're getting closer to the breach, we'll encounter more demons. It makes more sense to stay together."

Had he wanted her opinion, she wondered, or had he just been too excited to wait until morning to share his new plan?

She picked at a piece of lint on her pants, then brushed her palms on her thighs. "I guess it does," she said at last. "And I suppose you'll lead the group, then, yes?"

At his nod, she continued. "Then maybe ... I mean ... I've been rather tired lately and ... Maybe I could take a few nights off. You'll have enough fighters without me."

He stared at her for so long that she started fidgeting on her chair, crossing her legs then uncrossing them again.

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"You want to sit it out?" he said incredulously. "We might be days from the end of the fight—"

"There are other breaches," she cut in, more abruptly than she would have liked. "I'll have other chances."

She risked meeting his gaze and regretted it at once. His eyes pierced her as they so often did, and she crossed her arms as though it would stop him from reading her like an open book. With a sigh, Daniel sat back in his chair.

"It's about those vamps, isn't it?"

Her body froze, and she swallowed hard. "Of course not," she said a little too fast.

Daniel sighed again. "I tried to keep the old one away, but the other is too much of a pain, isn't he?"

Kate's denial vanished before she could voice them. Blinking in confusion, she asked, "What do you mean, keep him away?"

He shrugged. "Why do you think I changed the teams?"

"But you said—"

He made a dismissive gesture. "It wasn't about Blake. It was about Marc. I saw the way he looked at you, and I smelled trouble. I should have sent them away. Both of them."

Kate sat up and leaned forward, hands clasped in front of her. "We need them to find the breach!"

"Do we? They don't know where it is any more than we do. And I'd rather look for it with you at my side than them."

Kate had a second to think about it. Daniel was a good leader, and she'd follow him anywhere, but he was wrong. The odds that the squad would find and close the breach were much better with Marc and Blake than without them. She

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couldn't force him to choose. She was a soldier, she had chosen this life, and a kiss at the back of a truck or a crush on a pretty face didn't change that.

"I'll be by your side." The strength in her voice matched the determination she projected toward Daniel. She stood, instinctively taking the pose she had learned during her first week of basic training. "It was just my tiredness talking. I'll be better after I sleep. And I'll be there tomorrow night."

Daniel scrutinized her for a long moment before waving her off. He didn't look completely convinced, though he didn't say anything more. Holding on to her new resolve, she retreated to the barracks without once looking toward the back of the building where Marc and Blake slept. It wouldn't be all that hard to avoid them, she told herself as she went to bed. She would simply avoid the common room during the day, and stay close to the other members of the squad at night.

She didn't realize until she fell asleep that she wouldn't be able to hide from them in her dreams. Waking up, still a little groggy, in the middle of the morning didn't help; they both sought her out despite her efforts to avoid them.

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Chapter 12

When Marc trudged out of what passed as his quarters that morning, the startled looks thrown his way didn't surprise him. By vampire standards, getting out of bed before afternoon was the equivalent of waking up in the middle of the night for humans. For that matter, the members of the squad who went on reconnaissance missions at night rarely showed themselves before noon. It wasn't until he sat at a table with a cup of strong insta-coffee to clear his mind that he realized why the soldiers were staring at him. The murmurs behind him tried to be discreet, but he heard them as clearly as though the soldiers had been shouting. He touched his face gingerly, wincing when he found the bruises. They had started healing already, and they didn't really hurt unless he touched them, but he imagined he had to be quite a sight. Blake had mostly hit his face, hoping to mark him, he supposed.

He snorted into his mug, then drank deeply. The marking had happened both ways until they had both been too tired to go on. They had returned to the camp together, carrying the deer between them. They had left it in the cold storage for the cook to find; it would ameliorate a couple of meals for the squad. They had showered in separate stalls, then gone to bed in separate beds. The entire time, they hadn't exchanged a word. Lowering his mug to the table in front of him, he peered into it. Light steam rose from the remains of the drink, seemingly white as snow against the almost black coffee. He

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blew into the mug, and the tendrils vanished for an instant before rising again, slow and graceful, mocking him. He didn't know if the fight had changed anything. Part of him remained sure that Blake was playing a mean game with Kate. Another part couldn't help but remember Blake's disgust when Marc had accused him of that very thing. Could Blake be serious about her, or was she merely a way to get back at Marc?

He had refilled his mug twice but had still found no answer when Kate entered the building. He had been waiting for her and sat up as he observed her. She stopped at the long table by the kitchen first. Yawning behind her hand, she picked up a plate of eggs, a glass of water, and a cup of coffee, placing each in turn on a tray. When she started for the tables, her eyes met Marc's across the room. She froze mid-step. She looked back behind her at the door. Marc frowned, certain she would leave. Was she trying to avoid him? Why would she?

She wordlessly answered the first part of his question when, squaring up her shoulders, she turned back toward the tables and strode resolutely toward them. Her eyes remained away from Marc, and rather than coming to sit by him, as she had done multiple times since his arrival at the camp, she walked on to the third table, the most crowded one. She sat with her back toward him. On each side of her and across her, soldiers threw her surprised glances.

"How are you, Kate?" the blond man across from her asked.

"All right. Still a bit tired, but Leah snores louder than a freight train."

Chuckles spread around the table.

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"Yeah, we've got snorers in the men's barracks, too."

He threw a grin to the man on his left and was cuffed over the head for his trouble.

"Find anything during recon last night?" another soldier asked. Marc thought her name was Vickie.

"Not much. Some demons. A lot of fog."

Disgruntled murmurs answered her this time. They all loathed the fog and what it hid.

"Daniel thinks we're getting close, though," she added after taking a few bites. "He's merging the teams tonight."

They all looked at her, as interested as Marc felt. Was Daniel truly this optimistic?

"Does that mean more of us will be along for the ride?" the blond man asked, sounding eager.

"I'm not sure. I'll let you know after I talk to Daniel again."

After a while, the soldiers resumed their conversations, and Kate ate in silence. One soldier or two at a time, the table emptied. When the blond man left, Marc stood and went to take his place across from her, taking his half empty mug with him.

"Good morning," he said as he sat down.

She didn't look up. "Morning."

He watched her eat her eggs, one bite after the other, her movements as regular as clockwork. Something was different about her, and he could only imagine the events of the previous night had something to do with it. Every few seconds, he tried to start the conversation, but the words refused to come out. He had to give her this warning, for her own sake, but he had a feeling she wouldn't like hearing it,

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and he was afraid to hurt her. He took slow sips from his now cold coffee, finishing it just as she took the last bite from her eggs. He had to speak now, he figured, before she finished her coffee and left the table.

"Kate..."

She still didn't look up. They were alone at the table now, yet Marc kept his voice low so he wouldn't be overheard.

"We need to talk about what's going on between you and Blake."

She glanced up, so briefly he thought he had imagined it. Her hand shook just enough for him to notice when she picked up her coffee.

"Nothing is going on. There's nothing to talk about."

He leaned forward. "I saw you two last night."

Her face turned crimson. She kept her eyes resolutely away from him and took a sip from her coffee. He waited, but she didn't answer.

"You slapped him..." He paused, dreading the answer she might give to his next question and what he would have to do if his fears were confirmed. "He didn't force himself on you, did he?"

That finally brought her eyes to him for more than a passing glance. She seemed puzzled. "No, of course not. I just—" She clamped her mouth shut and a muscle twitched in her cheek. Her gaze hardened. "Why are we talking about Blake? What does it matter to you that he kissed me? You were trying to push Simon at him before."

Marc swallowed back a sigh. "It's not that he kissed you that matters. It's that he's going to hurt you."

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"What—"

"Listen, Blake is..."

He stopped and pinched his lips together. He had planned what he would tell her, but now that he had to say the words, they wouldn't come. He couldn't manage to voice that Blake was playing with her.

"He's like ... a bee," he said at last.

The right corner of Kate's mouth twitched. She seemed to relax a little. "A bee," she repeated.

"I mean, he goes from flower to flower. He never looks back, never thinks of what he's leaving behind when he moves on. And he *will* move on. We're only here until the breach is closed."

The beginning of her smile faded before it even bloomed. Her face suddenly expressionless, she observed him for a long moment. Marc started hoping that she understood his warning, but a few words, more bitter than his coffee, made him wonder why he was warning her against Blake when he was just as dangerous.

"I see," she said as she stood, picking up her tray. "But tell me one thing, Marc. Do *you* think of the flowers when you move on?"

Head high but smelling of fresh wounds, she stalked off. Marc could do nothing but watch her go.

* * * *

It was only after Marc left their room in the morning that Blake finally managed to fall asleep. Until then, he kept his teeth clenched so he would neither apologize nor ask Marc

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just how much he cared about Kate exactly. Enough to stay with her when it was all over ? Enough to send Blake away?

Blake wasn't sure he wanted to know. At least if he didn't ask, he could keep his illusions.

He woke up with a start after a few hours of restless sleep. When he got out of bed, he scowled at the small room in the dark. He had never liked enclosed spaces, but the so-called bedroom was awakening his claustrophobia. It was a good thing he didn't need to breathe, or he might have been hyperventilating. He put on jeans and a t-shirt and, barefoot, hurried out. Even the large open space of the common room wasn't enough. Hands in his pockets, he tried to walk at a normal pace to the main door. It opened on the eastern side of the building, so he'd find shade outside. As he went, he could feel eyes following his every step. Marc didn't need to know how bad it was this time.

As soon as he stepped outside, the weight lifted from his chest. He closed his eyes against the slightly uncomfortable afternoon brightness and took a deep breath. The loose soil and blades of grass beneath his toes felt almost warm after the coolness of the smooth concrete floor inside the building.

"So, you're suicidal now?"

He opened his eyes at the half mocking, half worried words. Kate sat on a tree stump a few yards to the right of the door, a knife in one hand and a slim piece of wood in the other. He was moving toward her before he even knew it.

"It's only direct sunlight that's bad for my skin," he said, strolling to the edge of the shadow cast by the building. "But thanks for caring."

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Her eyebrows arched as she scanned his face and exposed arms. She shook her head, and her lips settled on a grim expression. Dropping her eyes to the piece of wood in her hand, she resumed her whittling. "So that's how Marc got his bruises, huh?"

Blake sat down on the ground on a patch of grass, knees raised in front of him, his arms thrown back to support his weight. He observed her in silence. Each of her movements was precise, methodical, designed to create a sharp, even point on the crossbow arrow. She hadn't asked how he had gotten hurt; she had commented about Marc's bruises. He doubted she had chosen her words lightly.

"Yeah," he finally replied when she paused and glanced up at him. "We had a bit of a fight. But we heal fast. No need to worry for me, sweetheart."

She snorted and gestured at him with the pointy end of the arrow. "One, I'm not worried for you."

Blake kept his expression neutral even as she confirmed what he had imagined. She wasn't worried for him, but she was worried for Marc.

"Two," she continued, unaware of the cut she had just inflicted on him, "call me sweetheart again and I'll shove this through your chest."

He pushed what he hoped looked like an amused smile to his lips. "You'd really kill me over an friendly word?"

"I didn't say I'd aim for the heart. You said it yourself, you heal fast."

He could almost have believed she meant it if not for the grin she couldn't quite hide. He laughed in delighted surprise.

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Every time he thought he had her completely figured out, she found a way to startle him. "Usually it takes longer before the threats start," he said, still chuckling.

Amusement drained from her face. She placed the arrow next to a few others on the ground on her left and picked a piece of wood on her right. She started peeling the bark away in long strips, revealing the tender wood inside.

"Don't," she said, so low Blake almost didn't catch it.

"Don't what, now?" he asked, curious.

She didn't reply. Strip after strip of bark came off under her skilled touch until she had a piece of bare, straight wood in her hand. Shifting her hold on the knife, she started working on the point. Never looking away from her work, she said, "I had quite an interesting chat with Marc this morning."

So, that was what was going on. Blake leaned back on his forearms and looked up at the sky. A few fluffy clouds drifted over pale blue, soothing him. He should have known Marc would play dirty.

"Did he make up some big ugly lie to try to scare you away from me?"

The knife never stopped scrapping at the wood, the sound like a murmur. "I don't think he was lying."

Blake grinned to himself. Of course she didn't. "What did he say, then?"

"That you two will leave when the breach is closed."

Looking back at her, Blake tilted his head to one side. The wind had shifted, bringing him her scent. She smelled ... hurt, there was no other word for it. That was unexpected.

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"Well, that was the plan from the start," he said, picking his words carefully. "But if I had a reason to stay—"

"Don't," she said again, more coldly this time. "You'll leave, reason or not. I'm not a ... a *hobby* for you to pass time with. I don't have time for this. In case you hadn't noticed, we're at war."

She finished with a hard glance in his direction, as though daring him to contradict her. He considered it, but decided against it. Throwing her off was his best bet now.

"You're right."

The knife stilled mid-stroke. Frowning, she looked up at him again. "About what?"

"It was a game, at first. Marc liked you, and I figured I'd beat him at his own game."

Her eyes widened in outrage, and acridness peeked in her scent, mirroring her anger. "You're—"

"Trouble is," he continued, ignoring her. "I got to know you a bit too much while trying to steal you from under his nose. I know why he likes you. And I like you pretty much for the same reasons."

She bared her teeth at him in a twisted sardonic smile. "Don't be ridiculous. You don't know *a thing* about me."

"Don't I?" He sat up, crossing his legs so he could lean forward toward her and catch her every reaction. "So I'm wrong when I think in your mind, you're a soldier before anything else? I'm wrong to see your toughness with the other soldiers as the best way you found to make them respect you? I'm wrong to think you named your knives like I named Seneca, though you never told anyone? You didn't

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spend the night after Aaron was hurt replaying the entire thing in your mind and finding all the places you could have done something different , did you? You don't—"

"Stop it."

Her eyes closed tight and she breathed in deeply for a few seconds. Blake waited until her heartbeat had calmed down before he asked, more gently now, "Tell me, Kate. Do I know you or not?"

Her jaw clenched a few times. She returned her eyes to the piece of wood in her hand and started working on it again. This only lasted for a handful of seconds. Stopping again, she looked at Blake through narrowed eyes. "I know you, too. I know you're only here because Marc is. I know you're mad at him, for whatever reason, but you're still with him."

"What bothers you most?" he shot back, barely thinking about what he was saying. "That I sleep with him or that he sleeps with me?"

Her heartbeat jumped. "Why would I care—"

"If you didn't care," he pressed on, "you wouldn't feel so..." He paused, certain he had to be wrong, and breathed in her scent again. "Guilty? Why would you feel..." He blinked as he understood, and a wide grin settled on his lips. "Oh. Now that's interesting," he murmured.

Kate stood and stared down at him, the knife clenched in her right hand, the half-formed stake in her left, both pointed toward him. "I'm not feeling guilty! And whatever you think is interesting, you're wrong!"

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Still grinning, he slinked to his feet and faced her. "Am I? So you don't like us both, then?"

The shock spread over her features, draining them of color. When she blushed, the redness was even more fiery for it.

"You know," he said softly, "if you do, neither of us will mind."

Once again, her heartbeat stuttered. "What are you..." She was shaking as she lost her words. "You're *sick!*"

He shrugged. Maybe he hadn't read her as well as he had thought. He might as well lay it all out. "I'm not sick. I'm a vampire. Certain things cease to matter when you're a vamp, like the gender of the person in your bed. Or how many people are in it. It's an eye-opener, really. You don't see things as narrowly as you used to."

He observed her, waiting for her reaction. It didn't take long and, all things considered, it wasn't as bad as it could have been.

"Guess what. I'm human. And I want you to stay away from me. Both of you. Tell him that from me."

She pushed past him and stalked off, striding toward the barracks. Even without the expanse of sunlight between them, he wouldn't have followed. She needed time to think over what he had said. He doubted she would go for it, but it had been worth a try. Sitting on the ground again, this time with his back to the building, he consoled himself by replaying her parting words. At least, in her denial, she was pushing the both of them away equally.

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Chapter 13

An hour or so before sunset, Daniel called for his squad to assemble. Every soldier save for the four that guarded the gates and patrolled the perimeter came to sit at the wooden tables, now aligned in one long row.

Marc had taken a seat at the end of the long table, facing the weapons wall in front of which Daniel was pacing as he waited for everyone to come in. Kate had arrived early. She had exchanged a few quiet words with Daniel before sitting in the front. Too many people crowded the way between her and Marc for him to get a clear view, but she seemed to be avoiding looking in his direction. It didn't surprise him all that much.

When Daniel stopped walking and faced his troops, silence spread amongst them. The spicy scent of their excitement permeated the air, and even though Marc thought Daniel's optimism was a little premature, he couldn't fight the feeling of anticipation that spread through him. He leaned forward on his chair, resting his forearms on his thighs, and listened attentively.

