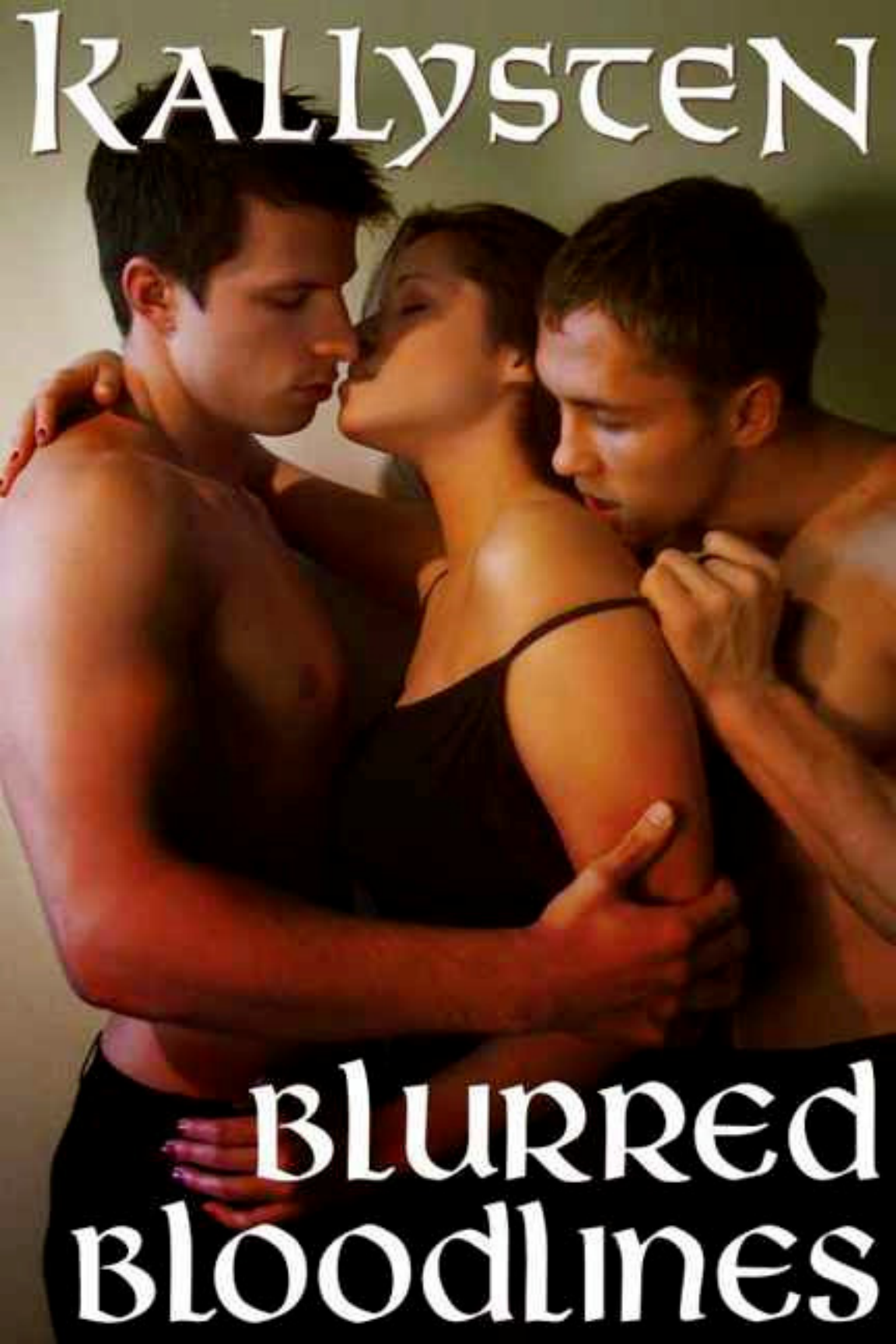
Kallysten
Blurred
Bloodlines

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CONTENTS

Previously, in Blurred Nights:
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25

Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Coming Soon in Blurred Memories
About the Author:

* * * *

Blurred Bloodlines

Kallysten

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Previously, in Blurred Night:

In a future world shattered by the invasion of beast-like demons, humans are fighting back as well as they can, using ancient weapons along with magic to defend their cities.

When Kate's squad of fighters meets vampires Marc and Blake, she is torn. Her squad could use their help, but the two men are distracting her from her duty. Night after night, they search together for the breach between realities that allows the demons' invasion. They search, also, for the equilibrium that will allow Blake to forgive his Sire, Marc to accept Blake as he is—and Kate to admit she is attracted to both of them.

When a vampire from Marc's past betrays them and leads the squad to a trap, everything seems lost: Kate is in danger and Blake and Marc argue one last time. Finally realizing that he's fighting for more than pleasure, Blake risks his life to help the squad close the breach, earning both Kate's and Marc's respect and love.

And now, in Blurred Bloodlines:

Months after closing the breach in the City, Kate's squad is in a new town, battling demons yet again. Blake and his Sire Marc have accompanied the soldiers and continue to help them, although Blake, these days, is just as busy fighting demons as he is scheming.

He sleeps with both Kate and Marc separately, and figures that, since they are attracted to each other, they should sleep together too.

Before his ultimate goal of sharing his bed with both of them can be achieved, however, the unthinkable happens: while fighting demons, Blake stumbles through a breach and becomes trapped in another dimension.

Grieving over his loss, his lovers fall apart and go their separate ways. Will finding Blake again—a damaged Blake, wampire,appcfalhinkgoalpee breac sca-5.lake,

Chapter 1

Above the wide double doors, letters a foot tall proclaimed that the room was the "Grand Ballroom." The gold leaf that had once gilded those same letters was flaking off, however, and the room had long since hosted its last reception. Even with the regular meetings now taking place there, a smell of dusty mustiness clung to the air, testament to years of neglect.