"Tonight," Daniel said, his strong voice filling the space, "we start a new phase in our attack. Tonight—"

The front door creaked open, cutting him off. Daniel frowned as he looked past his troops and to the newcomer. Just about everyone turned to see who was interrupting him. Marc did as well, but he knew already who it was. Barefoot

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and his hands shoved in his jeans pockets, Blake seemed completely unconcerned about disrupting the meeting.

"Go ahead," he said as he approached. "Don't stop on my account."

Daniel cleared his throat and resumed his speech. Marc kept a reprobating eye on Blake, who pulled out one of the few empty chairs and dragged it to sit by Marc's side. He straddled the chair, his crossed arms against the back, and rested his chin on them. Shaking his head, Marc focused on Daniel again.

"I know you're all tired of these recon missions that seem to lead us nowhere," he was saying. "I am, too. But recon is necessary. And recon will lead us to victory."

He turned to the board he had dragged out of his office. He touched a corner of it, and a crude map of the City popped to life, black lines crisp on the shiny white plastic.

"The City." He touched the corner again, and dark blue stripes covered large spots in the south and east of the map. "This is what we have explored so far."

Groans erupted at the table. The stripes didn't cover a quarter of the map, if even that. Daniel made an appeasing gesture, his mouth twisting in a dry smile.

"I know. But wait."

Another touch to the board brought a new layer; this time, thin red lines covered the southern and eastern parts of the map, becoming progressively closer. It looked like a topographic map indicating elevation. One last touch, and this time green crosses popped up.

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"The density of the fog," Daniel explained, his finger following a red line. "And every spot where we encountered demons. Do you see what I'm getting at?"

The pattern suddenly popped in Marc's mind. Sitting up, he wondered how he hadn't seen it before now. They had talked about each element being a clue separately, but now that Daniel had gathered them on one map, they all pointed the same way. Several soldiers gasped. Daniel nodded, his eyes sweeping the room.

"We'll keep going this way," he pointed at the path where the fog and demon encounters showed something suspicious going on. "We'll probably meet more demons, so all three groups are working together from tonight on. We'll add four or five more soldiers also. Simon, that includes you."

A small, squeaky sound erupted at the table, no doubt Simon's reply to that announcement. Daniel continued as though he hadn't heard.

"When we find the breach, we close it. There won't be any coming back later, and finding the breach more heavily guarded. Even if the entire demon army is waiting for us, we'll fight to give Simon the time he needs. Questions?"

Murmurs spread around the table. Without trying to discern words, Marc listened to the tone of voices. Excitement covered any doubt. No one had questions, so Daniel called off the meeting. They had an hour to get ready before sunset. The soldiers left in small groups of three or four, still discussing the news. Marc's eyes found Kate. She talked with Daniel for a few seconds before following him back to his office.

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"Think we're really as close as he makes it sound?"

With a slow blink, Marc turned to Blake. His question sounded innocuous, as though they hadn't fought with fists and fangs the last time they had talked.

"I hope so," he replied, cautious. "The soldiers won't take it well if it lasts much longer."

Blake stood, pushing the chair away. He made a small sound in his throat that could have meant he agreed.

"Look at me," Marc requested, standing as well.

When Blake obeyed, Marc raised a hand to his black eye and touched the darkened skin with butterfly fingertips. Blake flinched away.

"I'm fine," he hissed.

"How well can you see?" Marc asked, ignoring him.

"I'm *fine*," Blake repeated. He started rolling his eyes and winced for his trouble. "Demons gave me worse. You're losing your touch, old man."

Marc forced a smile up to his lips. He had expected many things from Blake, but not an attempt at a joke. "Maybe I need more practice."

"Maybe you do. You know me, always happy to help." His eyes left Marc to focus on something behind him. His faint grin faded. "She asked me to tell you. She wants us both to stay away from her."

In a flash, Marc's amusement faded. He turned just in time to see Kate walk out of the building. "What did you do now?" he asked, very low, as he looked back at Blake.

Blake shrugged. "Just told her we both had a thing for her. I'm pretty sure the reverse is true as well. She wouldn't admit

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it, though. Silly humans and their narrow ideas of what they can or cannot do."

Incredulity came first, followed by resignation mixed with anger. Of course Blake was capable of telling a woman that two men had an interest in her. Of course he saw nothing wrong in suggesting to her that she didn't have to pick one over the other. Of course he had done both things. If Marc talked to him now, he would yell. If he let his hands close into fists, he would start another brawl. Neither would help. Gritting his teeth, he resolutely walked away from Blake, hoping his Childe would know better than to try to follow him now.

He hoped Daniel was right, and that they would stumble on demons that night. He felt like killing one or two—or an even dozen.

* * * *

"Come on, guys. You know the drill by now."

After four nights of pushing through always deeper into the City, always deeper into the fog, the soldiers did know what to do. Daniel hadn't finished talking before they were already falling into formation. They did so without enthusiasm. The excitement from the first night had faded along with their hopes that it would all be quick now. Kate held back a sigh and took her place, front and center of the first line, a squad soldier on each side of her, Marc and Blake on each end of the line. Four more rows formed at their back, three or four people in each.

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She had thought all along that they ought to continue exploring with smaller groups. Daniel had heard her, but he had followed his plan anyway. Smaller groups might have evaded the demons more easily. In four nights, they had fought three times, and weariness was beginning to take its toll on the troops. They hadn't suffered any serious injury—at least not yet—but two soldiers had stayed behind tonight to nurse small wounds.

The call came from the center of the group, where Daniel stayed close to Simon. "Let's go."

They started marching, twenty soldiers armed with swords and axes, the twenty-first mumbling the chant that would mask them, to an extent, from demon senses. Simon's concealment glamour wasn't perfect, his nerves getting the better of him too often still, but he was improving every night. With the fog now so dense around them, they needed every little advantage. Every few minutes, Kate had to remind herself that squinting did not help in the least, and only tired her faster.

Not for the first time, she wondered how far the vampires could see in these conditions. Daniel had positioned them at the front supposedly so they would be able to use their keener senses for the squad, and in fact they had raised the alarm with plenty of time to prepare each time the demons had attacked. Kate couldn't help but think that Daniel had also put them there, in the front but on the edges, so that he would be able to keep an eye on them. She wasn't sure how well that worked, though. From the third line, she didn't think Daniel could do more than guess their shapes.

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She shook her head and brought her attention back to her surroundings so she wouldn't stumble over debris on the uneven street. She couldn't see much, but she could hear the regular breathing of the soldiers around her, that matched the rhythm of her heart. She could feel the wind, weak but constant, push the fog against her skin in cold, wet fingers that made her shiver. She did her best to remain calm and attentive; lives were at stake. Her own, the squad's, the lives of the people in Claremont...

Try as she might to remain focused, Kate's mind started wandering as it did much too often lately. Somehow, it seemed more difficult to keep Marc and Blake out of her thoughts now that they had both backed off as she had requested. She hadn't expected them to do it, and she was still surprised they had. She could still feel Blake's eyes on her every so often, and Marc sometimes looked as though he wanted to talk to her, but neither had made a move in four days beyond the necessary communication from soldier to soldier.

If she was completely honest with herself, she missed sparring with Marc, and his surprisingly motherly ways. She missed Blake's banter and deadpan humor just as much. The mere thought that Blake might have been right when claiming she liked them both was robbing her of too many hours of sleep—and of too much attention when she needed it all. She bit back a curse when she realized the other four people on the front line had stopped. She hurriedly did the same and raised her closed left fist like they had, signaling for the rest of the troops to stop. Both Blake and Marc stepped forward

and disappeared into the fog. Kate held still despite the tickling down her spine that tried to push her forward. They knew what they were doing, she told herself firmly. There was no need to check on them.

They reappeared after a few moments, side by side and almost straight in front of her. The fog swirled at their backs and parted for an instant, giving Kate a glimpse of what had stopped them. The wall of debris, behind them, rose twice as high as they stood. She followed them to Daniel, already knowing what they would report.

"A couple of high rise towers collapsed right on top of each other," Marc said, grimfaced. "The street is blocked."

"Can we go over them?" Daniel asked.

"It's too high," Kate answered, right as Blake said, "We could. You? Probably not."

Daniel threw him an annoyed frown but didn't comment. He pulled out a map from inside his jacket. Before he had finished unfolding it, both Kate and Marc were pointing slim torchlights at the paper in his hands.

"We are..." His finger traced their path so far. "...about here. If we backtrack to this street, we can go around and resume our original path."

And this, Kate thought, was only one more reason why it would have made more sense to explore in small groups, and come back as a squad once they had found the breach. She said nothing but, glancing up, met Marc's eyes. He seemed as frustrated as she felt. It was only when he answered in kind that she realized she was smiling at him. She looked away, flustered, and fumbled to turn off her light. Shoving it back in

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her pocket, she moved through the group, spreading out the word of what they were doing and why.

It could have been nothing more than an effect of her imagination, but when they started again, Marc seemed to be closer, on the other side of the soldier standing between them. She shook herself. It was going to be a long night.

* * * *

Another night in the City; another dead end. Frustrated, Marc raised his hand, signaling for the group to stop behind him. He didn't bother to glance to the other end of the front line to see whether Blake had stopped as well, and strode forward. As had happened twice already that week, a mountain of debris blocked off the street completely. He slid his sword back into the scabbard and started climbing onto the mass of broken concrete and twisted metal. It creaked menacingly beneath his feet and hands. He tried to step forward, only to start falling when the stone on which he had stepped collapsed under his weight. He clung to a jagged piece of metal, stopping his fall but cutting his hand.

"What are you doing?" Blake hissed, somewhere behind him. "Did you hurt yourself?"

Marc closed his fist over the shallow cut and gingerly found his way back to the ground.

"It's nothing," he said as he reached Blake. "And I was trying to see if we could go through."

Blake's eyes trailed over him, stopping on his hand, though he didn't reach for it as Marc expected.

"So?" he said, looking back up. "Can we?"

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Marc turned back to the mound of rubble. Unstable, treacherous, with no way to know how far it extended; the breach might be just behind it.

"We could," he said slowly. "It'd be a pain, though. I'm not sure it's worth it."

"Problem?" Kate said, emerging from the fog.

She remained just a step further away than Marc and Blake were to each other, just far enough that Marc had trouble reading her expression.

"Another dead-end," he told her. "We'll have to backtrack again."

She groaned; they had all had enough of these seemingly unending detours. "We're going to spend the night on this again. Help me convince Daniel we should break the group to explore faster?"

Although surprised that she would ask for his support, Marc readily agreed. He had tried to avoid power struggles with Daniel, but if his second in command was ready to contradict him, Marc could lend her his voice. Blake tried to help as well, though his particular brand of arguing rarely worked with Daniel. After a few minutes and a careful observation of his map, Daniel grudgingly gave in. The squad broke into three groups. Daniel led one to a side street on the right, taking Blake along, while a second, under Simon's glamour, remained in place. Kate took the last group to the right. Marc went with her—as she had too casually requested.

They took the lead, with the other three members of the group spread out behind them. They stepped through the fog, stumbling over broken pavement and looking for the way

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forward for about the length of a block in perfect silence. Kate then stepped closer to Marc and, never taking her eyes from the road ahead of them, murmured, "Is that it?"

A jolt of energy rushed through Marc, and he followed her gaze, trying to see what she had seen. There was nothing there, however. He glanced at her, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

She moved yet a little closer to him, and their shoulders brushed against each other. She spoke even more quietly now. "Did you really give up?"

"Didn't you want me to? Blake said—"

"I didn't expect you to listen."

What an interesting development, he thought. He had been suspicious when he had noticed that, like him, Blake was leaving Kate alone, and he had asked him what he was now planning. Blake had answered with a cocky grin that she would come back to them soon enough. It looked as though he had been right.

"Did you *want* me to listen?" he asked, glancing down at her again.

A swirling gust of wind brought her scent to him. Beyond the scent of lavender, that had been absent for the past few days, she only smelled of confusion, the jumbled notes of it resembling frustration without the hint of acridness.

"I don't know," she said in a sigh. "You're just making things too complicated. Both of you."

Marc couldn't disguise his chuckle. She glared at him, letting out a little huffing sound. He shrugged, apologetic.

"Sorry?"

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She shook her head as she looked away, but she was smiling. Almost forgetting where they were, Marc started humming quietly. He caught himself before anyone—including demons—noticed, and tried to focus his mind on what they were doing. It was difficult. He had missed her smile.

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Chapter 14

Blake was many things, but he wasn't an idiot. When Marc and Kate returned from their exploration, both trying to hide smiles despite the lack of progress their group had made, he knew something had happened. He spent the next day trying to ferret out from Marc what had changed, without much luck. Marc merely told him not to push Kate and to let her go at her own pace instead. That might work just fine for Marc since he knew what was going on, but Blake had used just about all his patience in the last days. He refused to let his chance pass him by just because Marc wasn't in a sharing mood.

Convincing Daniel took less effort than he had anticipated. He waited until they had arrived on the edge of the City, where they usually left the trucks, and took him to the side.

"We're doing the separate teams thing again tonight, aren't we?"

Daniel eyed him suspiciously. "Yeah. Why?"

"Marc and I should switch. That way—"

He had prepared an explanation about how they ought to keep everyone from falling into a routine because routines could be dangerous, but Daniel didn't let him finish.

"Great idea. Have Kate deal with you for a while."

A little taken aback, Blake chuckled and pretended to be offended. "Keep it up and I'll think you're glad to get rid of me."

Daniel didn't even blink. "I am."

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Blake rolled his shoulders, feeling the weight of his sword and wishing he didn't feel like drawing it out. "I'm a good fighter. You should be sorry I won't be by your side."

"You are a good fighter," Daniel agreed. He crossed his arms and looked intently at Blake. "But you're not a soldier. If you ever applied to join the squad, you'd be kicked out in hours. It's not enough to know how to hold a sword. Your partners need to be able to trust you. And I don't think anyone here can honestly say they trust you."

With a dismissive snort, Blake strolled away. Why should he care about Daniel's thought? Human or vampire, he had never wanted to join the army. He didn't react well to orders.

Pushing Daniel's remarks out of his mind, he went to tell Marc of the change for the night. He didn't take it too well, and warned Blake against "doing anything stupid," whatever that meant. Kate had apparently been informed by Daniel already, and she showed no reaction when Blake joined her group. Her scent held just a trace of amusement. It irritated Blake. He realized it was silly, since there might have been dozens of reasons for her to be amused, but he couldn't help feeling as though she were making fun of him, somehow. Rather than remaining close to her as he had planned, he fell back when the group separated from the others, bringing up the rear.

For some odd reason, Daniel's words kept coming back to him. He scowled, annoyed in retrospect that he hadn't replied. Of course people trusted him. Many of them. His Sire, for one. They had fought more battles than Blake cared to remember, and Marc owed him a few lives. The reverse was

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true as well, but it didn't change the fact that Marc trusted him, and so did others. It was nothing more than a temporary lapse of his memory that he couldn't come up with any other name.

They had been advancing in the fog for a few minutes when he stepped up to Kate. She started when he touched her arm lightly and looked around, immediately concerned.

"Did you see something?" she asked, the words coming out fast and quiet.

"No, I just—"

"Then don't startle me like that! You almost gave me a heart attack!"

He mumbled an apology and fell silent, his eyes returning to their observation of the surroundings.

"What did you want?" she asked after a little while, sounding resigned.

"Nothing. Nothing at all."

She gave him an unconvinced glance but didn't press on. They took a few more steps before Blake blurted out, "Do you trust me?"

She looked at him again, a little longer this time, then glanced back at the soldiers behind them. "For the most part," she finally answered, very quiet.

Blake scowled at the swirling fog in front of them. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means that I trust you to give everything you have in a fight and kill as many demons as you can."

Satisfaction filled him. Daniel just didn't know what he was talking about. After a moment, however, when Blake replayed

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her careful words in his mind, he realized just how much wasn't covered by it.

"What don't you trust me with?" he asked, almost spitting out the sour words.

Walking very stiffly as he waited for an answer, he watched her from the corner of his eye. She opened her mouth, closed it again without a word, and gave a small shake of her head.

"Ask me another time."

She walked ahead of him. Blake didn't try to catch up with her and merely watched her go, pensive. He didn't like much the unpleasant feeling that had settled in the pit of his stomach.

* * * *

When Kate's group reported back to the main road that night, two unrelated thoughts were tearing her mind apart.

Her team had found nothing more than yet another blocked road. She had already shared her theory with Daniel that the demons had blocked some streets on purpose, creating a maze for anyone who dared to attack them. No doubt they had a way to return to their base easily, but that path, if it existed, had eluded the squad so far. How many nights would it take them to find the way, at last? Was it even leading to the breach?

She could only blame herself for the resurgence of her second problem. The two vampires had left her alone until the previous night. She was the one who had reopened the conversation with Marc. She should have guessed that Blake

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would take that as an invitation to do the same. Although why he had asked her whether she trusted him, she couldn't imagine. Why she hadn't been able to answer that she did was a mystery as well.