The banquet tables had been arranged in long rows, the chairs behind them all facing toward the three-foot-high dais. What was now the squad's briefing room could host about a hundred people, and they were all there today for the squad's weekly meeting.

At the front of the room, Daniel and two aides were running through the usual list of assignments for the next week, sharing news from their superiors about the breaches that had been identified or closed lately. Blake didn't listen to a word of it. He didn't want to know what had happened halfway across the country, or who had guard duties for the next night or the one after that; he wasn't technically one of Daniel's soldiers, and he didn't take orders from him, nor did he care what his superiors wanted or thought. As for breaches, the only one he cared about was the one he would soon help close.

Resting his left arm on the back of Kate's chair next to him, he leaned in toward her. Her eyes did not leave Daniel and his flunkies, but her lips twitched in a repressed smile.

"Any plans for the rest of the day?" he asked, close enough for the words to caress the shell of her ear.

His free hand settled on her wrist and started tracing sinuous lines on her skin.

"Maybe if you let me listen," she murmured with a quick glance at him, "I'll know if I have any duties today."

Blake let out a quiet snort. On the dais, Daniel's voice rose a little higher.

"You already know," Blake said as quietly as possible. "You probably helped him make that list."

She turned her hand palm up on her knee, catching his fingers as they drew a slow spiral on her skin. "What if I did?"

He was surprised she wasn't batting his hand away and chastising him for not paying attention; she was probably just as bored by it all as he was. Daniel could barely sneeze without Kate knowing about it. If not to be with her, Blake wouldn't have attended the meetings at all.

He was at the end of the first row—Kate had picked her seat first, or he would have sat in the back of the room. He glanced beyond her, easily finding Marc. He was seated front and center, as usual, and even taking notes. Blake rolled his eyes at him, even though Marc wasn't looking in his direction. His Sire was nothing if not predictable.

Turning his attention back to Kate, Blake brushed his lips against her earlobe. Her ears were pierced, he had noticed long ago, but she didn't wear earrings. She had cited battlefield regulations when he had asked why not, but he hadn't had any luck yet in making her wear some off the battlefield.

"So? Do you have an assignment or not?"

The slightest shake of her head was answer enough.

Blake grinned. "Wanna spar?"

It was her turn to snort. She disguised the sound by covering her mouth and pretending to cough, but her lips couldn't resist curling into a grin anymore. "Depends. Do you mean actually spar or something else?"

"Why not spar *and* something else?"

She didn't reply in words, but her fingers tightened over 14.2726 01.5 Tca75 -less. not spar

It seemed much too easy. She hooked the hilt of her sword behind his. Pulling hard with her sword hand and pushing at his chest with the other one, she managed to disarm him so that he tumbled to the floor. He wasn't above letting her win if he thought it would get him what he wanted that much faster. His slight grin, as he crossed one arm behind his head, certainly suggested he hadn't been trying all that hard to beat her.

asked, his head tilting to one side. "I locked the doors. And it's dinnertime anyway; everyone is at the mess."

When he laid the facts out like that, it was hard to remember that this was a public space, and anyone could walk in on them at any time; the locks weren't all that hard to pick. Still, she tried to cling to propriety. She seemed to be doing that a lot, when she was with Blake, though it never seemed to work so well.

"My room," she started, but somehow couldn't figure out how to finish.

Blake rose to his knees and undid the laces that held the knife sheath to her thigh. He set it aside, and started working at the fastenings of her pants. Kate's hands covered his for an instant, stilling them, but when he looked up at her with a questioning gaze, she let go and allowed him to pull down her pants and panties. He discarded them along with her shoes, then with a wicked grin, he leaned close and pressed his tongue where her legs joined, brushing a fleeting touch to her clit. Her eyes narrowed to slits, Kate glanced back at the door, but the last of her reluctance vanished when Blake gently pulled her down to kneel in front of him. A look at his smile, and she was lost.

He made short work of the second knife sheath on her arm, her t-shirt and sports bra, and soon she was kneeling naked in front of him. His gaze on her when she was first revealed to him always made her shiver, always caused her nipples to tighten almost too fast and wetness to form between her legs. There always was something in his eyes, a shimmer that went beyond lust and desire, a flame that made

her warm—made her *want*. She swallowed hard, then took his offered hand and laid face down in front of him, her head resting on her folded arms.

"It'd be more comfortable on a bed," she complained, but resignation filled her voice. Blake was much too stubborn to give up so easily.

He chuckled, the sound rich and dark like molten chocolate. "Shh... Just relax."

Whatever she would have answered was lost when he touched her, a single finger sliding down her spine. She wanted to arch and accentuate the caress, but already his other hand joined the first, and he now pressed and rubbed with his entire hands, from the tips of his fingers to the heel of his palms. The knots of tension seemed to dissolve beneath his touch, and Kate's eyes fluttered closed.

She had taken a step back from acting as Daniel's second in running the squad, both because she was burning herself out and because she didn't care to witness Daniel's disapproval at all hours of the day. Just the same, though, she still had many responsibilities, and the weight of them never lifted—not unless she made a conscious effort to let go, like now.

"Mmm... did I ever say you've got wonderful hands?"

Blake hummed in reply, then shifted from her side, nudging her legs apart so he could kneel between them. In this new position, he could put more of his weight in each pass of his hands, and Kate could have sworn she was melting beneath him. She started drifting on a cloud of contentment, nothing left in her consciousness but Blake's

hands, now warm from touching her. They covered every inch of her back in long sweeps, from the nape of her neck to the curve of her ass, then back up along her sides, just shy of tickling, before starting the circuit over again. The movements were almost hypnotic, and Kate could have fallen asleep if not for the way his hands dipped a little lower each time, then started pulling her cheeks apart.