They had almost reached the rendezvous point when Wally, a few steps in front of her, stopped abruptly. His gloved fist raised and she mirrored the gesture. The faint footsteps behind her stopped. She looked around, intent on figuring out what Wally had heard or seen. She couldn't see anything, but with the always-present fog, it didn't mean anything.

Wally came to her, his eyes darting all around him. "I thought I heard something," he said very quietly.

"Demons," Blake breathed in the shell of her ear.

She shivered, and caught herself just in time before she could gasp and give their position away.

"At least eight. Fight or hide?"

She got a grip on herself and made her decision. She didn't have to think about it. Eight demons versus a team of six; she didn't like those kinds of odds. "Hide."

Quickly and silently, she gave her orders. Pointing at three members of her team, she indicated the left side of the street, and the gaping entrance of a building. Another gesture, and Blake, Wally, and herself hurried to the other side of the street. If the demons noticed them, they would have two fronts to fight rather than one.

She crouched on the right side of the gaping hole that had once been a wall. A pile of rubble would provide some cover for her, but she could still peek through to observe the

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progression of the demons. Wally, under her silent instructions, retreated farther inside the building to hide behind a half-wall that was miraculously still standing. She pointed at another corner for Blake, but he ignored her and crouched behind her instead. She felt him lean in toward her, so close that his chest pressed against her arm. Her heart jumped a few times inside her chest before she could calm it again. What was wrong with her? She wasn't a teenager who would react this way every time he came close to her.

"So, you still don't trust me?" he asked. The murmur tickled her earlobe. "If we avoid a fight, it'll be thanks to me."

Through a small opening in the pile of debris, she could see the first demons passing by, dark shapes stomping through the fog. The ground shook a little with each of their steps, and the smell of dust rose in the air. Very slowly, she turned to Blake and gave him an annoyed look.

"Now is not the time!" she hissed, the words no louder than a breath.

He leaned in again, resting his hand on the ground next to her for balance. "It never is time. We're at war. People die in wars. There's no time to wait for better days. If I don't kiss you now and I die in an hour, then it'll be twice the waste."

She rolled her eyes at him, realizing even as she did that she had started to miss Blake's sometimes absurd, sometimes extravagant pronouncements in the few days he had given her space. Refusing to even answer, she returned to watching the demons. They had all passed the building by now, and the stomping was slowly fading with each second. Nothing indicated that they had noticed the squad or would

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stop to investigate. She took in a deep breath and let it out very slowly. They would wait a few more moments and then leave their hideouts.

"Well, can I, then?" Blake asked, still as quiet.

She looked at him again. "Can you what?"

"Kiss you."

In spite of herself, she smiled. She should have seen this coming. Blake was nothing if not persistent. "You ask that a lot."

He shrugged, a corner of his mouth twitching in a half grin. "And you never answer."

"How's this for an answer?"

She couldn't have explained why she did it. The most likely answer was that, quite simply, she wanted to. All she had to do was turn her face toward his and close few millimeters between their lips. She kept it short and sweet. Blake was grinning when she broke away.

"So you do like me," he said, the edge of a suppressed laugh rising in his voice.

She let out a little snort. "Believe me, I'm the most surprised about that. You're insufferable."

Blake didn't even bat an eyelash. Still grinning, he said, "But you like me."

"Despite my better judgment."

"But you do like me."

He wagged his eyebrows, but the look in his eyes didn't quite match his impish expression. Behind the cocky, playful man in front of her, she could see another side of Blake. She had only caught glimpses of this other Blake, but now she

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could see him, hopeful rather than lecherous, happy rather than triumphant. Her slight annoyance at the way he was repeating himself disappeared as she understood what he was waiting for. She wasn't ready for a grand declaration, but she could keep it simple and still give him what he wanted.

"Yes," she said, unable to stop herself from grinning. "I like you."

Her heart stuttered as the words passed her lips. Maybe a grand declaration wasn't that far away, after all.

Blake beamed at her. She searched past the self-satisfaction on his face and found pure, simple joy hiding beneath.

"See, that wasn't so hard to admit." His smile faltered and he stood, firming his grip on Seneca. "And now you won't have anything to regret if the next fight kills me."

Just as he finished, an alarm started blaring, announcing that demons had found something. She blinked, then gasped. They were close to the rendezvous point, and the demons had been heading in that direction. She felt as though a blow had just knocked the breath out of her.

"That was a joke," Blake said, lending her a hand up. "Don't go worrying your little heart for me, now."

She held on to his hand just a little longer than necessary, letting go only when Wally cleared his throat behind them.

"Worry for you?" she said, her voice a little shaky. "Don't be silly. I'm worried for whoever they're attacking right now. Let's go!"

She led the way out, and quickly called the rest of her team. The six of them hurried forward, blades bared and

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ready. The alarm only grew louder as they approached the intersection. As soon as they arrived, she could see that she had been right. The group of demons had found Elliot's team, which, outnumbered, was resisting as best it could.

"Let's go!" she called out to her men, and they rushed forward and into the fight.

On her right, Blake ran to the demons with a shout she could barely hear over the alarm. He slashed his sword left and right, and in only seconds he had drawn two of the demons away. Shaking her head, she forced herself to look away. She had to trust that he would be all right, or else she wouldn't be able to fight. Her eyes fell on one demon, on one side of the fight, that was pounding its sword against a dome of blue light. She hurried forward. Despite many attempts at teaching him how to fight, Simon was completely inept at yielding any sort of weapon. At least, he had kept enough of a cool head to protect himself. There was no telling how long he would hold out, though.

She attacked the demon from behind, banging her sword against the metal plates of its armor to draw its attention away from Simon. It slowly turned to face Kate with small, lifeless, dark eyes. A row of spikes adorned its forehead, an incongruous tiara over beast-like features.

"Come on, then," Kate said, spreading her feet to find a better fighting stance. "Let's get to it."

She didn't know if demons understood human speech, but as she finished talking the demon raised its axe and ran at her, its yell like thunder despite the alarm. She braced herself, gripping her sword with both hands. She was ready.

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She would fight, and she would kill this demon, and then another one until they were all dead. She had to because, despite what Blake had said, she would be left with many regrets if things ended here.

The demon's axe and her sword rang like a deep, heavy bell when they clashed together. She wasn't strong enough to push the demon back, so she evaded, twisting her body to break away and to the side. The demon turned at once toward her, and this time it parried her attack. A couple more steps, another attack, another evasion, and her turn came again.

She wondered if Blake knew how to dance. She wasn't too good at it herself, but she enjoyed it a lot.

The demon struck again, with such force that Kate collapsed to her knees when she blocked the blow. The beast grunted in triumph. It struck again, fast and hard. Kate rolled away, bruising her arms and knees. The axe embedded itself in the asphalt, right where she had been a second earlier. The demon had to struggle to free it. She took the opportunity to spring to her feet and slash her sword at its side, where thick leather laces held its armor closed. The laces fell apart, and the armor gaped open, sliding out of place.

It won't just give you an opening to kill, Marc had told her during one of their sparring sessions. *It will destabilize the demon. Some of them just get rid of the armor rather than having it loose on their body and getting in the way.* She would have to tell him she had given his suggestion a try. Maybe he could teach her other moves.

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Before she could take advantage on the opening in the armor, the demon turned to her again, the axe pointed at the ground. It didn't make a noise, this time, and merely considered her with narrowed eyes. The hair on her arms raised, and a shiver passed through her. Without waiting any longer, she attacked. She struck high, low, toward its arms, belly, legs, and neck, frustrated that she couldn't find an opening to its exposed side. It parried each blow and responded in kind, and it was her turn to parry and evade. The bones in her arms rattled every time their weapons clashed. Sweat pearled on her brow and slid down her back. It was only from tiredness, she assured herself, stepping back to catch her breath. Not fear.

Although if she didn't find a way to end the fight before she tired much more, it would definitely be time for fear.

The demon seemed to know exactly what she was thinking. It bared its teeth in what could have passed for a smile and lunged at Kate, both hands on its axe raised high above its head. Everything froze in Kate's mind, and in a flash she saw the opening. She rushed forward, blood pulsing through her and pushing her to go faster. She sidestepped at the last second and stabbed her sword in the demon's side, where the armor gaped open. She pushed in with all her strength before drawing the sword back. Her legs screamed at the effort but she scrambled back, holding her breath. Blood gurgled at the demon's lips, dark as ink. Its left hand fell to clutch its side. It took a stumbling step forward, then started falling.

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Kate's mistake was to lower her guard before it reached the ground. In the last moment of its life, the demon used what remained of its strength to swing its axe blindly.

Surprise registered with her mind first; pain came next. Eyes wide, Kate glanced down and touched the torn Kevlar vest. Her fingers came away tinted with red. In her ears, the sound of her own blood beating against her temples drowned out the still-strident alarm. She turned, staggering, and looked around her. The fog swirled around forms on the ground. She couldn't tell if they were demons or humans. Four more fights were still happening, three or four fighters around each demon. Only Blake fought alone, just yards away from her. She stumbled toward him. Her lips formed his name, but she wasn't sure she said the word aloud. Her vision started blurring. She fell down to her knees. All she could see anymore was Blake's grin as he fought—as he played with the demon.

His sword raised high for another blow, he glanced in her direction. She blinked twice to clear her vision. When she opened her eyes again, Blake was kneeling in front of her. He caught her as she fell forward. She couldn't understand the words he said, but she clung to his voice as she drifted into darkness.

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Chapter 15

Blake couldn't smell anything other than Kate's blood as he cradled her in his arms. It covered everything, from the acrid scent of demon blood around them to the slight scent of sulfur. His fangs elongated without him even noticing. He couldn't hear anything other than her heartbeat, the fragile tempo drowning out the clash of weapons, along with the shouts of pain, triumph, and despair behind him. He didn't even realize that the alarm finally stopped as he focused on her heartbeat. He held her more tightly, leaning down to hear better. Was her heart slowing down, or was it only his fear talking?

"Kate? Can you hear me?"

She stirred. Her limp hand dragged on the ground, but her eyes remained closed. The scent of blood enveloped her, thicker with every passing second. He had to do something, and he had to do it fast. He had told her he wouldn't have any regrets if he died, but the lie had come easily since he hadn't thought for a second he would get hurt. He hadn't imagined she would, either.

The idea crept slowly from the depths of his being, the same place that had taught him to bite, feed, respect his Sire, and fear the sun. He had never turned a human before, but he knew how it was done; of course he knew, he had been there at his own siring. Whether he did nothing or turned her, the result would be the same. She would die. Turning her, however, would give her a second chance.

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Blake just wasn't sure he was ready to sire anyone, let alone someone he had feelings for. What if she changed too much? What if she wasn't the same Kate he liked anymore? What if he ended up having to leave—

He looked around him, pushing away both the temptation to turn her and the panic the thought of doing so awakened. His eyes stopped on Simon, standing just feet away. He looked back at Blake, his entire body shaking. He didn't seem hurt, only scared.

"She ... she helped me." Simon took a hesitant step forward. "That demon ... it would have ... but she..." He swallowed hard. "Is she dead?"

"No. But she will be if you don't help her."

Simon started as though Blake had hit him. "Help her? I'm no medic! I can't—"

"Use your magic! You told me you can do anything you want with magic."

Simon walked a little closer still, his hand gripping the leather bag that hung to his side. "I can! But I ... I've never done anything like this. What if I hurt her?"

"What if you do nothing and she dies?"

Simon still wasn't convinced. His head turned from left to right. Blake imagined he was looking for a medic. They had left one of them at the camp, however, and the other was with Daniel's group. Blake looked at Kate. She was still unconscious, still bleeding, and now so pale. He held her a little closer, as though his cold body might give her back the warmth she was losing. The words came out of nowhere, but he knew they would work. He wasn't playing fair, using

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Simon's crush on him like this, but he couldn't have cared less.

"If you do nothing and she dies, I will never forgive you."

Simon's eyes grew wide and he blinked furiously. "But it's not my—"

He snapped his mouth shut so hard that Blake heard his teeth clash. Three more steps took him in front of Blake. He slid the bag strap off his shoulder as he knelt.

"Put her down," he asked, already digging into his bag for supplies.

Every inch of Blake wanted to protest. He didn't dare to argue, however, not when Kate's life was at risk. As painful as it was, he forced himself to slide her off his lap and gently laid her out on the ground. Now that she rested between them, he could see her wound better, her blood spreading on each side of the cut in her protection vest. Without it, she would be dead already, but it had only bought her time.

Time slowed down to a crawl. Blake's eyes circled restlessly between Kate's face, her wound, Simon's fingers playing over his magic ingredients, and the street around them. Two demons were still standing, each surrounded by several fighters. The fights took place far enough from Kate that Blake didn't want to intervene, but if a demon came closer, he would.

Simon finally picked several bottles and mixed their contents into a small bowl. With a grimace, he touched Kate's blood and blended the ingredients into a paste with his bloodied fingers. The mixture glowed softly when he

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murmured a few incomprehensible words over it, the electric blue light casting shadows over his face and Kate's.

"Can you pull her vest open?"

Blake did as he was asked, gingerly sliding off her vest to uncover the wound beneath it. He peeled off her shirt and t-shirt as well, exposing her skin. There was so much blood that it was impossible to see how deep the demons' weapon had cut her. With very careful movements, Simon applied the paste to the sides of the wound. Kate shuddered at the touch, but soon the blood stopped flowing as the glow faded.

"It's not going to heal her," Simon said, "but it'll keep her alive until Sasha can do something. I'm not sure how long it will hold, though."

Blake looked up at Simon to thank him, but the words died on his lips. Behind him, new shapes were emerging from the fog, too small to be more demons.

"Medic!" he shouted, raising his hand and waving it. "This way! Medic!"

A silhouette, right on the edge of the fog, seemed to hesitate for a second before rushing toward them. Simon shuffled to the side to make room for Sasha. She knelt next to Kate, and he explained what he had done.

"She was bleeding a lot so I ... I stopped the bleeding."

She had drawn latex gloves from somewhere and touched the wound delicately, pulling the sides apart.

"Light," she said curtly.

With a single word, Simon summoned a small ball of white light that hovered above Kate.

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"It looks contained for now," she muttered after a few seconds. Pulling a glove off, she grasped Kate's wrist and took her pulse. "As far as I can tell she's stable. I can work on her when we're back at the camp."

She started getting up. Blake grabbed her arm before she could leave. She grimaced in pain. Realizing he was hurting her, Blake released his grip but he didn't let go.

"Help her now!" he demanded, putting all his strength into the words. He had never been very good at thrall, but trying couldn't hurt.

Sasha tugged on her arm weakly. She blinked and turned her head, but didn't break free of his gaze. "Are there..." She wet her lips and blinked again, still unable to tear her eyes away from him. "Are others wounded?"

At Blake's side, Simon shifted, holding his bag to his chest. "I ... I think so."

His voice broke through Sasha's daze, allowing her to shake away the thrall. Her eyebrows knitted in confusion for a second, then she finally pulled her arm free of Blake's hold and got up, stumbling away. The little ball of light followed, bobbing along with her.

Blake threw an annoyed glare at Simon. Without his intervention, she might just have helped Kate now. What was he supposed to do now? He looked around him. Out of the fog came Marc and Daniel. Marc missed a step when he saw Kate. He slid his sword back in its scabbard, fumbling, before hurrying forward. Daniel beat him to Kate. He put a knee to the ground and his eyes ran over her face before detailing her

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blood-soaked mid-section. When he looked up at Blake, his features held no expression, only ice.

"Take her to the trucks. We'll be right behind you. Simon, go with him."

With a nod, Blake picked up Kate, wincing when the movement, as careful as he tried to be, jostled her a little. Daniel had already moved on, but Marc was still watching, his face inscrutable. Pushing him out of his mind, Blake started toward the trucks, Kate cradled in his arms. Her heartbeat had returned to a steady rhythm, and he kept the sound at the back of his mind as he walked, his senses focused on the uneven ground beneath his feet and the fog that might still hide demons. The walk back to the truck took hours—or at least, it seemed to. The entire time, Blake tried not to wonder if Kate would survive. Humans were so fragile. He should have known better by now than to get close to one of them.

He only spoke to Simon as they reached the trucks. "Can you drive?"

Simon jumped when he looked at him; he seemed torn. "Maybe ... maybe we should wait for the others? They'll need to get back, too. And Sasha's the best medic."

Grinding his teeth—Simon made sense, as much as he hated to admit it—Blake climbed into the back of the nearest truck. He held Kate closer to his chest so he wouldn't move her too much. He sat on the floor in the back, with her on his lap, and gently tapped her pale cheek.

"Kate? Come on, now. You've had a long enough nap. Wake up."

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Simon had climbed in as well and sat close on a side bench, his bag on his knees. "Should you wake her?" he asked, his voice turning into a squeak when Blake scowled at him.

Before Blake could answer, Kate groaned quietly. Her eyelids batted open very slowly, and her face settled on a pained expression.

"Got hurt," she mumbled. "Bad?"

Blake smiled, relieved. "No, not bad, you'll be just fine."

He brushed loose strands of hair away from her face. She tilted her head into his touch, and he could have sworn she smiled.

She murmured something that sounded like 'dance,' or it could have been 'demons.'

"What was that, sweetheart?"

Her smile faded. "Stake you."

She had to be delirious, Blake thought. He pressed his hand to her forehead. It was hard to tell with his skin so much cooler than hers, but he didn't think she had a fever.

Time slowed down to a crawl as he waited for the rest of the squad to return. Once or twice, Simon commented on how he was sure Kate would be OK, but Blake didn't respond. Finally, the truck filled with the smell of blood, and too many heartbeats covered Kate's. There wasn't a lot of talking as they drove back to the camp. Sasha had climbed into the other truck after checking that Kate was still stable, and she was waiting for Blake with a gurney when they arrived.

"I'll carry her," he said. "Just show me the way."

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Kate weighed nothing in his arms. She was unconscious, and her wound had started bleeding again. He tried to walk a little faster.

"Put her down on the table," Sasha said as she pushed open the infirmary's door.

Patrick was already in, gloved and masked, shiny instruments at his side. As soon as Blake put Kate down, Patrick placed sensors over her heart and temple. A slightly irregular beeping filled the room.

"Everyone out," Sasha demanded. She had cleaned up and thrown scrubs and gloves on. "Patrick, can you clean the sides of the wound?"

Blake took a step back, but he didn't leave. He had carried her this far; he wasn't going to abandon her now. He could hear shuffling feet behind him but he paid them no mind, his eyes following every movement of the two medics.

"Blake. A word."

He barely spared a glance toward Daniel behind him. Ignoring his stern expression and his words, he returned his whole attention to Kate and the two pairs of hands working over her.

"Blake," Daniel repeated, the word cutting as steel.

Sasha muttered a curse and pulled bloodied fingers from inside the wound. She raised glaring eyes toward her audience.

"I thought I asked you to get out. All of you!"

A heavy hand settled on Blake's shoulder and tightened, stopping just short of pain. "Come on."

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Marc's voice, although quiet, left no place for disagreement. With a last glance at Kate, Blake allowed Marc to guide him out of the infirmary. They stopped outside the door, and Marc's hand fell away at once. Blake frowned, momentarily thrown off by the lack of contact. He didn't have time to wonder why the loss of that simple touch affected him so much. In front of him, standing of all his height, Daniel glowered at him.

"I should stake you." Anger splashed out of each clipped word, splattering over Blake like mud. "Right here, right now."

Blake waited for a beat, but the defense he expected from Marc did not come. Rubbing his fingertips to his right temple, he observed Marc's blank expression while answering Daniel distractedly.

"Do I get to know why before you try and I break your arm?"

The words fell flat without his usual sarcasm to give them life and color. Daniel didn't even acknowledge them, and neither did Marc. He merely stood there, arms by his side, returning Blake's look without a sign that he even knew him. The last time he had looked at Blake like this, he had been packing up his things while Jen waited for him outside. Unable to bear his gaze and the memories it brought back, Blake turned his attention to Daniel. His light eyes had never seemed so dark and threatening.

"Wally told me about you kissing her," he said. "About you distracting her when the demons were just steps away."

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The mention of Kate had Blake's eyes fleeing to the shut door. He could still smell her blood. "It wasn't like—"

"And then," Daniel continued, "everyone who fought said the same thing. You were *playing* with the demons, taunting them rather than going for the kill while my men were trying to survive and could have used the help. You even stopped fighting completely rather than helping them."

What was the man getting at? He had said it himself, hours earlier. Blake wasn't a team player. He had never pretended to be.

"Of course I stopped." Didn't Daniel understand? Wouldn't he have done the same thing? "Kate was hurt!"

"She was. Because of you. Because you distracted her. Because you didn't work with the squad and instead you played your own game. You don't give a damn about humans. All you care about is killing, and that makes you no better than a demon. You're not fighting with my squad again. Now get out of here. And stay the hell away from Kate."

The words made no sense. Blake gaped at Daniel, trying to figure out whether this was his idea of a joke, or whether Blake had misunderstood him. Daniel, however, did not explain himself, or add anything. He passed by Blake on his way back into the infirmary, bumping his shoulder and pushing him out of the way.

Troubled, Blake turned his eyes back to Marc, a question already piercing to his lips. It died, frosted by the icy stare Marc directed at him. A shudder ran through his body. Unsure of what had just happened—what was still happening—he took his first step away from the door. He felt heavier now,

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even though he didn't carry Kate anymore. Daniel's words still echoing in his mind, he made his way back to the main building. He had never realized before how far it was.

He unbuckled the harness and removed the scabbard from his back as he entered the small bedroom. He dropped it to the floor by his bed before sitting down. After a long moment, he leaned down to untie his shoes, but stopped halfway through his gesture. The door closed at his back with a sharp clicking sound, and Marc turned off the light. Blake heard the rustling of clothing being removed. The bed creaked when Marc lay down.

"He will still accept my help," Marc said, startling Blake. "As a courtesy to me, he'll let you stay, but he won't let you come on recon missions anymore, or fight when we find the breach."

Blake clenched his jaw and kept his eyes wide open, staring at the darkness as though shapes or colors might emerge from it if he looked hard enough. Marc was only feet away, close enough to touch, yet Blake felt lonelier than he ever had. Even when Marc had left before, abandoning him without much of an explanation, he had known, deep down, that it wasn't his fault, that it was all about Jen seducing Marc with her nonsensical talk about old Pacts and traditions.

For the first time, he was wondering whether Marc had left for a different reason; whether he had left because, simply, Blake wasn't worth his time. Would he leave again, now that Blake had reminded him what a flawed Childe he was? Would he leave if Kate died, or would he kill Blake as punishment?

Blake wasn't sure which would be worse.

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Chapter 16

Palpable tension thickened the atmosphere the day after the squad battled the demons. In addition to Kate being hurt, two other soldiers had been wounded, and a third one killed. Minutes after he had come out of their room, Marc realized that the entire squad shared Blake's grim mood. Sipping a cup of coffee, he watched the soldiers around him. Shoulders hunched and heads low, they kept their eyes on their breakfasts, rarely exchanging a few muttered words. Their mixed scents made him cringe: anger, fear, and despair swirling together until they became undistinguishable. Marc sat there for a little longer, wondering whom to ask about Kate's condition, when Daniel walked out of his office. He approached the tables, and silence fell over his soldiers as they all turned to him.

He still wore the same wrinkled uniform from the previous night minus the Kevlar vest. Purplish circles beneath his eyes hinted that he hadn't slept much, if at all.

"Change of plan," he said without preamble. "We're cutting back on reconnaissance while we rebuild our forces. Team A, you're off to Claremont for a week of R and R. Finish eating and then pack up, you're leaving in an hour."

He paused as though expecting an interruption, but no one cheered.

"Team B, you're staying here, and we'll resume small-group recon missions tonight. You'll get your turn in Claremont next week. That's all."

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Without waiting to see how they'd react, he turned on his heel and started for the building's exit. Marc left his half-finished coffee on the table and hurried after him, calling his name. Daniel glanced back and slowed down, but he didn't stop.

"You'll be with us tonight?" he asked when Marc caught up with him.

"Yes, of course. But I wanted to ask about Kate. How is she?"

Daniel stilled and turned a hard look to Marc. "Well enough to be transported to Claremont," he said slowly, as though weighing each word. "They have Healers there much better at this kind of magic than Simon is."

The block of ice in the pit of Marc's stomach started melting. "That's good."

"I wouldn't go that far, but yes, it could have turned much worse."

He started for the door again, and stopped again with a hand on the door handle. "No visitors," he said shortly, and left without another word.

Other soldiers started trickling out. Marc returned to the table. The smell of egg-substitute and toast lingered even now that most soldiers had finished eating. He and Blake would need to go hunting that night, he thought distractedly. They should have gone after the previous night's mission, but it had slipped their minds. He picked up what remained of his coffee. He blew on it mechanically before noticing it had cooled down. The warmth was the only thing that made the beverage passable in his opinion, but, grimacing with each

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sip, he forced himself to finish it. Even insta-coffee was becoming rare, and he hated to waste his hosts' supplies.

The flavorless brew did nothing to help with the cold that had kept him frozen to the bones since they had returned to the camp in the early morning. Kate would be all right, or so Daniel had implied, but she wouldn't have gotten hurt in the first place if not for his and Blake's presence. He didn't doubt she had been distracted, and that had contributed to her getting wounded. He had noticed she was less focused than usual the past few nights. Foolishly, he had rejoiced at the idea that he could trouble her like this. He should have known better than to play Blake's game. He should have stopped everything rather than risk this happening. It was over now, and part of him was glad that Kate would leave the camp for a while. For her own sake, it was better this way. Still, he would miss her.

Soldiers started coming back after a while: the ones who weren't leaving for Claremont, Marc supposed, judging by their grim expressions. They paired up and spread through the room to spar. To Marc's surprise, one of them asked if he would spar with him. Marc accepted; he didn't really feel like it, but it would give him something to do to pass time.

Before he knew it, night fell. He accompanied Daniel and three more of his men back to the City. They walked for hours, more careful than ever, exploring foggy side-streets in their attempts to move deeper into the city. They didn't find anything. They returned two hours before sunrise. Blake had probably hunted and fed on his own, Marc thought, and so he didn't go in to ask if he wanted to come along. When he came

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back to their room, Blake was in bed, an arm thrown over his face. Marc didn't think he was asleep, but he didn't have anything to tell him. He didn't have anything to say that would damp the scent of misery permeating the room. Unless...

"Kate will be OK. They took her to Claremont to rest." Blake didn't reply. If anything, the sourness of his scent was only accentuated.

By the middle of the next afternoon, Blake still hadn't said a word. He had come out the room at last, and walked out of the building with his sword in hand. His behavior irritated Marc. It wasn't like him to wrap himself in self-pity. Marc had kept his distance so far, thinking that Blake needed to think about what had happened to process it, but it didn't seem to be working. It was time for an intervention. He thought about it for a little while; he would have to be careful about it. Bluntness would only strengthen Blake's defense walls.

Once he had established a strategy, he joined Blake outside. He had to stop right past the door and let his eyes adjust to the brightness of the day. A murmur of steel on his right drew his attention to Blake. Sitting cross-legged in the shadows with his back to the building, he ran a polishing stone along the edge of his sword in long, even movements. Marc came to sit by him, but Blake didn't seem to notice.

"Tell me something. Why do you fight?"

Blake's eyes turned to him, lifeless. "Same reason you do. Demons are fun to kill."

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Marc shook his head once. "You know that's not why I fight. When I turned you, I told you about the Pacts, remember?"

The Pacts. Saying the word brought back the memory to the surface of Marc's mind. His grand-Sire had told him about it, days after he had been turned, and for years before siring Blake he had planned the words he would use to transmit the tradition forward.

"I remember," Blake drawled. "Pretty story."

Marc winced. He had rarely been as disappointed as when his newly-turned Childe had dismissed the idea of the Pacts as nothing more than a legend. Even now, after all these years, the wound remained fresh. He tried not to let it show into his voice.

"But it's not a story, can't you see that?" He leaned forward, willing Blake to finally hear him, to finally understand. "Vampires don't exist separately from humans and demons. We were made to fight demons. That's our purpose. That's why we're stronger. That's why we see and hear better."

With a roll of his eyes, Blake returned his attention to his sword, fluidly running the polishing stone along the edge again. The sound that came from the sharpened metal was almost melodious, but Marc stopped it just the same, closing his hand over Blake's and holding it tight and immobile. Blake's eyes, when they came back to him, screamed his annoyance, although he didn't say a word.

"We were made to fight demons and protect humans," Marc started again, talking slowly as though to a child. At

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times, it seemed like the only way to get through to Blake.

"There was a time when we knew it, and humans did as well. They offered us blood, gave us the tools we needed to fight, and in exchange we kept them safe. Can't you see we're back to that?"

Blake gave a tiny shake of his head, his guard finally dropping. "I don't understand."

Holding on to his patience by his fingernails, Marc let go of Blake's hand. At least he was listening. Time for another attack. "I'm sure you do. Everywhere vampires go, humans give us food and shelter. And in exchange, we teach them, and fight alongside them. There's not enough of us, but we protect them as we can."

"If you put it that way, I guess it's true."

Marc waited before allowing himself to hope. He knew Blake well enough to tell when he was giving in—and when he wasn't completely beaten yet.

"For you," Blake continued after a couple of seconds, frowning absently, "it's true. But you know I don't care about humans. I don't do any of it for them."

Inside, Marc crowed triumphantly. He had brought Blake exactly where he wanted him. A few more attacks at the crumbling walls of his defense, and he would be standing alone, with no way to hide from himself.

"Don't you?" he asked, his voice harsher now, almost mocking. "Is that why you were so scared that she'd die? Is that why you're so miserable now that she's gone? Because you don't care?"

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Blake sat up, his back tense as a high-strung bow. His expression turned indignant. "I wasn't scared! And I'm not miserable! She's just..."

His anger deflated as quickly as it had come to life, and the same shadow of misery passed over his features.

"She's just what?" Marc pressed him.

He shrugged, looking away. "She's just another human. The planet is full of them."

"Why do you still try to lie? You know you can't fool me. You never could."

As though he couldn't stand to feel Marc's eyes on him anymore, Blake jumped to his feet. The polishing stone fell to the ground at Marc's feet, and he picked it up. Holding it in his right hand, he rubbed it against his left palm. It felt warm and it smelled like heated steel. A few steps away, Blake walked to the edge of the shadows, swinging his sword at the grass, catching only a couple of the sparse blades. The stone lost its warmth against Marc's skin, and Blake soon sat down again, legs crossed and shoulder slumped, his back to Marc. Resting in front of him, the tip of his sword gleamed in the sun.

"It was a mistake," he said quietly.

"What was?"

The words rose slowly, as though voicing them caused pain to Blake. "For me to ... get attached to her. I shouldn't have."

Marc stood. Quickly passing the polishing stone from hand to hand, he came to stand behind Blake. "There's nothing wrong with that. Can't you see it makes you stronger to fight for a reason other than your selfishness?"

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"Stronger?" Blake snorted. "How does it make me stronger to be so scared she'll die that I can't even finish a fight?"

Marc let his smile grow wide, happy that Blake couldn't see it. He dropped the stone onto his lap and ruffled his hair with his hand. "You're even more clueless than I thought, Childe," he said, his affection filtering through his voice despite his efforts to keep it neutral. "But at least you're not completely hopeless."

Blake threw his head back and looked up just as Marc turned away. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Just think about what I said," Marc threw over his shoulder as he returned to the building.

"Marc!" Blake called after him. "Tell me what you mean!"

Shaking his head, Marc kept walking and did not answer. He knew Blake would figure it out; as often as Marc called him an idiot, he was anything but, and soon enough the cloud of misery that obscured his thoughts would start breaking apart. Just the same, Marc wished he had fully understood it himself. What was it in Kate that had changed Blake's perspective on humans, tilting his world on its axis just enough to transform everything without his notice? Marc knew what he liked in her, but he would have liked to know what made her so different in Blake's eyes. In the end, it didn't matter, though, just as it didn't really matter if they never saw her again. Whether she knew it or not, whether she had tried to or not, she had changed Blake, made him a better vampire—a better person—and for that, Marc would always be grateful to her.

* * * *

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Blake thought about Marc's words until night fell and the squad departed. He was still thinking about them when they returned in the small hours of morning. He spent a third sleepless night turning the words over and over in his mind. They weren't much of an improvement over Daniel's scathing remarks, but while he had been able to dismiss Daniel's words—what did the man know about him, anyway?—it was more difficult to do with his Siere's. It was rendered even more difficult by his fear of the past couple of days that Marc avoided talking to him because he was preparing to tell him goodbye—for good, this time. That he had told him something else instead, something cryptic he hadn't explained, was both a relief and a new source of fear. What if this was a test of some sort? What if passing it by understanding what in hell Marc had been rambling about was the way to keep Marc with him—and failing to understand would send him away? He had to think about it; he had no choice in the matter.

As much as he hated to admit it, Marc knew him well. A few decades spent together had seen to that. What had Marc seen that he couldn't?

In the end, the beginning of their conversation gave him the key he needed to understand what Marc had said. He had thought at first that it had had nothing to do with the rest, but this was Marc. Of course his damn Pacts would have to be involved in some way.

When he heard Marc getting out of bed that morning, he opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He understood; that didn't mean he knew what to make of it all—or even that he

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thought it was true. He let Marc go and, staring up into the darkness, tried to decide what to do.

Marc believed that, just because Blake felt something for Kate, his motivation for fighting had changed. He could believe what he wanted; Blake knew otherwise. Caring about her didn't make him care about anybody else. But why was Marc making such a big deal out of it? Why talk to him after two days of near complete silence to ask why he fought? Hadn't he accepted, long ago, that Blake wasn't like him and—

He sat up, frowning at the sudden thought.