He wouldn't, she thought, trying to convince herself. Not when they were in such a public room. He proved her wrong with a light touch of his index finger circling her wrinkled hole. She tensed and reached back, batting his hand away. "Stop that."

"Why?" he asked, and she could hear the grin in his voice, bright as sunshine. He bent lower to breathe in her ear, "You liked it before."

Heat suffused her face, and she hid it in the crook of her arm. "Not now," she mumbled. "Not here."

He chuckled again but resumed his massage, digging deeper into the renewed tension along her spine. It wasn't long before she could feel his denim-covered cock pressing against her ass with every move, and quiet hums rose from her throat with the harder pushes.

"Are you going to tease me long?" she murmured without opening her eyes.

When Blake pressed a kiss to the center of her back, she could feel his silent laughter. "Tease?" he repeated. "I wanted more than a massage and you told me to stop."

She raised her head to glance back at him and give him an annoyed look, but when she met his amused gaze, she realized her need was greater than her annoyance.

"Shut up," she muttered. She pushed herself to her hands and knees, arching her back like a stretching cat, then looked back again, this time in invitation.

Blake's amusement faded, leaving nothing more than desire on his handsome features. The sight of his tongue running over his lips made a flash of heat spread through Kate. She reared back against him, pressing her ass to his dsdcovered crotch and pulling a light groan from him. His hands flew over the fastenings of his pants. She turned away just as he was shoving them down his thighs and freeing his cock. She pressed her forehead to her hands and, heart beating wildly already, waited.

She didn't have to wait long.

The first slide of his cock against her opening was pure teasing, smearing her wetness over her flesh and his. Then he pushed in, just the head first, and a strangled groan passed the lump in Kate's throat. She tried to push back and take more of him in, but he gripped her hips hard and held her in place.

"Ready?" he murmured.

Before Kate could say a word, he shoved himself in, sliding all the way, her need easing his passage. Kate cried out, both in surprise and at the feel of him stretching her so suddenly,

hands clenched on her hips, and he slipped into a familiar rhythm, fast and deep. Just right.

Sometimes, he forgot himself in the excitement of their lovemaking and held her too tightly. The next morning, bruises would bloom on her skin, like strange flowers that blossomed for a few days. Blake always looked dismayed when it happened, and always apologized with quiet words, soft kisses and gentle caresses. In truth though, Kate didn't mind all that much. She received worse bruises sparring or fighting demons. Not only that, but she rather liked the idea that she could make Blake lose control that much.

It went fast. They were both worked up from sparring together, they both knew it was only the first round, and so neither of them tried to slow things down and make it last. The pressure built in Kate, then let go in a flash, flooding her body with warmth, blinding her with white light. She moaned Blake's name and twisted her head, wanting, searching.

He understood and bent to kiss her, hard and fast, the rhythm of his slapping hips never faltering. Then he drew her up, gathering her in his arms and holding her flush to his chest. Leaving one arm around her waist, he caressed her breast with his free hand, causing aftershocks to rock her body even as he thrust into her, quick jabs of his cock that made Kate lose her breath all over again. It was too much, too soon, too hard... It was perfect.

She wanted to tell him, when she felt him come inside her, when he slipped out and pulled her to lie against him. She wanted to say that she had never known it could be like this.

That being with him always made her feel like the world was the way it ought to be, at last.

But she never could find the words, and so she just kissed him, a simple brush of her lips on his, and hoped he knew.

She nestled her head against his shoulder and let out a quiet little hum. The floor mat wasn't particularly comfortable, but Blake made for a fine pillow. "I don't want to move."

He entwined his fingers with hers on his chest. "Then don't."

"We have to. Someone could come in."

She could hear Blake's smile in the smugness of his voice. "Did I burn your brain cells or something? I told you, I locked the door."

She shifted against him, pressing her body alongside his. He was slowly warming from their contact, and she never tired of all the different ways she affected him. Even as delightful as this was, though, worry was creeping up inside her, and in her voice. "They could unlock it."

Most people in the camp knew about them, but she saw no humor in being caught in the act. Blake, of course, seemed to think it was half the fun.

"Have you thought about it?" he asked, obviously trying to distract her.

She became very still against him, even holding her breath for a few seconds. Then she slipped away, lying next to him, both hands resting on her stomach. "You're impossible," she said in a flat voice.

He rolled onto his side, resting his temple against his closed fist as he observed her. She closed her eyes, shutting

out the weight of his gaze. Her heart was beating furiously in her chest, betraying that she wasn't as calm as she pretended. She couldn't have said *what* she was, though. Annoyed that he was bringing it up again when she had asked for time to think. A little bit aroused, though she wouldn't have admitted to it. But mostly, scared. It was strange that *this* scared her, when fighting demons didn't.

Blake's fingers walked up her arm and to her shoulder. She batted at his hand, and he captured hers, bringing it to his lips for a gentle kiss. She tried to glare at him, but her look turned into something else halfway through.

"But you've thought about it?" he asked very softly, then kissed her hand again.

"What if I have?" she muttered, resigning herself to the fact that he wouldn't stop asking until she answered.

He just smiled.

Marc would have to be blind to fail to notice Blake's and Kate's distraction during the meeting, or the way they sneaked off hand in hand immediately after it concluded. He shook his head as he watched them go, but he was smiling as well, amused. He was used to Blake acting like a spoiled child, but to see him infect the usually so-serious Kate with his particular brand of carefree silliness was entertaining.

When he looked away from them, his gaze fell on Daniel, whose frown was traveling back and forth between Marc and the door where they had disappeared.

"I don't get it."

Marc shrugged. "No one asks you to."

This answer did not please Daniel, and a sour note crept up in his scent as he shifted his stance. "This is all going to blow up, and then I'm the one who'll be left without my best fighters."

"Nothing's going to blow up."

Marc absently glanced back at the now-closed door, wondering where they had gone. The soldiers' bedrooms were located on the other side of the building. Only training rooms and the armory lay that way, and neither had seemed quite in the mood for a sparring match. He shook his head'ntringing himself back to the meeting room. Wherever they were and whatever they were doing was not his concern. He'd probably hear about it from Blake. However hard he tried to tell his Childe that privacy was a lovely thing, Blake insisted on oversharing.

Daniel's knitted brow was still skeptical, and Marc clasped his shoulder. "It *works,*" he insisted, pushing Daniel toward his office. "It's been working for six months. It will keep on working just fine as long as no one pokes their noses into our business."

The hint of warning he injected into his words brought a sharp look to Daniel's eyes and a faint, peppery edge to his scent that almost resembled guilt, which surprised Marc. Was that what Daniel had felt when, after he had tried to talk Kate out of dating Blake, Kate had told him in no uncertain terms to stay out of her personal life? Blake's grin and posture, on that afternoon, had radiated his pride, and Marc could still hear the cockiness in his voice when he had leaned in toward him to murmur, "Told you so." Until that moment, Marc

wouldn't have believed that Kate was capable of disobeying her superior—and he wouldn't have believed she'd accept sharing her new lover with Marc.

"Anyway," Daniel said after clearing his throat. "You wanted to show me something on the map?"

Marc nodded and followed Daniel back to his office. It was larger than the office at the camp near Claremont, but the shelves behind Daniel's desk were still overflowing with an assortment of mismatched items, some of them military supplies, others trinkets that Daniel diligently carried from assignment to assignment. Many humans were like him, clinging to relics of a past that had been shattered when the demon invasion had started, a past they had never known. They all hoped that, sooner or later, they could return to what they saw as a Golden Age. Marc had lived through that time. He knew there had been nothing golden about it. The only souvenirs he kept were in his memories, and he dearly hoped that, once the demons were beaten, the world would be rebuilt better than it had once been.

Daniel spread out a map on his desk, covering other maps, reports, and the usual mess that cluttered his workspace. He pointed at a location indicated by a small black dot.

"This is where they stopped us last time," he said, glancing up at Marc for just a second. "The breach has to be nearby."

Resting a hand on the edge of the desk, Marc leaned over the map. It showed the coastline, including the peninsula on which the town was located, and the barricaded bridge that led to it. Those barricades were the reason why such a small town had not been destroyed by demon attacks long ago.

Past the bridge, ruins lay for miles and miles, devoid of human lives. On the outdated map, small cities were still neatly aligned along the coast, waiting for the first days of summer and the tourist season. Only the thin lines representing reconnaissance expeditions from the squad told a different story. They looked like a tangled mass of thread.

"In Louisiana," Marc said absently, recalling his first attempt at closing a breach, "they protected an area as hard as they seem to protect this." He pointed at a rough circle devoid of reconnaissance lines. "But when we finally got through, it was just a camp. A large camp, but nothing more than that. The breach was nowhere close. We lost a lot of men taking that camp, but it didn't help in the end. The demons would have come to us eventually."

His eyes searched the map, trying but failing to recognize a pattern.

"So you think we should look elsewhere," Daniel said, the frown all too clear in his voice.

"I think we should try, yes. Maybe somewhere around here?" He pointed at a new area of the map, beyond the tangle of lines and eastward of the position the demons seemed to be defending. "It's still close enough that they could join their camp through here."

"If it is a camp," Daniel pointed out, but he sounded interested.

They spent the next half hour discussing a new reconnaissance plan. Daniel was in charge, and in the end it would be his decision where to send the squad, but for a while, Marc welcomed the distraction. He rolled his eyes

whenever Blake decided to share too many details with him, certainly, but that didn't mean his mind didn't work on overdrive whenever he knew Blake and Kate were together.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter 2

Every time Kate stepped into her shower stall, she caught herself grinning. Back in Claremont and at the camp outside the City, water and energy restrictions had meant that hot water was only available for a few minutes per shower. Lakeview was smaller than Claremont, but it had enough resources that such restrictions didn't exist here. The drawback was that outside supplies were more difficult to obtain, and Kate had needed to do some serious bargaining to

tiles. If she was truly going to do this, she needed to get ready.

Running the threadbare towel briskly over her body, she dried herself, then walked out of the small bathroom and into her bedroom. Lakeview housed its soldiers in what had once been a hotel near the lake, and the accommodations were the best she had been offered since she had become a fighter. The decor was a little bland, maybe, neutral colors all around, but a room to herself was certainly a luxury she wasn't accustomed to. Most soldiers had to share rooms, and being Daniel's second-in-command had its advantages.

The three boxes were lined up on her bed, exactly as she had found them when returning after a day spent training new recruits. She knew who had left them even before opening the note that accompanied them; only Blake had a spare key to her room. The first two boxes were plain cardboard, but the smallest one was blue suede, and her fingers itched to pick it up and finally open it. She could guess it was some kind of jewelry, and she was a little anxious to discover what it was. Knowing Blake, it could be anything from a lovely bracelet to a nipple ring. She hoped it wasn't the latter—for his own sake, she hoped he had listened when she had said no to *that*.

On top of the largest box, the note she had opened earlier lay half open. She picked it up and read it again, the butterflies in her stomach fluttering a little faster as she did.

I hope you'll like these. Be ready at eight.