What if something had changed, in that battle, not for Blake but for Marc? What if what he had been able to tolerate before had become unacceptable in the light of Kate's close miss with death? What if this was Marc's twisted way of giving Blake an ultimatum—change, or lose his Sire?

In the darkness, the walls started closing in on him. He got up and stumbled out of the room, glad beyond words that he had been too apathetic to undress before falling into bed. The corridor wasn't much better, but as soon as he threw open the second door, his chest stopped constricting over his heart and he remembered—he always remembered too late—that he didn't need to breathe.

A few pairs of eyes had turned his way at his hurried appearance. Holding on to his fragile calm, he ignored them and strode toward Marc. The soldiers resumed their sparring, and the muffled sounds of their weapons clashing rose through the room. Sitting astride a chair a few feet from such a pair, Marc was giving each of them advice and comments in

turn. He continued even as Blake dragged a chair to sit next to him with his back to the fighters. He listened to him for a little while, remembering the lessons Marc had given him in his fledgling years. Blake had learned how to fight when he had been human, but he had only become good at it long after he had been sired. Without Marc's apparently infinite supply of patience, he might not have survived more than a couple of decades.

"Let's go to the City," he said abruptly.

Marc threw him a distracted glance before looking back at the fighters. "What?"

"Just you and me. We go faster when it's just the two of us. We fight better, too. We can find that damn breach for them like we said we would. Keep them safe and all. Keep that Pact of yours."

That brought Marc's attention fully on him. Blake started fidgeting under the wide-eyed stare, and he was soon frowning at Marc, forgetting his goal of making him happy by whatever means he could find.

"What?" he snapped defensively. "Why are you grinning like that?"

Marc laughed, head thrown back, his laughter loud and earnest. It had been a long time since Blake had heard him laugh like this, but just the same, he crossed his arms.

"Because I've been waiting for this moment pretty much since I sired you," Marc said when he had calmed down, though he was still grinning widely. "My Childe is all grown up. Give me a second, let me savor the moment."

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He pretended to wipe a tear from his eye. Blake scowled at him.

"Asshole. Stop making fun of me."

Even the insult didn't seem able to damp Marc's good mood. "I'm not. All right, maybe a bit. But I'm proud of you. Our clan always followed the Pacts, even when humans hunted vampires. Our bloodline held on to the traditions as a matter of pride. I'm glad you finally get it."

A niggling feeling of guilt settled over Blake's shoulders, weighing him down. It would have been nice to truly earn Marc's pride rather than to deceive him like this. He shook the feeling away. This was his chance to keep Marc. Not only that, but they could take better care of each other when no humans got in the way of their fighting. On top of it, he had the faint hope that they might find the breach and finally close it before Kate returned to the fight; she'd be safe a little longer if they did. All of it reinforced his resolution. Marc had told him countless times that he was a bad liar, but in this case, Marc wanted to believe him. It shouldn't be that hard to pull.

"We'll go tonight," Marc said after a moment. "We can take a different road so we won't meet the squad. But before that, you need sleep."

Blake started at the idea of returning to the oppressive bedroom. "Sleep? I just got up!"

"And how much did you sleep last night? Or the nights before that?"

"It's not like I got tired while sitting around and doing nothing!"

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Marc stood, implacable, and motioned him to follow.

"Come on."

After remaining frozen for a few seconds, Blake managed to push himself off the chair and onto his feet. He could smell the fear on himself, and he forced himself to take deep, calm breaths. He couldn't let Marc know this was happening to him again. He knew Marc had watched him carefully the first few nights they had spent in that closet-like room. He had put up a good front for him. He couldn't let it go to waste, not now, not when Marc might leave at the smallest hint of a weakness.

He narrowed his eyelids to slits when he shuffled back into the corridor. Sometimes, it wasn't as bad if he forced himself not to look too closely. He took slow steps forward, imagining a wide-open, starry sky over his head. Marc was waiting for him just past the bedroom door, and without a word he took his hand and led him to his bed. It was small for two, and he ended up pulling Blake on top of him, a hand around his waist to hold him securely in place. The room didn't feel as stifling, suddenly, and neither did Marc's embrace—but then, it never did.

His fear fell dormant again even as he found sleep. In his dreams, he couldn't tell whose hand held him close, whose fingers raked through his hair. At times they were Marc's, and at times, Kate's. And sometimes, they both held on to him and promised never to let go.

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Chapter 17

The kiss started slowly, tenderly, two mouths getting to know each other. Kate had kissed Blake a couple of times already, but this felt ... different. No more stolen kisses hiding at the back of a truck or behind a crumbling wall. This time, they had all the time in the world. She closed her eyes and parted her lips. His tongue slipped inside her mouth. She made a small sound, low in her throat. His hand cupped her face, holding it gently as he tilted his head to deepen the kiss.

She wanted to feel his skin. Instantly, his clothes fell away, and she wrapped her arms tighter around him, pulling him close to her chest. The coolness did not surprise her; instead, she embraced it and tried to press more of her body to his, trying to soothe the inferno that raged in her. His hardening cock pressed into her upper thigh. She shivered. It had been so long...

A little out of breath, she broke the kiss and nuzzled his shoulder, placing small kisses against skin that warmed at the brief contact of her lips. He arched his neck for her, drawing her to it. She could feel two small scars against her lips. She stopped there and sucked on them gently, wondering if this was where Marc had bitten him when he had turned him. Blake made a little humming noise. Emboldened, she scraped her teeth against the scars and felt his cock jump against her. She did it again, grinning against his skin, with the same result.

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"Mmm ... Do you have a biting fetish you didn't tell me about, Kate?"

The quiet, chuckling words made her frown, though she couldn't have said why. She pulled back to look at Marc. Her frown deepened. Marc? He smiled at her, sparks dancing in his eyes and brightening his entire face, and her confusion vanished.

"As long as I'm the one doing the biting," she replied in a mock-severe tone.

He chuckled again. "No biting. Got it. How about sucking?"

Before she could reply, he lowered her to the mattress behind her. He kissed her again, and his mouth seemed different, for some reason. It pressed a little stronger against hers; his lips were a little fuller. She wanted to discover him all over again, but after a few seconds, he pulled away, much too fast to her liking. She threaded her fingers through his hair, intending to draw him back to her mouth, but forgot what she meant to do at the first caress of his lips on her breast. She stilled against him and held her breath, waiting for...

She shivered. "Oh. That's..."

His tongue flicked against her hardened nipple, then ran lightly around it.

"That's?" he said, his lips moving against her nipple and sending another shiver through her.

"Nice." She felt like purring as he drew her nipple into his mouth and sucked gently. "Very nice."

In response, he sucked a little harder. Her fingers tightened in his hair. She gasped, unsure whether to draw

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him closer or push him away. His hard cock rested against her leg, heavy and full. She wanted to touch it, touch him, make him feel half as good as he was making her feel, but his body was in the way.

As though reading her thoughts, Blake—she frowned briefly; hadn't Marc been here just a second ago?—shifted against her, turning his attention to her other nipple, sadly neglected until now, and giving her room to reach for his cock. He raised his head. Flames danced in his eyes.

"Touch me."

She knew what he wanted—the same thing she did—but she took her time, teasing the both of them just as he was teasing her nipple with small touches of his tongue. Her right hand let go of his hair to slide down the muscled expanse of his back. She raked her nails into his skin, wondering if it would be enough to mark him ... Marc?—for a little while. She kneaded his tight ass for an instant. She definitely would need to give it a proper look later. Finally, she slid over his hip and down to her goal. His cock twitched when she ran a single finger along it. Unable to resist any longer, she took it into her hand and squeezed lightly. Blake arched into her touch and took more of her breast into his mouth while caressing the other with his hand. She sighed in pleasure and closed her eyes. If he only had two mouths...

His hand retreated, giving way to full lips and a tongue that twisted around her right nipple while the lips around her left one tightened and the barest hint of teeth pressed into her flesh. Blake thrust lightly into her hand while Marc's cock pressed into her hip.

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Kate's eyes snapped open, jostled out of her dream. She covered her face with her hands and groaned.

"Not *again*."

This was not good. Not good at all. She remained still for a little while, waiting for her heart to stop hammering in her chest and for her libido to cool down.

The Healers had warned her of this side effect of their work. It was, after all, why no Healing took place at the camp, even though Sasha could do a small bit of it. The patients were always left with what the Healers called 'cravings' for a few days afterwards. *In other words*, a female friend had explained to Kate, long before, *you're horny as hell for a week*.

Her friend had failed to mention erotic dreams. Where in hell were those coming from? And how long until they stopped? It had been five days already. With her system still recuperating from the healing and her days peppered with naps, she'd had more than her fill of dreams.

She sat up in her bed and shook her head. She knew where they were coming from: Blake. Blake and his little talk about how he didn't mind sharing. Until now, she had imagined—not that she had thought much about it, not at all—he meant he didn't mind if she was with Marc when she wasn't with him. After her dreams, she was beginning to wonder if he had meant—

She groaned again and got out of the bed. Not good. Whatever he had meant, she certainly was not thinking about it. A few steps took her to the small bathroom, standard in every hospital room on the Healers' floor. She grimaced at

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her reflection in the mirror above the sink and pulled off the hospital gown to step into the shower stall. She scowled at the '3' inside the press-button for the water. Three minutes of hot shower. Two less than at the base. She hated coming to Claremont.

Angling the showerhead so as not to wet her hair, she turned on the water. She let the hot spray wash over her for a few seconds before picking up the soap and quickly washing off the antiseptic smell that still clung to her. Even these small, innocent touches had her nipples hardening again, and renewed the wetness between her thighs. She gritted her teeth and put down the soap, refusing to think of her dream. It had been the cravings talking, not her. She didn't want—

The water temperature dropped without warning, and she gasped. She'd never get used to it. Shivering, she forced herself to stay under the spray for a few more seconds. If that didn't calm down her libido, nothing would short of getting back to the camp and—

She rolled her eyes at herself and turned off the water. Icy cold water wasn't enough, it seemed. Goosebumps covered her entire body when she stepped out of the shower and grabbed a threadbare towel. From the cold, she told herself firmly. Nothing more. It wasn't as though she wanted to think about those two vampires anyway. Neither of them had seen it fit to come and see her in the infirmary, or even to come and say goodbye to her. When she had mentioned it to Daniel—she had still been out of it, pain medication making everything a little blurry or else she wouldn't have said anything—he had simply shrugged and replied they were

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busy. She snorted at the memory, a little disappointed, a little annoyed. She should have known better than to think they really cared about her.

Although ... Placing the towel on the sink, she looked down and traced the thin, white scar along her abdomen with a finger. It was all very foggy in her mind, but she didn't think she had imagined Blake's arms around her, holding her tight, carrying her to safety. She remembered the tone of his voice, though no distinct words remained in her mind. He had been scared, scared for her. She wouldn't have thought until she had heard him that he could be scared for anyone, not even himself. That had to mean he cared about her, that he really liked her. She looked up into the mirror and was surprised to see herself smiling, surprised how young she looked suddenly, and how her eyes seemed to gleam.

So that's what I look like when I'm in love.

The unexpected thought knocked the breath out of her. Her smile vanished in the mirror, replaced by a wide-eyed, almost scared look. It was one thing to be attracted to someone—to two someones. It was something else for her subconscious to have a field day with both of them. But to actually love...

She shook her head and pushed herself away from the sink. Naked, she hurried back to her bed and the pile of clothes next to it. She dressed quickly, focusing on what she was doing and nothing else: underwear, sports bra, socks, pants, t-shirt, combat shoes. Like every day since she had awakened in Claremont, she grimaced at the absence of her

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knives. She always felt naked when the sheaths weren't strapped to her arm and leg. They had to be at the camp—

She redirected that train of thought as quickly as she could. She'd have to do without the knives, that was all. It wasn't like she would need to fight while she was in Claremont anyway.

A nurse tried to stop her when she walked out of her room, claiming that she had to stay under observation until the next morning. She even tried to scare her, promising her the pain would return soon, when the drugs started to fade. Kate shrugged it all off. She'd been there for five days. She needed fresh air, and to clear her head. She'd never be able to do that if all she had to contemplate were the four bare walls of her hospital room.

Night had not fallen yet, and it wouldn't for at least an hour more, but heavy clouds darkened the sky and already the streets of Claremont had cleared out. Hands in her pockets, Kate strolled through deserted alleys, letting her memories guide her while her mind wandered freely—or almost. She made sure she steered clear of one particular topic every time it brushed her mind. She had no time to be in love. People got distracted when they were in love. They made mistakes. That was how she had ended up in Claremont, wasn't it?

She grimaced when she realized her mind had brought her back to what she didn't want to think about. She needed something to distract her. Thankfully, she had arrived at the pub. She pushed open the heavy door and walked in. A few heads turned to look at her. Other soldiers from the squad were on leave, and they had found their way to the

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clandestine pub as she had. She nodded at them. Rather than joining then, however, she went to sit at the counter.

The owner looked up at her from behind the counter, his wrinkled face brightening into a smile. Spencer Lievitch had belonged to the squad, long before she had joined it herself, and treated those he still called his comrades extremely well.

"Long time no see," he said, already placing a glass of his home-brewed beer in front of her.

She nodded, returning his smile. White froth covered the golden beer and already condensation fogged the glass. The prospect of drowning her confusion in a few glasses was enticing. If she still had drugs in her system, however, it might not be the best idea to get drunk.

"I should stick to water," she said apologetically, as she pushed the glass away. "With a sandwich? And I don't suppose you have fries?"

His slight frown lasted no longer than a second. He didn't ask why she didn't want beer; he didn't need to.

"Officially, I don't," he said with a conspiratorial grin. "You know, rationing and all that. But I've got this small patch of earth on the roof and I've been growing some vegetables..."

He winked and limped to the back of the counter to prepare her food. Kate watched him absently, her eyes stopping on his right leg. The fabric of his pants hung loose around it, and revealed, just above his shoe, the gleam of metal. If he had not lost his leg in battle, would he have continued fighting until he had died? She had always believed that was what would happen to her. As a child, she had wanted a nice house, a husband, and children. She liked kids.

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She had dreamed of being a teacher. Only when she had participated in basic training had her perspective on the world shifted. If she was to have kids, she wanted to know they would be safe. The only way for that to happen was to stop the demons. She had joined the squad, then. She couldn't imagine herself resigning now, not for anything, not until she knew all the breaches were closed, all the demons gone.

"Here you go." Spencer placed a plate in front of her along with a glass of water. "On the house."

Her mouth already watering, she thanked him and picked up a couple of fries. They burned her fingers, but she ate them anyway before biting into the sandwich. The food at the camp was more than decent, but it lacked variety. It almost was worth coming to Claremont and missing the fight for a few days if only for the different food.

Spencer served a couple of newcomers before coming back to her.

"So, anything new at the camp, then? How's Daniel?"

He had fought by Daniel's side for a while, and never failed to ask about him. Kate swallowed a bite of her sandwich and drank a little water before she answered.

"He's all right. Always cracking the whip over our heads when he thinks we're not fast enough."

Spencer chuckled. "You should have heard him, back when the squad still fought in Claremont. Always had these wild ideas about going into the City and fighting back. Even tried to get the higher-ups to let him do recon down there, though what he hoped to find ... I wonder if he's still looking for the same thing."

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He let the sentence hang in the air between them. Kate couldn't mistake his expression for anything other than hopefulness. He thought she knew what Daniel was looking for, and he was waiting for her to tell him. Very slowly, she picked up a few more fries. What had he heard, and from whom? Everything that related to the squad was classified information.

"He's looking for the rip," a woman said as she sat next to her. "Isn't he?"

Kate choked on her food. Coughing into a napkin, she picked up her glass and drank deep. She looked at the woman through watering eyes.

"What's a rip?" she asked in between two more fits of coughing.

The woman smiled indulgently, though no warmth touched her brown eyes. She pushed her auburn hair over her shoulder as she pivoted on the stool, facing Kate fully. She wore dark jeans and a light blue jacket. Her bright red lipstick made her skin seem even paler than it was. She looked to be in her late twenties, about Kate's age.

"Let's not play this game," she said. "You know what a rip is. You've been looking for it for weeks. And I can lead you to it."

Kate blinked, then forced a laugh from her throat. As tempting as it was, she couldn't admit anything to a stranger met in a pub, and even less when Spencer was looking at the two of them with wide, greedy eyes, waiting to hear more.

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"Listen, I don't know what you're talking about, Miss, but it sounds like a fun story. Let me buy you a drink and you can tell me—"

"I'm afraid not," she interrupted, her smile hardening slightly. "I'll talk to—Daniel, isn't it? And no one has called me 'Miss' since long before you were born, child. My name is Jen."