She touched the words, then Blake's signature. His handwriting was a little slanted, the cursive letters slightly rough and irregular. It fitted him.

Putting the note down again, she lifted the cover of the largest box—and immediately gasped. A dress lay in the box, white and silver with large black flowers across the bodice and down the skirt. Her hands trembling a little, she lifted it out of the box, and noticed the lace inserts in the ankle-length skirt. It was silky smooth between her fingers, and she could just imagine what it would feel like on her skin. She had never seen anything so lovely, let alone worn it. It looked like something from another age, before breaches had opened all over the world and demons had started their relentless attacks on the human civilization. These days, simple fabrics and clothes that were both utilitarian and easy to make were the norm. She could only wonder where Blake had found something so extravagant.

Moments later, her wonder turned to awe when she slipped the dress on over plain cotton panties and bra, and found that it fit perfectly. She could have sworn it had been made for her. Surely, though, that was beyond Blake's means. There was at least one seamstress in each town who could sew special garments, usually for weddings and celebrations, but their prices were supposed to be exorbitant—not that Kate had ever had the need for one.

She smoothed her hands down the sides of the dress as she turned to the second box. In her haste to open it, she dropped the lid. It fell to the carpeted floor with a whisper but she barely noticed as she pulled out the shoes from inside the

box. She remembered Blake checking her boots, a few days earlier, and commenting on what small feet she had; she hadn't thought anything of it at the time. These weren't anything like her combat boots, though. Black with a white trim, they had heels—not very high ones, but still higher than she had ever worn—and a curved opening at the toes. These, she noticed, weren't new. The soles bore some signs of use. Although not anything like what she was used to, they were lovely, and surprisingly comfortable once she slipped them on. She walked back and forth through the room, getting used to the heels, and was almost surprised when she didn't immediately trip over her own feet. All those balance exercises were paying off, she thought with an inward grin.

Only the suede box was left. She sat on the bed after picking it up and held it on her knees for a moment before opening it. Rectangular and about as large as her hand, it had to be too big for a nipple ring. A necklace, maybe? The lid flipped back easily, revealing not only a necklace, but also a pair of earrings in the center of the box. The pieces appeared to be silver. The necklace, short enough that it would sit close to her throat, was made of three flat strands, the links that formed the strands so small that they were barely distinguishable. The three strands were entwined in a tight braid. Three similar strands of differing lengths dangled from the earrings.

Kate touched the necklace with the tip of her finger, following one of the strands as it wove over and under the other two. It was all a terrible idea, she thought as she snapped the box shut. She put the box on the bed and

rubbed her hands together; her palms were damp. She ought to call the whole thing off. Yes, that was what she was going to do. She would call Blake and—

A knock on the door made her jump to her feet. She swallowed heavily and went to open it, absently throwing a glance at the alarm clock by her bed. It wasn't time yet. It couldn't be him.

She wiped her palms on her dress before clasping the doorknob and twisting it open. Blake was standing there,

She opened her mouth to do just that—lie—but found that she couldn't say a word. She could feel heat rising in her cheeks. Stepping to him, she pressed her face to his chest, hiding her embarrassment. His arms closed around her and he stroked her back up and down in soothing motions.

"I do," she admitted, no louder than a whisper. "But it's not..."

She didn't know how to finish. He slipped a finger beneath her chin and tilted her face up toward his. The smile was still there, but softer, somehow.

"It's not what, sweetheart?"

She grimaced and replied instinctively. "Don't call me that."

Blake laughed, and she smiled. They were back on familiar ground, and she found her words more easily. "It's not... decent."

"As long as all parties concerned consent, I don't see what's indecent about it."

Did he not get it? "Blake..."

The smile faded at last, and a serious expression, one she rarely saw him wear, settled on his features. "Listen, nothing needs to happen tonight." He carefully picked a strand of hair that had fallen across her cheek and tucked it behind her ear. "If you want to stop after a drink, that's fine. If you want to stop after dinner, that's also fine. If you want more than that, it's up to you." An impish grin pushed forward on his lips even as amusement sparkled in his eyes. "And if you want to make it a threesome, you two know where to find me."

She heard a heavy sigh behind her, and turned to find Marc there. Contrary to Blake's jeans and t-shirt, he was wearing black slacks, a fitted shirt, and a tie. What was it Blake had called her? Scrumptious? That certainly applied to Marc. She could feel her cheeks heat up again, but this time it wasn't from embarrassment.

Marc arrived just in time to hear, through the partially closed door, Blake suggest a threesome. He pushed the door open and let out an exaggerated sigh.

"Could you be even more obnoxious?"

Blake didn't look at him, his eyes remaining on Kate even as she looked at Marc, blushing like a fiery sunset.

"I can try if you want," Blake said, the edge of a laugh in his words.

Kate snorted as she glanced at him. "Please don't."

If Blake answered, Marc didn't hear it. While he remained at her doorstep, Kate came to him, her dress fluid against the curves of her small frame. Marc swallowed hard and forced his eyes to her face. Her smile was bashful and adorable. When she was standing just two feet in front of him, she raised a slightly shaky hand toward him. Marc met her movement and took her hand in his.

"Hi."

"Evening, Kate. You look gorgeous."

Her blushing increased, if that was even possible. "You're not too bad yourself."

Behind her, Blake groaned loudly. Marc glanced at him; he had covered his face with both hands in a dramatic gesture.

"Good thing I'm here, or you two would still be flirting by the time we've closed all the breaches in the world."

Kate turned toward him. "Blake? Please shut up."

Grinning, he blew her a kiss from the tips of his fingers. She smiled and returned the gesture before looking back at Marc. The smile wavered a little, he noticed, and he was speaking before he knew it.

"If you'd rather not—"

"Marc?" She squeezed his hand. "Let's go."

A last look at Blake revealed that he was entirely too smug. "You two lovebirds go ahead," Blake said, shooing them out. "I'll lock up."

The gleam in Blake's eyes was all too familiar, and Marc didn't like the promise of mischief it held at all. Swallowing back his misgivings, he focused on Kate. He'd enjoy his evening with her first, and then worry about what Blake was scheming.

As soon as they walked out of the room, Blake picked up the phone with one hand, his other hand already dialing the number he had memorized. The tone only rang once.

"They're out," he said without any sort of greeting, and hung up right away.

Turning around to look at the room critically, he reviewed his battle plan. Lighting first, then he'd change the standard issue, low-thread-count cotton sheets to something a little more decadent. It hadn't been easy to find in this small town, not any more than the dress, the shoes, or the jewelry, but Blake had had a bit of cash squirreled away and this had been as good an occasion as he could imagine to spend it. He

hadn't found any strawberries; a couple of traders had actually laughed in his face when he had asked. Even on the verge of destruction, though, humans had not abandoned making fine wine, and champagne, although expensive, had been easy to procure.

Mere minutes passed before he opened the door in response to a timid knock. Simon was standing behind the door, clutching his leather bag to his chest. He gulped as Blake motioned for him to enter, looking more scared than Blake had seen him in a long time. He took a small step forward, but did not pass the threshold.

Blake tapped his foot. "Come on, you're not losing your nerve, are you?"

Simon took another small step. "She'll know it's me." He looked back as though speaking of Kate would make her appear behind him. "If she doesn't like it, she'll kill me!"

Snickering, Blake grabbed his arm and pulled him in. The door closed with a soft click behind them. "One," he said, raising his forefinger, "she'll blame me, if anyone. Two, she doesn't have it in her to kill a human. Three, you promised."

Simon frowned as he pushed at Blake's hand. "Don't bat your eyelashes like that," he muttered. "It's not fair. Plus, I'm completely over you."

It wasn't the first time Simon had claimed as much, but he still didn't sound all that convinced himself. Blake decided not to point this out, though, not now that Simon was finally walking further into the room and setting his bag on the edge of the bed.

"Good," he said absently, watching the various powders and herbs Simon was pulling out of the bag. Even closed, the containers each had a distinctive smell, and mixed together these scents tickled Blake's nose until he rubbed it with the back of his hand. "So you're still going out with that kid, then?"

He picked up a jar filled with a fine, golden powder and shook it curiously. Simon glared at him and snatched the jar back. "He's not a kid!" His voice became shrill in outrage and he puffed up his chest. "He's a year older than I am!"

Blake bit the inside of his cheek so that he wouldn't grin too much. A year older than Simon still couldn't be much more than twenty-two or twenty-three. "Is he? Well, you need to stop worrying so much then; it ages you."

Looking crestfallen, Simon touched his face with tentative fingertips. "Really?"

"No." Blake rolled his eyes at him. "Now get to it."

He stood to the side to let Simon work but continued to observe with avid eyes. He had always wished he had been able to do magic, but he had never had any talent for it. Simon, on the other hand, was a natural at it. With his bag of magic herbs and powders and given a few hours, he could come up with just about anything, from a spell that indicated whether a vampire fed from humans—that had been the first spell he had ever cast on Blake—to closing a breach or creating a special atmosphere for two special people.

Under Blake's careful watch, Simon forgot his initial reluctance and let himself be caught up in the magic. The more complex it was, the more focused he became, and while

he had said this spell was not all that complicated, he had invented it himself and this was the first time he was performing it when it wasn't just a test. He mixed a few ingredients, then chanted the incantation he had worked out at Blake's request. The air shimmered throughout the room for a few seconds, before thin strands of lights materialized.

"Is that all right?" he asked, turning to Blake.

Blake nodded and smiled. "It looks great. Add more. I'm sure she'll love it. "

He really thought they would, but he couldn't help the nagging doubt that persisted at the back of his mind. Kate wanted this, but she was scared of what people would say, and in particular Daniel. As much as she had told her leader to mind his own business, Blake knew that she respected his opinion. Daniel wasn't merely her superior; he had become her friend over the years they had spent fighting side by side, and something of a big brother as well. Blake thought she would go through with it, however, if for no other reason than that she didn't back down once she started something. Of the two of them, she wasn't the one he worried about the most.

Marc had kept himself at some distance ever since Kate and Blake had come back from the City hand in hand. Once they had reached Lakeview, he had even suggested that Blake move in with her. He had given up on that particular nonsense after Blake had dragged him to bed. He should have known better, really, than to think Blake would let go of a lover because he had found another. He should have known *Blake* better.

Making Marc remember that he liked Kate—that he liked her a great deal, in fact—had been a simple matter. At first, he had protested whenever Blake shared any kind of details about his relationship with Kate, from the kind of underwear she favored to what position they had used on a given night. After a while, he had pretended to tune out Blake, but his scent never lied, and Blake knew he listened to every word. Eventually, he had admitted what Blake had known all along: he did want her. Working on her reluctance had been a little different, but it hadn't taken much more time to make her admit she wanted Marc.

In the decades they had spent together, Marc and Blake had never shared a lover like this, mostly because there had never been anyone they both liked, and who liked them both in return. They had found exactly that in Kate, and if she and Marc let him, Blake would make sure the three of them worked out. And while he had only been joking about the threesome—Kate was not ready for that yet—he hoped that, sooner or later, things would turn in that direction.

"What are you grinning about?" Simon asked, peering at him curiously. "It's not like you're even going to enjoy any of this."

He waved a hand at his hard work. Snapping back to the immediate present rather than dreams of an indistinct future, Blake nodded approvingly. It looked great.