Kate's automatic protest that she was no child died on her lips. Her eyes widened, and she stared at the woman. Her pale skin and words added up to a clear conclusion; she was a vampire. Her name and the fact that she knew about breaches ... In a blinding flash of certitude, Kate knew. This was the vampire Marc had told them about, the vampire who had been prisoner of the demons and who had guided him to the first breach he had helped close. How she knew where to find the breach in the city or that it was what Daniel's squad was looking for, Kate didn't know. What she did know was that she couldn't let this chance pass. Thanks to this woman, a breach somewhere in Louisiana had been closed. It was Claremont's turn to be safe at last.

Jen in tow, she went to the squad headquarters in Claremont and took the truck. By chance, the demons weren't attacking the town that night and after some arguing with the sentries, she convinced them to let the truck out. She tried not to drive too fast; it wouldn't help anything if she ended up in a ditch. Still, she hoped to get to the camp before Daniel left for recon. The sun hadn't set very long earlier; she might just make it. And in fact, she did. She drove into the camp just as Daniel walked out of the main building with three

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other soldiers. Kate searched their faces, expecting to find Blake or Marc with him and was a little disappointed that they weren't there.

"Kate!" Daniel didn't look too pleased to see her. "You were supposed to stay in Claremont for two weeks!"

"It couldn't wait."

She walked to him. Jen followed her. Daniel's expression darkened.

"Not only you disobey direct orders but you bring a civilian to the camp? Did you get a blow to the head, too?"

"Her name is Jen," she said quickly, wondering if he'd remember. "She knows where the breach is."

"Jen?" He blinked and looked at her through widened eyes. "You know..."

Jen smiled, more in amusement than friendliness. "I do, yes."

"That's..." Daniel shook his head as though he could barely believe what he heard. He straightened suddenly and pulled the map out of his jacket, unfolding it for Jen. "Here. Can you show me on this?"

"I'm sorry, I can't, no. But I can lead you there."

Daniel frowned, his enthusiasm damped. "I don't understand."

She shrugged. "I've passed through a rip just like this one. Since then, I can ... I want to say feel it, but that's not exactly it. It's like a beacon. It calls to me. I've visited the City on my own. I've seen this breach. I can lead you there. Do you know how to close it?"

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Daniel folded the map, his eyes never leaving her, thoughtful. "We do, yes. A vampir e taught us how to do it. I think you know him. His name is Marc?"

She tensed at once, and her eyes darted around her. She didn't look pleased. They didn't seem to have parted in good terms, Kate thought, and somehow a part of her felt a little relieved.

"We do know each other, yes," Jen said, diffident.

"Where is he?" Kate asked. "Where's Blake?"

Daniel's brow contracted. He snorted. "They decided they'd be better off exploring on their own. They've been going out alone for three nights now."

Jen relaxed at the news. "So, will you come with me?"

"Of course. We can go on a reconnaissance party tonight, and tomorrow—"

"No need. I know where we're going."

"Most of my men are on leave, we can't—"

"We'll be better off with a small group. It'll be easier to hide from demons."

Daniel seemed as taken aback by her insistence as Kate felt. His eyes darted between Jen and Kate. "I'm not sure ... What do you think, Kate?"

She thought about it for no more than a second. She hadn't driven at night from Claremont for nothing. "We could end it tonight. I say we go."

"We?" Daniel shook his head . "Oh no, don't even think about it. You're not coming."

"I'm fine," she said, as calmly as she could. "The Healers barely left a scar!"

"Try that one on someone who didn't go through their clutches."

Kate crossed her arms. "I brought her here. I'm coming."

"As I said," Jen intervened, "we will hide from demons rather than fight. I could lead your mage by himself if you wanted. The fewer who come, the safer for all."

"He'd never go on his own," Daniel said, still looking at Kate with a slight frown. He sighed. "All right, Kate." He nodded at Elliot behind him, who had been listening with rapt interest. "Go grab Simon. Tell him it's the night. I want him ready in five minutes."

Grinning widely, Elliot hurried toward the barracks. It was a measure of his excitement that he didn't seem wary in the least about following a vampire into the City. Kate followed so she could get a protective vest and her knives. She needed to get a sword, too. She'd pick one of the lighter ones. The effects of the drugs were beginning to fade, and diffuse pain radiated through her abdomen. She would be OK, though. There was no chance in hell that she'd miss this fight. Whatever had happened between them afterwards, she imagined Marc had followed Jen for her courage. She wanted to show him—show herself—that she was just as strong. It would be a shock, when he and Blake returned to the camp. She just knew Blake would be mad that they had closed the breach without him, and Marc ... She supposed he'd be glad. And then, she would know. Once this reason to fight with the squad was gone, would they go? Or would they have a different reason to stay?

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Chapter 18

Marc glanced sideways at Blake and could barely stop himself from chuckling. Hours earlier, Blake had been silent as they drove to the City to explore a different area. His uncharacteristic moroseness had been starting to worry Marc. All had changed with a shimmer on the eastern side of a plaza.

"I've seen you do many things, but bouncing is a first."

Blake stilled in the car seat; it didn't last long.

"I'm not bouncing. Can't you drive any faster?"

"Yes, throwing the car into the ditch is going to help, you're right."

Even his sarcasm didn't affect Blake's excitement. Marc doubted anything would tonight. They had found the breach.

"You should calm down," he said as he turned onto the unpaved road that led to the camp. "Daniel is probably in the City himself by now. We won't be able to go back until tomorrow."

Blake let out a quiet snort. "It's not like we need him. If the mage is at the camp, we can go back right away. Give Daniel a taste of what it's like to be left behind."

Marc didn't respond. If Daniel hadn't kicked Blake out of his recon group, Marc might have done as much himself. A couple of nights spent thinking about why he wasn't on the frontline had given Blake some of that empathy he sometimes appeared to lack toward humans.

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The regular bouncing of Blake's leg next to him slowed down and stopped.

"A pity Kate won't be there, " Blake said. "She would have liked this fight."

Marc weighed each word before answering. "There will be other breaches to close."

From the corner of his eye, he saw Blake turn sideways with his back to the passenger door. Marc kept his eyes on the road, a little uncomfortable at the feeling of being scrutinized so closely.

"I thought we would leave the squad after this was over."

Blake's toneless words didn't allow Marc to guess what hid behind them, and his scent held no clearer answer. Was he irritated that Marc was thinking of staying with the squad? Or hopeful, maybe? Why had it become so hard to talk to his Childe?

"We can leave if you want to. I just thought you might want to stay a little longer."

"So you'd be staying for me, then? Not because *you* want to stay?"

They had arrived at the camp. The sentries let them through, and Marc drove up to the main building. He shut off the engine and looked at Blake, whose face was an expressionless mask.

"You know I like the girl," he said very low. "But if she likes you, I've got no problem with that. If you want to stay and try to get past the obstacles Daniel will put in front of you, that's fine with me. If you want to forget about her and move on to work with another group, that's fine as well."

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Just..." He didn't want to plead with Blake. It wasn't in him to do so. He just hoped Blake could see how tired he was of the games, tired of being reminded of his mistake. He sighed and finished. "Just don't make this about the past, OK?"

He half-expected Blake to claim he didn't know what Marc was talking about, and so his small nod surprised him. They climbed out of the car to find that a couple of soldiers had come out, probably alerted by the noise from the engine.

"Look at that," Blake said, his excitement obvious in his voice. "We even get a welcome committee. It's like they already know we've got good news."

Marc froze mid-step and turned his head sideways toward the nearby truck. He could have sworn ... He breathed in again, and again smelled the same familiar scent.

"We thought Daniel and Kate were back," the closest soldier answered Blake, arms crossed but grinning.

"Kate is back?" Blake said at once, sounding excited.

"She is. And she brought information back with her. They took Simon, and they went to close the breach."

"They what?" Blake exclaimed just as Marc stepped forward and asked urgently:

"Was a woman with them?"

The soldier looked at him in surprise. "How do you know?"

Marc swore and ran his gaze around the camp. He could already see the demons sweeping in and destroying everything. He had to do something.

"Listen. They walked straight into a trap. And the demons now know where the camp is."

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The three soldiers in front of him exchanged glances that, though wordless, clearly questioned his sanity.

Blake touched his shoulder. "What are you talking about?"

Marc ignored him. He knew he was only pushing back the inevitable by not answering him, but he would understand soon enough. "How many soldiers are left here?" he asked the one who had talked so far; he thought his name was Mike.

"Six. The rest went with Daniel."

"What's going on?" Blake insisted.

Six. With him and Blake, eight fighters, against who knew how many demons. Their only hope now was that the demons wouldn't consider them a big threat and would only send small numbers. Unless...

"Can you call back the soldiers who are in Claremont? Can you ask for reinforcements?"

Mike shrugged his shoulders. "I could, but they wouldn't arrive for at least an hour."

Marc couldn't understand how Mike could remain so calm. Didn't he understand? "Then go ahead and call now!"

At his side, Blake had fallen silent. He walked over to the truck and sniffed the air. Marc closed his fists. Mike still wasn't moving.

"Why should I do that? You're not part of the squad, and you come here spouting nonsense. If I followed your orders, Daniel—"

"Daniel might be dead by now. At the very least, he's a prisoner." It was all Marc could do not to shout at the idiot. "The woman he left with works with demons. If she came

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here, they will, too. They won't wait. We've got to fortify the camp and get ready to fight. And call for those damn reinforcements!"

Eyes wide and sweat pearling on his brow, Mike turned to his two companions. They conferred quickly before running in together. Marc wanted to sigh in relief, but it was much too early for that. He still had a lot to plan and organize.

"Jen works with the demons," Blake said, his voice strangled.

Marc observed the camp around him again, turning around. Everything had been so peaceful until now; by morning, a lot would change. "What do you think," he asked Blake, "should we defend the perimeter? Or let the demons in and fight them inside the camp?"

"When did you find that out?"

He was ready for this fight. He had known it might come at any moment. He could make it through this. "Drawing them to fight in the main building might work best. They'll only be able to enter one at a time, or they'll lose time trying—"

He jumped at the sound of broken glass. Blake had just put his fist through the car's window.

"That's why you left her, isn't it?"

Blake's still-closed hand fell to his side, blood slowly dripping from it. The smell covered other scents still clinging to the air around them. Marc made himself look up at his face.

"You found out she was a traitor," Blake continued, his voice shaking as hard as he was, "so you left her. And all that time I thought you came back for me."

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Marc wanted to take that bloody fist and pull the glass shards from it. He wanted to tell Blake that they didn't have time for this, not now, but he'd explain anything Blake wanted to hear later. Blake's fiery eyes, however, told him that doing anything other than answering him would be a mistake.

"I *did* come back for you. Her working with demons has nothing to do with you."

Blake shook his head slowly. "Then why didn't you tell me?"

His blood still dripped to the ground. He took a step back, and Marc's stomach clenched. He knew that look on his Childe's face. He had seen it once before, and then he had deserved the accusation of betrayal in Blake's eyes. Not this time, though. He hadn't done anything wrong. He had only tried to protect Blake.

"Because I knew you'd get it all wrong, like you're doing now!"

The gravel beneath Blake's boots crunched as he stepped back again. "Would you have come back for me if she hadn't been a traitor?"

Marc could hear voices inside the building, coming back toward the door for instructions. He clung to the excuse those voices gave him. If he kept giving Blake answers that didn't satisfy him, things would only get worse. He'd keep this fight for when they were done with the demons—if they survived. He tried to sound calm and reasonable, but even so a frantic edge crept into his voice.

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"We don't have time for this , Childe! Not now! We'll talk about it later."

Blake didn't answer. He reached into the car through the broken window and pulled out his sword. Without a word or a glance toward Marc, he walked to the truck and climbed in.

"Blake! Stop! Where are you going?"

"As far away from you as I can, that's where."

Blake started the truck and drove to the gates. The sentries hesitated for an instant , then opened the gates for him.

"I made the call," Mike said behind Marc. "They said not to expect them before at least an hour, maybe more. What now?"

The truck sped on the dirt road, going faster than was safe. Marc stared at it until it had disappeared past a group of trees, then turned to Mike.

"Get everyone in here. Just leave a sentry outside. We need to get a plan ready. We don't have much time."

Marc glanced back to the road. Not much time, and not much hope either. Daniel, Kate and whoever had accompanied them had to be dead by now, and Jen must have reported the camp's location to the demons. With heavy steps, he entered the main building. He wished he had killed her when he had had the chance. He had been so stunned to realize she was the one who kept interfering with their mages' efforts, so disappointed to lose all the hopes he had placed in her that he hadn't reacted until it had been too late. She had escaped. And now she was back. Maybe he would get a

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second opportunity to kill her. Even if he did, though, he doubted he'd get a third chance with Blake.

* * * *

"Idiot."

Blake's foot pressed a little harder on the accelerator.

"Fucking idiot. Pathetic fool."

The truck bounced with each hole and bump on the dirt road. Blake's hands tightened a little more over the wheel.

"I should have known. Of course he didn't come back because of me. Why would he?"

Something twisted in his chest. He clenched his jaw to stop himself from talking any more. He didn't like the way his voice sounded, halfway between a whine and a sob. He was angry. He should have been shouting rather than complaining. He should have put his sword through Marc's gut instead of running away from him. He should have known better than to trust him again. Hadn't he been hurt enough already?

He scowled and accelerated yet again. The right of the truck came close to swaying off the road, and he coaxed it back to the center of the dirt path. He hated that Marc could do this to him—break his heart, when Blake had never even given it to him. He hated feeling like Marc had only been playing with him. He hated that he couldn't even manage to truly hate him.

The truck reached the larger road and came to a dead stop. Hands still clenched on the wheel, Blake stared ahead of him. Turning right would take him away from the City, away

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from Marc. As far as he ran, though, he doubted the pain in his chest would ease. His head turned slowly to the left. The City lay a few miles ahead. The breach was there, though he had no chance to close it by himself. Kate was there, too; probably dead, Marc had said. The pain accentuated at the thought, then transformed into white-hot anger. Jen. Jen had to be in the City, if she had taken the squad there. Jen, who had taken both Marc and Kate from him.

He started the truck again and turned left. He took a long, deliberate breath in through his nose. Kate's scent and Jen's both lingered in the truck cabin. He would have no trouble tracking them down. If he found Kate first, if she was still alive, he would have someone to fight with, someone to take Marc's place. If it was Jen ... He bit the inside of his cheek and blood trickled over his tongue, sharpening his senses. His fangs came down. If he found Jen first, death would be slow to come for her.

Maybe by the time he reached the City he would have figured out which of them he most wanted to find.

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Chapter 19

The two women's scents wove through the fog, a trail of crumbs that Blake had no trouble following. He had left the truck on the edge of the City next to the squad's, and he now advanced on foot, sword in hand. In the past weeks, he had grown used to the terrain, and he managed to walk quickly without stumbling over the uneven ground.

Every few steps, his mind insisted on reminding him he should have been back at the camp, fighting with Marc, protecting his Sire as all his instincts demanded. He pushed back the thought every time. His anger at Marc—at himself—had shifted onto Jen, but he still hurt. He didn't know how much of his feelings for Marc came from the blood link between them and how much was something else, something vampires weren't supposed to be able to feel. He had never cared to examine his heart that closely. The double nature of what he felt, however, made Marc's betrayal hurt twice as much. Blake hurt as Childe and he hurt as lover. He wasn't sure that this time—

A frantic yet muted heartbeat stopped his progression along with his muddled thoughts. Focusing on his hearing, he rotated slowly in a semi-circle until he could pinpoint the source. Demons were approaching, a couple of streets away, but for now he wanted to know to whom this terrified heartbeat belonged. He flexed his fingers around the hilt of his sword and stalked over to the dilapidated house on his left. Most of the façade lay in ruins in the front, along with

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part of the ceiling and roof. Blake stepped over the rubble, then stilled. The noise of crumbling materials beneath his boots made him lose the heartbeat.

He caught it again and moved toward the back of the house, very careful of where he stepped. He looked down when the texture of the floor changed. The carpet had seen better days, but the most surprising was that it still looked like carpet—moldy, torn, and covered in dirt, though that was to be expected fifteen decades after the demons had invaded the City. Humans had endured as well and still clung to their civilization even as they struggled to save it. As much as he dismissed them, Blake envied their purpose sometimes. They would have something to rebuild when all the demons were gone. He wasn't sure what he would do then, if he was still alive.

Standing in the middle of what had been a bedroom, Blake turned on his heel. His eyes scanned the room but found nothing. This had to be the place, however. The sound was the loudest here, accompanied by the bitter scent of fear. A flash of blue light followed by movement caught the corner of his eye and he turned, instinctively raising his sword. He stopped himself from striking just in time and slowly lowered his arm as Simon hugged him.

"Oh, thank God!" His sobbing words almost got lost against Blake's shoulder. "Help me! They're trying to take me!"

Reining in his impatience, Blake pushed him back with some difficulty. Tear tracks traced neat lines over the dirt that

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marred Simon's face. He trembled under Blake's scrutiny, his eyes darting repeatedly to the room behind Blake.

"Where are the others?" Blake asked, focusing on the most pressing matter. If Simon was alive, Kate might be as well.

"Who—"

"They're here!"

Blake turned to the doorway. If the demons in the street hadn't noticed them before, Simon's shriek alerted them. They stopped and, as one, turned to the house. One of them grunted; orders, maybe? Blake didn't have time to wonder. With his free arm, he pushed Simon against the wall then gave him a hard look.

"Stay here. Whatever trick you used to hide? Do it again. And try to cover sounds and scents this time."

Simon's eyes widened. His Adam's apple bobbed, and he nodded very stiffly. Blake didn't stay to watch him perform his little magic trick. Already focused on the demons, he strode out of the room. Two of them had just climbed over the debris that delimited the building, while two more waited on the edge of the street. So they thought they could take him down with just two?

Blake charged them, his teeth bared. He would show them. He slashed at the first one's face. A moon-blade axe stopped his sword with a thundering crash. He broke away and struck again, this time aiming for the second demon's knees. The demon parried, but too late. Blake shifted his angle at the last moment to avoid the blocking sword. The demon roared as Blake's sword struck between two bony spikes on the side of its leg, then again when Blake pulled the

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sword upward, breaking bones. A grunt behind Blake reminded him to break away before the first demon attacked his exposed back.

He shuffled back, reassessed the situation when a third demon joined the first two, and launched himself into the battle again. He danced between the three monsters, using agility where they only had brute force. His fangs extended as the bitter smell of demon blood, mixing to the sweeter scent of his own, started permeating the air. He put all his anger and hate behind each blow. These were Jen's demons, he chanted in his mind with every strike. He was going to kill them, and then he would kill her. He would kill her for taking his Sire and Kate from him. He would kill her because, once she was ashes, he would finally stop wondering whether Marc would ever return to her. He would kill her, take her head off just like this, but not before he had made her hurt the same way he did. He would kill—

"Blake?"

For the second time that night, he missed killing Simon by pure reflex. The idiot had grabbed his sleeve from behind. Couldn't he see Blake was busy?

"They're..." He swallowed hard beneath Blake's stare.

"They're dead. You can stop now."

Frowning, Blake looked away from him and at the four demons around them, lying in growing puddles of blood. When had he put down the last one?

"Let's get out of here," Simon said, half-pleading.

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Blake shook his head once to clear his mind and led the way out of the ruins. Had he been so caught up in his rage that he hadn't noticed that the fight had ended?

Back to the foggy street, he breathed in deeply. He couldn't smell any more demons, but he had lost Kate's trail as well. He turned to Simon, so fast that Simon started in fear.

"Where are the others? Where's Kate? And Jen?"

That last name put some fire back into Simon. He glowered as he repeated her name.

"Jen? She led us straight into a trap!" He was shaking again, but this time it was from anger rather than terror.

"There were demons everywhere, and she went to stand with them. She was laughing at us! Mocking us! She told them to get me! And then Daniel told us to run..." He deflated, his gaze dropping to the ground even as his voice fell to a murmur. "I did. There's nothing I could have done to help them."

Blake snorted. "Nothing? What about your magic! You could have—"

"You don't understand," Simon cut in, looking back at him through pleading eyes. "I can't do spells if I'm scared. All I can do is protect myself, and that's more a reflex than conscious thought. It's not like I enjoy being useless, but I couldn't help them. I really couldn't."

His tone begged Blake to believe he was telling the truth. Blake swept his eyes around them, trying to calm down. The fog drifted lazily over torn streets and shattered buildings. He

could imagine Kate and her friends fighting, somewhere beyond the ruins, while Simon ran as fast as he could.

"Are they dead?" he asked very low.

"I ... I don't know. I didn't look back. But I heard Elliott shouting. And Kate. I think they got hurt."

Pain blossomed into Blake's chest, as intense as the pain from Marc's betrayal. He had known when he came into the City that she might be dead, but as long as he held on to her scent, he had had hope. What were the odds that she was still alive, now? His only consolation was that she had died doing what mattered most to her: trying to close the breach and save her people. He wished he had been there for her. He wished he could have helped...

He looked back at Simon, who was observing him with obvious nervousness. He *could* help. Maybe it was too late for her, but the people she had tried to defend still needed to be saved. The breach still needed to be closed. And Blake not only knew where the breach was, he had with him the one person who could seal it. He would do it, in Kate's memory. He would do it, and prove to Marc that he wasn't such a loser, after all, that he was worth coming back to.

He rested his left hand on Simon's shoulder, next to the strap of his leather bag, and squeezed once. "We're going to close the breach."

Simon jerked out of his grip, fear taking over again in his scent and eyes. "We ... what?" He shook his head, incredulous. "Oh no, no way, it's too dangerous, I just told you I can't—"

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Blake didn't let him go on. "But you have to," he cut in, his words even and strong. "What, you think I'm not scared when I go to battle? We all are."

Simon's eyes narrowed for a moment. "You're scared?" Blinking, he shook his head and took a step back. "No, you're just saying that."

"I'm not," Blake said, closing the distance between them again. "I need you to get over your fear. I need you to do it for me."

Those last words caught Simon off guard. He looked at Blake's hand, back on his shoulder, then returned his eyes to his face. Hesitation, fear, and hope flickered over his features. He licked his lips. "If I ... if I did that ... if I closed the breach ... Would it change anything? About us, I mean. About how you feel about me."

"Well," Blake replied with a wide grin, "everything is possible, and..."

His voice trailed off as he watched hope spread over Simon's face. The human's crush on him was a convenient tool, and stretching the truth cost him nothing. It should have been easy to lie. He was surprised to discover that it was anything but. His hand fell away from Simon, and his grin turned into an apologetic smile.

"No," he said, quieter now. "I'm sorry, but you could defeat the entire demon army , and I still wouldn't like you, not the way you want me to. I'd be in awe, and a bit pissed off you took away all my fun, and kinda proud that I pushed you into doing it, but..."

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He shrugged, and tried not to let Simon's disappointment get to him.

"It's not a game, you know," he added after a moment. "For the longest time I thought it was, but it's really not. There's no prize for either of us if we do this. We might not even live through it. But I swear I'll die fighting to give you time to do your spell if it comes to that. We're doing it because it's the right thing to do. Because other people will live if we succeed, and many more will die if we don't."

He stopped abruptly, startling himself. He had heard the same words from Marc's mouth dozens of times. He had never understood them—never until now. He smiled, amused that now, of all times, he finally did. In front of him, Simon gulped and, very slowly, nodded.

* * * *

Behind the fence, the woods grunted and growled with the advance of the demons. Marc clenched his hand on his sword's hilt but left it in its scabbard for now. They couldn't even see the demons yet. He would draw his weapon soon enough.

"Everyone's in place," Mike said, coming out of the building behind him. He sounded nervous, his voice rasping with every word. "You're sure—"

Marc didn't need to look at him to know he was looking at the fence and the gates that had been left open.

"I'm sure," he interrupted, wincing at the harsh tone of his own voice. He looked at Mike and tried to smile reassuringly. "Trust me, I've been here before. This is our best chance."

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Mike gave him an uncertain smile. "I hope you're right. Daniel will kill me if I get his entire squad slaughtered." He frowned, his smile twisting into something much darker. "Although I'll be dead too if that happens, so I guess I'm safe from him."

Marc's eyes returned to the woods, and he didn't reply. It wouldn't help anything to remind him that Daniel was probably dead by now.

"It'll be all right," he said when a few seconds had passed with only the sound of the approaching demons breaking the silence. "I've done this before, more than once, and I'm still here."

He *had*, he reminded himself forcefully. He had led attacks toward demon camps, he had planned traps and ambushes, he had fought with humans who barely knew him, barely trusted him, and kept most of them alive. Casualties were to be expected, of course, but they had better chances of survival if they followed his plan than if they didn't. He had done this before, and he had survived.

One difference gnawed at him, leaving him raw with pain. For the past eighty years, he had either had Blake by his side when leading such attacks, or he had kept the knowledge that he would see Blake again, sooner or later, at the back of his mind. This time, he didn't know if Blake would return, where he was, or what he was doing. Knowing Blake, he had found demons to kill; that didn't reassure Marc in the slightest.

He knew why Blake was angry. He also knew what kind of stupid stunts his Childe pulled when anger got the better of him. And he knew, even if he wished he didn't, that this anger

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could have been avoided if he had just told Blake about Jen when he had returned. Things had been so tense, though it had seemed easier to just move on without coming back to a festering past. Not only that, but he had compounded his mistake by not warning the squad about her. Worse, his omission had negated their wariness toward vampires. Would they have trusted her so quickly if Marc had never mentioned her name?

"They're coming," Mike said next to him, the words no louder than a rush of air.

Marc blinked and focused on the forms now distinguishable amongst the trees. Without thinking, he pulled his sword out and firmed his grip on the hilt.

The entire mess was his fault. All he could hope was that someone remained, when it was over, to listen to his apology.

* * * *

Kate's fingers shook against Elliot's neck. She closed her eyes and pressed a little harder. His skin was clammy, already cooling—or maybe it was just an effect of her imagination.

"No pulse," she murmured.

She opened her eyes again and looked at Daniel, a few feet away. Crouching behind a crumbling wall, he kept watch on the street. She didn't know what he was trying to see; with the fog swirling in the street, they only got glimpses of ruins and demons. He didn't turn to her but nodded to show he had heard. Two steps behind him, the third member of

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their group, Lou, met her eyes. Dried blood marred his face forming a long, thick line from his forehead down to his jaw.

"We ... we've got to move on," he said, grimacing. "They'll smell his blood—"

"Just as well as they'll smell mine," Daniel cut in, the cold edge of a knife slicing through his words. "And yours. And Sammy's."

Kate winced. A few feet behind where Elliot had fallen, Sammy's face turned paler with each passing moment. She wasn't sure whether it was from blood loss or fear.

"Lou is right." She hated to contradict Daniel, especially where other soldiers could hear, but they were beyond that now. "We've got to move. But not because of the blood. They know where we are, there's no way they could have lost us, even with the fog. They're just playing with us."

Daniel sighed, but he still didn't look back. "I can see it," he murmured. "It can't be more than fifty yards away. It's so bright..."

No moon shone over the city, but the street was almost as bright as day. An unnatural light came out of the breach. They had all seen it before when Jen had called out a small troop of demons from their hiding spot. She clenched her fists at the thought of Jen. How could they have been so trusting?

"There's nothing we can do about it," she said, "not with Simon gone."

If only Daniel hadn't told Simon to run before they could realize the demons weren't trying all that hard to kill them. If only the rest of them had been able to follow him before demons had cut their path. The demons seemed to want

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them alive, though for what reason, Kate couldn't fathom—just like she couldn't understand why Jen had led them to the breach, when the ambush could have taken place anywhere.

"But if we get out of here," she continued after a moment, "if even one of us makes it out, we can come back. We know where the breach is now."

There was another possibility, of course. Simon might make it back to the camp. She couldn't make herself mention that hope, however; it felt too much like one of those wishes that can't come true if they are voiced.

She stood and slowly stretched, raising her arms up. The scar that marred her stomach had been throbbing for a little while. The drugs had long since faded from her system. She ground her teeth together and pushed back the pain. She would hurt much more if she let the healed injury stop her from fighting her best. She lowered her arms again and pulled her sword from its scabbard. It glinted in the ethereal light coming from the breach. Sammy stood as well. He winced and shifted his weight to his good leg before gingerly touching the tightening-bandage Kate had applied to his wound. All it did was slow down blood loss. Sammy's fingers came back bloody. He wiped them on his pants. His expression hardened.

"Dead for dead," he said, his voice gruff from pain and repressed fear, "I'd rather die fighting than bleed to death hiding here."

"Me, too," Lou said very low.

Daniel sighed again, and finally turned to look at Kate. His eyes scrutinized her. "How are you?"

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She frowned at the unexpected question. "How am I? What do you mean?"

"The three of us are hurt. You've got the best chance to go back to the camp and—"

"Wait!" She stared at him through wide eyes. "That's not what I meant!"

"But it makes sense," Lou said. "We can keep them occupied and give you as much of a head start as we can. If you run—"

"But I don't *want* to run!"

Daniel stood from his crouching position and gave her a mildly annoyed look. "That vamp has been a bad influence on you. Since when do you question orders?"

Her stomach tightened, and this time it had nothing to do with her wound. She remembered what Blake had said about dying without regrets. She wished it had been true for her, but her dreams from the past couple of days had left her with too many unresolved 'what if' questions—questions that really weren't helping her focus at that moment.

"It's got nothing to do with—"

A savage howl resounded through the fog. They all tensed and turned toward the street, expecting demons to rush at them. Kate frowned. It had sounded like...

"Blake?" she murmured.

The next second, the demon alarm started blaring over them, strident and deafening. It drowned the sounds of fighting as soon as they started. She didn't think twice. She ran out, her sword raised, and joined her wordless yell to the battle.

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Chapter 20

For the first few minutes, Marc's plan worked. Five demons entered the building one by one, and he managed to shut the reinforced metal door and barricade it, locking the rest of the demons out. He then joined the fight, and together the six soldiers left in the camp got rid of the first wave of demon attack. It was when Marc looked up from the body of his dead opponent that he first realized things weren't turning so good after all. All demons had been killed, yes, but three humans were bleeding, the heady smell of their blood mixing to the more bitter one of the demons'. Worse, the door, battered by an axe, was about to cave in.

"Spread out," he advised the fighters. "Keep in teams of two. We can do this."

Uncertain nods answered him. It hadn't been an hour yet since Mike had called Claremont for reinforcements. At the rhythm things went, they would arrive too late. Marc was determined to do all he could, but the odds weren't good. If only Blake had been there...

He had resisted the impulse until now, but he gave in. Closing his eyes to focus, he searched inside himself for the awareness of Blake's existence. The turning of a new vampire created a bond between Sire and Childe, a bloodline. Only death could sever it, and doing so it told the survivor of the other's fate. The bond, however, had another use. Marc had never done this before, but his Sire had done it to him, calling him back when he needed him. In his mind, he seized the

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bloodline that linked him to Blake and pulled at it. Wherever he was, Blake would feel the tug to return to Marc. He might not answer it, but at least Marc had tried.

He opened his eyes again when the soldiers around him gasped. Massive demon hands grabbed the edges of the opening the axe had carved in and pulled, tearing the door apart with a screeching roar. In its haste to come in, the demon didn't fully destroy the door, so that it had to contort itself to pass through the hole in the metal. Marc's eyes narrowed, and he lunged forward. If he could kill this one before it was fully in, it might slow down the others a little.

Holding on tight to the bloodline, he yelled and slashed his sword at the demon.

* * * *

Just as Blake pulled his sword free from the body of his first kill, two things happened. A flash of motion just steps away from him caught his eye, accompanied with a shout that the demon alarm drowned almost completely. The scent, though, was unmistakable, and he rushed forward to fight by Kate's side with sheer joy. She was alive. Not only that, but she had joined his desperate attack.

At the same time, he tried to ignore the sudden pull inside his mind and chest. Southeast of where Blake fought, Marc was calling for him. He had never felt anything like this before, such a compulsion to drop everything and go to his Sire. How bad could things be at the camp for Marc to even resort to this? Part of him was glad that, despite everything, Marc would think of calling for his help. Blake couldn't give it

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at that moment, though, not when he had his own battle to fight.

A second demon fell under his blows. Through the dense, drifting fog, he saw glimpses of three, maybe four more fighters around him. From his estimations, maybe a dozen demons were guarding the breach. That was all he had been able to count before rushing forward to fight. He hoped his distraction had been enough to allow Simon to get closer to the breach under the cover of a glamour. He also hoped that they'd be able to buy him enough time.

Maybe fifty yards away, the breach gleamed as brightly as it had when he had first caught sight of it hours earlier. It seemed like it had been days rather than hours. Its brightness was enough to shine through the fog that appeared to drift through it. Maybe ten feet high and half that in width, it seemed to have been torn through the fabric of reality itself. The ragged edges of the roughly oval opening seemed to flap with the feeble wind. Despite its brightness, it was hard to tell what lay beyond it; a sheer but blurry veil appeared to drape over it. There didn't seem to be movement on the other side, however, and that was good. The last thing they needed now was for reinforcements to surge out of the breach.

"Blake! Behind you!"

He whirled at Kate's warning, blindly slashing his sword with both hands. It met metal, and sparks flew, illuminating the demon's snout. He hit again and again. The fog was slowly thinning around him. At his back, the light emanating from the breach flickered.

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* * * *

The building reeked of death. Marc passed a hand over his face, wiping the blood from his eyes. He instinctively licked his fingers as he turned on his heel to find his next prey. He grimaced as the bitterness hit his tongue. Some of it was his, but mostly it was demons' blood. They had realized, at about the same time that they had torn the door off its hinges, that he was the most dangerous of their adversaries. They had been avoiding him since, focusing instead of the weaker humans he fought with.