"Don't worry about me," he said with a small smile. "If they enjoy themselves, that's good enough for me."

At least for now, he added to himself.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter 3

Her eyes wide as she stared at Marc, Kate covered her mouth with her napkin to muffle her laugh. "He didn't!"

Grinning, Marc nodded. "I swear he did. Not a stitch on him, just the scabbard on his back and Seneca in his hand. I thought he'd get himself sliced to bits but the worst that happened was that he cut his foot on a shard of glass. He whined about it like a baby, too."

The mental image of Blake fighting demons stark naked and pissed off that he had been interrupted in the middle of some one-on-one time with his hand was too much, and Kate couldn't resist laughing aloud. A couple of the restaurant's other patrons glanced at her curiously. It wasn't often, these days, that someone would find cause to laugh so hard. She didn't even remember the last time she had been so amused.

Once she had calmed down, she took a sip of wine before asking, tongue in cheek, "I can completely believe he'd go and fight naked, but it's harder to believe he'd need to masturbate when you're nearby."

Marc chuckled quietly, inclining his head as though conceding a point. "We had argued about something."

Kate felt like laughing again. This, she could also easily believe. "Aren't you *always* arguing about something?" she teased.

Her gaze followed Marc's throat as he finished what was left of his wine, tilting his head back. Just below the edge of his shirt collar, she thought she could see two puncture

marks. They were healed, but still looked recent: Blake's. Warmth coiled inside her, and she returned her eyes to her plate of pasta.

"I think he actually enjoys making me mad," Marc said, oblivious to the excitement that had just sparked inside her. "You know how stubborn he can be."

She took a bite of her food and nodded. She knew, yes. That was why she was there, after all.

Or rather, she thought, feeling heat in her cheeks as she twirled spaghetti onto her fork, that was one of the reasons. Blake had sneaked up inside her heart, but on that first night in the City, it was Marc that had attracted her eyes first, and every conversation she had had with him afterwards, every sparring session or reconnaissance patrol had only deepened her attraction to him.

Could she do this, though? She raised her eyes to him again and found him staring at her. Her breath caught in her throat. Could she let herself love these two men?

"Kate?" His voice was a quiet rumble, serious when only a moment ago it had been full of laughter. "Is everything all right? You just looked..."

He didn't finish, for which she was grateful. She didn't like being scared, and liked even less having to admit she was. To change the subject, she pointed at his glass on the table. He was making it turn back and forth with two fingers around the stem.

"Do you like the wine?"

He nodded. "It's pretty good for something they had to relearn how to make from scratch. Do you like it?"

She swallowed her pasta before answering. "I'm not too fond of alcohol, but I can do a glass or two, once in a while with a good dinner." Her gaze fell to the empty plate in front of him, and she felt a little awkward at mentioning food when local restrictions meant he couldn't have any. Some vampires, Blake included, enjoyed the taste of food even if they didn't need it to survive, but in a city where supplies were sometimes scarce, food was reserved for humans. Had she been dining with Blake, Kate would have offered him a bite from her fork, but she wasn't sure yet whether to do the same with Marc.

"Did you have dinner before we came here?" she asked, filling the silence again.

He stopped playing with the glass and reached across the table instead, tracing the knuckles of her left hand where it rested by her plate. "I did, yes. I like how you call it having dinner."

She kept her eyes locked with his as she spread her fingers, capturing his between them and squeezing lightly. "What else should I call it?"

He didn't reply and simply smiled at her, watching her eat. She caught herself torn between whether to go faster or take her time. It had to be boring for him to watch her do something so mundane. Then again, the sooner she finished, the sooner she would need to make her decision about how the night would end.

"Will you have dessert?" Marc asked, smiling sweetly, when she put down her fork and dabbed at her mouth with her napkin.

It was time to see if Blake had told the truth, she decided. "I think I'd rather dance."

He stared at her for a long time before finally saying very slowly, "I'm going to kill him."

She laughed. Standing, she held her hand out to Marc. "Come on, he told me you dance very well."

He took her hand and let her pull him to his feet, but his expression was still thunderous. "I'll torture him first, and *then* I'll kill him."

This time, she snickered. She had heard them both proffer threats toward the other and knew not to worry about it. "Does that mean you don't want to dance with me?"

He answered by tucking her hand into his arm and leading her to the music box in the corner. "I haven't done so in years," he said, glancing at her before he made his selection. The slow notes of a mourning saxophone fell from the speakers above them. "So we'll keep it simple, if you don't mind?"

As he settled his hands at the small of her back, his touch strong and confident but surprisingly light, she found that she didn't mind at all. She rested her hands on his shoulders and looked up at him as they started swaying together to the sound of the music. His eyes shone, though not as brightly as his smile.

This was it, she realized. This was the moment when she could pull back, thank Marc for a lovely evening, and go back to her room alone. They had both told her it was up to her, but even if they hadn't, she wasn't one to do anything she didn't want to. It wasn't that she had never had one-night

stands before. She had, a couple of times, and she had been fine with it. She was a soldier, and she had no time to hunt down a partner that would accept her as she was—and no desire to turn to one of her fellow soldiers and complicate her life. But she hadn't needed to hunt Blake or Marc. They had entered her life by complete happenstance, and now she couldn't imagine living without them. Without both of them, she finally admitted to herself. While she had grown very close to Blake, she had first been attracted to Marc, and in the past weeks she had missed him when he gave her and Blake space to get to know each other better.

Even if he had never verbalized it other than through jokes, she had a rather good idea of where Blake hoped they would all end up: in the same bed. The thought should have scared her, but she realized, in that instant, with Marc's eyes locked with hers and his hands stroking her back over the dress Blake had bought for her, that she wasn't scared. Not about them, not about her feelings, and not really about what others might say. The three of them were fighters. Death hung over them every time they set out for a battle. She didn't have time to be scared.