Mike and a comrade battled three at once, barely managing to stay alive, let alone do any damage to the demons. They were tiring under the relentless assault—but then, they were all tired after fighting for so long. Grinding his teeth against the protests of his wounded thigh, Marc surged forward, his sword already raised. He focused his blows on one of the three demons until the beast growled its annoyance and broke away from the two humans to turn on him.

As he fought the pig-faced demon, he tried not to wonder where Blake was and whether he was listening to the call. Marc had not let go of the bloodline since he had seized it, but with each passing second, he doubted more and more that Blake would come back. Why would he, he thought bitterly. What had Marc ever offered him that would bring him back?

Over the clash of the battle, he heard the roar of an engine. His head whipped to the entrance, hoping to see ... Blake? Reinforcements? Numbers would have been better at

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this point, but he couldn't help hoping for a single silhouette in that doorway.

A flash of metal on the edge of his vision jerked him back into his fight. He rolled away from the descending blade. His thigh pressed against the floor, and he groaned as pain lanced through his body. Just a little longer, he thought, frantic, as he forced himself back to his feet. Just one more demon...

* * * *

Only ragged scraps of fog still clung to the street. The alarm had abruptly stopped ringing moments earlier, as though dying with one of the demons. Panting, Kate wiped sweat from her forehead, then gripped her sword with both hands again. She shifted her feet on the uneven asphalt to steady her stance and waited for the next attack. She didn't have enough energy left to keep throwing herself at demons. She didn't know how Blake could do it still. His left arm hung limp at his side, blood soaking his jacket's sleeve and trickling from his fingers, and yet he kept rushing at the four demons left, needling them before pulling back, drawing them away from Simon and his two bodyguards.

Five minutes into the fight, a flash of blue light had traversed the fog, lightning-fast but soundless. Just feet away from Kate, Blake had finished putting a demon to death before rushing toward the breach. Through her own frenzied attack, Kate had been sure he would jump through, for a moment, and a fist of ice closing over her heart had spurred her on. She had finished her attacker and run after Blake,

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only to find him guarding Simon. She had no idea when or how Simon had come to the middle of the fight, but she knew, without needing to think about it, what he was doing.

She had held her position ever since, guarding Simon from attacks and disruptions. Blake, on the other hand, had returned to the fight when Daniel had joined them. They were all just buying more time for Simon's spell. She realized that, but with each passing moment, Kate's hope grew that, maybe, just maybe...

"It's just us left," Daniel said. He sounded out of breath and in pain. "How much time, Simon?"

Kate glanced at Daniel. He should have known better than to talk to their mage and distract him. How desperate was he to risk interrupting the spell? Simon, however, didn't seem to have heard, and he kept chanting under his breath. Returning to facing the demons, Kate flinched. Three of them surrounded Blake about fifty yards away while the fourth one stalked toward her, limping. Swallowing past the lump in her throat, she stepped forward. Better to keep the fight away from Simon if she could.

* * * *

"It's over. The last ones just ran off into the woods."

Marc nodded at the soldier's words, grateful. His sword slipped from his bloodied fingers and fell with a resounding clang. He let his knees buckle beneath him and joined it on the ground. In a minute, he'd stand again, help the medic if he could, thank the reinforcements, count how many demons had died under their blows—and how many members of the

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squad had survived. In just a minute, he would do what needed to be done. Until then, though, he'd lie down and rest.

It was over. The price was hefty, but they had won this fight. And still, he couldn't make himself let go of the bloodline.

* * * *

"Two. Just two more. Just two."

Blake muttered the words over and over, burying his pain, tiredness and worry beneath them. He would never have believed he would last so long . Spurred on by Kate's presence and the unrelenting call of his Sire, he had fought harder and better than he ever had before . But then, no battle had ever mattered as much as this one did. Fights had never been anything more than games until now, where each move was the equivalent of a pawn meandering over an intricate board. Now that Blake understood how it could be so much more, the path was straight and unmistakable in front of him. He had no more time for sidesteps and detours.

The two demons a few steps in front of him grunted at each other. Blake had no idea what they were arguing about, but it couldn't possibly be good. He glanced at Kate on the other side of them. She had just pulled her sword from the last demon she had killed and seemed to be hesitating. Her braid had long ago come undone, and her disheveled hair framed her face, giving her a wild appearance. Even from where he stood, Blake could hear the resounding beating of her heart with each huffing breath she drew. She kept her sword pointed at the ground, her shoulders slumped. She was

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exhausted. Even so, she took an unsteady step toward the demons and him, then a second one. Despite himself, Blake grinned. If they survived this, he would kiss her—and this time, he wouldn't ask for her permission.

His grin faded when the taller of the two demons whacked at him without warning. Drawing from his last reserves, Blake stumbled to the side and out of harm's way just in time. At this new angle, he could see the thin silhouette stalking toward Simon and Daniel, unbeknownst to them. He hadn't known where Jen had hidden herself until now, or why she hadn't joined the fight earlier, but her goal seemed all too clear.

"Kate! Protect Simon!"

The demon took another shot at him. Blake crouched and rolled further away. He risked a glance at Kate and was relieved to see she was now hurrying back toward Simon, calling Daniel's name to warn him of the impending attack. Blake growled as he pushed himself back to his feet. If there was one kill he would have liked to have to his name, it was Jen's. The thought sent a burst of energy through him. He launched himself forward and swung his sword at the demon's neck. He didn't strike with enough force to sever its head, but blood spurted forward. Dropping its axe, the demon gripped the wound with both hands. Even then, the blood continued to gurgle until it fell, face forward. Blake tried to rush past it to get to the other fight, where Kate and Daniel fought back Jen with all they had left. The last demon however didn't let him go. It lashed out and, taking Blake by surprise, hit his already injured left arm. Blake's vision

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blurred when he felt the bone crack. He tumbled down, barely managing to protect his arm from further harm. Any more pain, he thought, grinding his teeth, and he might pass out.

Just as he hit the ground, he caught a glimpse of a silhouette jumping through the breach. He wanted to shout at Jen to come back, but the words died in his throat. The space around the breach fired up with a light brighter than the sun. Deafening thunder rolled over the street. When Blake's vision cleared again, everything was dark. It took him a couple of seconds to understand why. The breach was closed. Without its light, night had fallen on the street again.

A yell brought him back to his fight. The last demon was standing over him, but its head was turned to where the breach had been, just moments ago. Acting through instinct alone, Blake thrust his sword up, plunging beneath the demon's armor. The demon's shout died with it. It started toppling over, the metal spikes on its armor plunging toward Blake. With a groan of effort, Blake pushed it to the side where it lay next to another demon. And then, it was truly over.

Silence covered the street, almost unreal after the clash of steel and clamor of magic. Blake's ears buzzed, as though trying to cover the absence of noise. He sat up but didn't try to get to his feet quite yet. He didn't think he could stand without immediately getting better acquainted with the ground. A cry of joy rang over the corpses of the fallen fighters and humans. Blake looked toward the last three members of the squad. Simon jumped up and down, shouting his pride.

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"I did it! I really did it!"

He only stopped when, next to him, Daniel fell to his knees. He leaned toward him, asking a worried question, but Daniel only shook his head before breaking down into what could have been fits of laughter or crying, Blake couldn't tell. Kate left the two of them and, with slow, limping steps, trudged back toward Blake. He used his sword as a crutch to stand, and let out a small cry when the movement jostled his left arm.

"You're OK?" she asked, only four yards away now.

He slid Seneca into the scabbard on his back. Every inch of his body protested against the effort. "I will be. You?"

She imitated him and put her sword away. Blood, sweat, and remnants of camouflage make-up marred her face. She had never been so beautiful. "I'm ... fine. Better than fine."

Careful fingers cupped the back of his head and pulled him to her. She barely brushed her lips to his, as though afraid to hurt him. He smiled against her mouth.

"I'm not made of glass, you know."

He raised his arms to embrace her and show her what a proper kiss was like—and remembered too late the mangled state of his left arm. The dull pain that throbbed through his entire left side flared. He gasped, doubling in pain.

"Fuck!"

Kate let out a dry laugh. "I give you a little kiss and already you want to get in my pants. You're not losing any time, are you?"

With a pained smile, Blake shrugged his good shoulder.

"No time to lose, is more like it."

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She shook her head but she was still smiling. Delicately, she took his right hand in her left. Both their hands were bloodied. They stuck together. Blake didn't mind one bit.

"I've missed you," she said, quieter now. "I'm happy you're here. Really, really happy!"

She ended with a spark of bright laughter that lit up the night.

Walking back to the truck was an ordeal only made easier by Kate's hand holding his tightly. After all these nights spent wandering through the labyrinth-like streets of the dilapidated town, the absence of the fog made everything simpler, and they found their way back easily. Simon babbled the entire time, recounting his magic feats with unnecessary details. Although Blake wanted to tell him to be quiet, with the ready-made excuse that they didn't want to attract any demon left in the City, he said nothing. Simon had earned his moment of glory. He seemed disappointed when Daniel, Kate and Blake all climbed into the back, leaving the driving to him, but they could still hear his excited babble from the back through a narrow opening in the cabin.

"We'll go back for them," Kate murmured as the truck started.

Daniel nodded, his face turned to the quiet ruins and the dead they were leaving behind. He and Kate made plans almost the entire way back to the camp. Blake closed his eyes after a moment and let their voices roll over him like waves. Kate's hand anchored him to the truck, but sleep had never seemed so appealing.

"Blake? Will you?"

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He started awake, blinking owlishly at Kate and Daniel, both of whom were looking at him. Kate's expression was expectant; Daniel's, wary.

"What?"

"Will you stay with the squad?" Daniel asked, his tone gruff. "The job's not done."

Blake hid a yawn beneath his hand. "Not sure. Have to talk to Marc."

The two of them nodded and resumed their planning, unaware of Blake's frown at his own words. They had come out automatically, a standard reply for any decision that he wanted to discuss with his Sire. Part of him wanted to repudiate them—he had left Marc behind, after all. He couldn't manage to, however. As bitter as the truth was, he wanted to see Marc, wanted to look on his face for a sign of pride that Blake had helped close the breach, an acknowledgement that his turning g hadn't been a mistake. He hadn't thought of Marc since he had started fighting, but the tug was still there, calling him forward, the sensation becoming clearer as the truck approached the camp.

"We might come into a fight," he said abruptly, remembering what Marc had said about demons attacking the camp. "Marc was preparing your soldiers for it when I left."

Daniel frowned at that, exchanging a worried glance with Kate. He pushed himself up from the bench and stumbled to the back of the truck, close to the cabin. On his orders, Simon sent a message to the camp through the radio. The reply came in quickly, grim though positive. The camp had indeed been attacked, though the fight had ended now. The gates

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were wide open when they arrived there, and Daniel slipped out of the truck before Simon had even turned off the engine.

"Shouldn't you go with him?" Blake asked Kate, though he still didn't let go of her hand.

"He knows where to find me if he needs me."

They helped each other out of the truck, both wincing as the movements disagreed with their respective wounds.

"He also knows I'll send a medic to chase after him soon," she added, grinning through the pain, "so he'll do as much as he can before that."

Before Blake could reply, Marc appeared in front of them. The tug inside of Blake finally let go, and he immediately started missing it. The feeling disappeared when he took in Marc's worried expression.

"You're hurt," Marc said, almost accusingly.

Blake was too tired to do more than raise an eyebrow at him. "So are you," he replied. Even without looking, he could smell his Sire's blood and the stinging smell of disinfectant.

Marc gave Kate the same hard look. "And you're hurt, too. Weren't you supposed to be resting?"

Curious as to how she would reply, Blake glanced at her. She looked embarrassed. He chuckled; if he had told her she should have been resting, he was sure her answer would have been much more vocal.

Still frowning, Marc turned back to Blake. "How bad is it? Let me see."

Grinding his teeth, Blake let Marc fuss over his arm. The careful touches of Marc's fingertips sent a few flashes of pain through his arm. Marc flinched every time Blake winced.

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"There are two medics inside. Better have them look at it than let it heal on its own."

Blake nodded, though the words weren't anything he had hoped to hear from his Sire. Unconsciously, he tightened his hand on Kate's.

"The breach is closed," she said suddenly. "And it's all thanks to Blake. It'd never have happened without him."

Mark looked at her in surprise, then turned to Blake again. Blake couldn't recall ever seeing flames like those in his eyes, not unless he was angry. His scent, though, held no trace of anger.

"See?" Marc said, his voice shaking. "This, right here. You being a hero even when you claim you don't care about any of it. That's why I came back to you. That's why I was always going to come back, Childe."

The last word hid the trace of a question. Blake answered it with a small smile. Leaning in, Marc kissed him. The touch wasn't as delicate as Kate's earlier, but the urgency behind it was unmistakable. Unable to resist, Blake tilted his head and answered the kiss, pressing his tongue against Marc's. His scent shifted, just barely, and Blake realized what unfamiliar thread had colored it until that instant: fear. When had Marc last been afraid because of him? And why was a simple kiss enough to reassure him? He pulled back and slowly shook his head, trying to appear stern. He was still hurt. This wasn't as easy as Marc wanted it to be.

"You're not forgiven yet," he warned. "You should have told me about Jen."

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Kate nodded at his side. "You should have told *us*. We wouldn't have followed her so blindly if we'd known."

Marc looked from Blake to her and back, glancing down at their hands.

"You're right. I should have told you. I'm sorry."

It wasn't the first time he had heard his Sire apologize, but somehow, this time, Blake believed the words.

"So ... what now?" he asked, as much to Marc as to Kate.

He watched as their eyes met. She looked away first while Marc remained blank-faced.

Kate cleared her throat. "The squad will be moving to Claremont for a while, until all demons that remain in the City and around it are killed. Then we'll move to a different town, and help them close the breach there. If you wanted to stay ... The squad needs fighters like you."

She looked down at her feet as she said it, rather than looking at either of them, but the blush coloring her cheeks revealed she was addressing both of them. It hinted that she might want them to stay for other reasons as well, but now was not the time to press her about it. Blake brought her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles, all the while keeping his eyes on Marc. Marc tilted his head toward Kate and gave Blake a questioning look. He nodded.

"We'll stay," Marc said very slowly. "At least for a while. To see how things go."

He wasn't talking about the squad and the fight anymore, and Blake was sure Kate understood that. If anything, her blush darkened when she gave a shallow nod in reply to Marc's words. Blake smiled. He had rarely been as uncertain

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about what the future held for him, but he couldn't wait to find out.

The End

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Coming in 2009 in Blurred Bloodlines

Kate stared in shock at the space where, just a second earlier, the breach had winked out of existence. The shout that had been rising to her lips died there without a sound. She dropped her sword and clutched at her throat, touching the two bite marks there. She blinked once, then a second time, and still the breach was gone.

"Oh my God. Oh no, please no..."

She ran amongst the last of the fights toward the circle of mages, already shouting.

"Simon! Open it back up!"

He turned to look at her, his joy fading in front of her panic.

"What?"

She seized his arms and clutched them. "You have to open it again, you've got to—"

He shook his head and cut her in, each word slicing at her heart. "We can't do that, Kate. We've got no idea how. And even if we did, why would we?"

She opened her mouth but no word came out. How could she express the horror she felt when the image of the breach disappearing filled her mind, obliterating everything else. She let go of him and turned on her heel, looking around with a sudden hope. Marc. Marc would know what to do. Marc would know if...

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Her eyes found him, crouching near a rock maybe fifty yards away. She ran again, paying no mind to the demon bodies on her path.

"Marc!"

He turned his face toward her and slowly stood, giving the body at his feet a last glance. She threw herself into his arms and clung to him.

"Is he ... is he alive?" she said in between dry sobs.

His arms closed around her. "He asked me to do it," he said against her hair. "I swear. He'll wake up tomorrow and tell you—"

She pulled away and looked at him, dumbstruck. "What are you talking about?"

He frowned at her. "Daniel. What are *you* talking about?"

Her heart constricted in her chest. She looked down, already knowing what she would see. At their feet, Daniel looked like he was merely asleep. The trace of blood on his neck only emphasized how pale his skin was. She turned her head away and rested her cheek against Marc's shoulder. If he hadn't been holding her still, her knees would have buckled beneath her.

"Blake. A demon..." She swallowed hard. "A demon pushed him through the breach before they closed it."

Marc's arms tightened around her until she could barely breathe. She asked again, the words coming out in a murmur.

"Is he alive?"

...

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About the Author

Kallysten's most exciting accomplishment to date was to cross a few thousand miles and an ocean to pursue (and catch!) the love of her life. She has been writing for fifteen years, and always enjoyed sharing her stories and listening to the readers' reactions. After playing with science fiction, short stories, poetry and fanfiction, she is now trying her hand, heart and words at paranormal romance novels.

To see her other stories, visit:

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