The butterflies in her stomach settled at last. She relaxed fully for the first time that night and, hoisting herself up to the tip of her toes, she laid her lips on Marc's and kissed him.

Kate's lips tasted sweet, sweeter even than the wine Marc had shared with her earlier. She felt light in his arms, warm, and he was drowning in her scent: a faint lavender he had smelled so often on Blake after Blake had spent a few hours with her.

He set her down in front of her door, reluctantly breaking the kiss. Her arms remained around his neck but loosened so that he could smile down at her.

"It doesn't have to go any further than this," he reminded her, brushing a strand of hair off her cheek. "If you want—"

"I want this," she whispered. Her right hand dropped from his shoulder to pull her key card out of her purse. She swiped it and opened the door. "I want *you*."

He captured her mouth again, and they stumbled into the room wrapped in each other's arms. Marc pushed blindly at the door to close it, but opened his eyes again when Kate gasped against his lips. He followed her gaze and shook his head in wonder at what he saw.

Glittering strands of light floated across the room, moving slowly as though carried by a light breeze. Kate reached for the closest one, and the strand left gleaming sparkles on her skin before continuing through the air. The light was just strong enough to cast an eerie glow on the room. Marc hadn't taken a good look at the room earlier—he had been too captivated by Kate—but it was hard to miss Blake's improvements to the room. There were rose petals on the floor, leading from the door to the bedside table on the right of the bed. A small bottle of champagne waited there in a bowl filled with melting ice. Next to it, three champagne flutes had been placed side-by-side, two of them ready to be filled and the third one turned upside down.

"He was rather sure we'd end up here," Kate said as she led the way along the path of petals. Her free hand trailed over the bed; the sheets, drawn back to invite them in, had a

soft sheen in the flickering light. No doubt they were Blake's as well.

Letting go of her hand, Marc picked up the champagne bottle and uncorked it slowly, allowing the carbonation to escape without spilling a drop. "He's always too cocky for his own good," he said as he poured a couple of fingers into the two glasses meant for them.

She laughed as she accepted hers. "Cocky, huh? Interesting choice of words."

They clanked their glasses together. They rang like wind chimes.

"To Blake," she said with a slight grin.

Marc returned her smile. "To Blake. Meddlesome and pushy, but tonight I don't think I mind."

The champagne tickled Marc's lips and tongue, then easily slid down his throat. It didn't make him anywhere near as lightheaded as kissing Kate had. He leaned down to brush his mouth against hers. His lips tingled at the touch.

"Would you like more champagne?" he breathed against her lips.

She pulled away just enough to take his glass and put it down on the bedside table along with hers. When she looked up at him again, her eyes were sparkling. "Maybe later. Right now I'd like to kiss you some more."

Marc was all too happy to oblige. He cupped Kate's face in both his hands and laid his mouth on hers. She pressed back hard, her tongue slipping in to meet his. Her hands gripped and kneaded his shoulders for a moment before sliding to the front of his shirt. She quickly worked through the buttons,

and he soon had to let go of her face so she could push the shirt off him. She blinked when he stood bare-chested in front of her, and licked her lips. Marc groaned.

The rest of their clothes came off fast, maybe too fast—*Careful, please, it was a gift from him.*—but soon they were both naked, standing in front of each other under the shimmering lights. Marc had been hard since she had first kissed him at the restaurant, and his cock bobbed between them, brushing against her stomach, leaving a wet trail there. Her gaze remained locked with his, never straying down, and it was as though she were telling him their bodies didn't matter so much. She saw *him*.

For just a second, the memory of the last woman Marc had cared so much for resurfaced, along with how much her betrayal had hurt. He chased the thought away with a brush of his fingertips along Kate's cheek. She was here now, and she was all that mattered.

Kate's hand slid over his. She took a step back, then another, sitting on the bed and pulling Marc down next to her. Smiling, she lay down on the pillow, tugging Marc closer still. He reclined next to her, his body pressed alongside hers; her warmth was scalding.

"Kiss me," she demanded, and Marc was glad to comply.

His lips brushed hers, coaxing them open. His tongue darted in for a taste, receiving a quiet hum in return. He had tasted her lips so often on Blake's that her sweetness was familiar. There was another part of her he had tasted by proxy already and wanted to discover for himself.

"Can I..."

He was much too old to be embarrassed about sex, but somehow being with someone as young as Kate, not even as old as he had been when he'd been turned, made him feel like he had never touched another woman before.

"Anything," she breathed when he didn't finish, and something stirred inside Marc's chest at the softness of her smile.

He kissed her lips, then the hollow of her throat. Her pulse beat like a drum, fast and strong, urging him on.

He continued to press closed-mouth kisses down her body, stopping only to lay his hands on her thighs. They parted at the barest hint of pressure, and he lay between them, his face mere inches from her hot, wet folds. This close, the sweet scent of her need was almost overwhelming. With a last chaste kiss on that less-than-chaste place, Marc allowed himself the taste he had wanted since the first time Blake had come back to their bed smelling of sex and contentment and Kate. His tongue ran up along her slit, gathering wetness, ending at her clitoris. He circled it slowly, pushing back the hood of flesh that hid it, then dipped down again.

Kate's legs spread out a little more widely, giving him more room. He rested a hand on her silky thigh; it trembled beneath his touch like the core of her trembled against his mouth. He pushed his tongue inside her. Her quiet moan was sheer music; the way her hips arched, pressing her closer to his face still, was a dance. He lapped at her folds, gathering her wetness on his tongue, before paying close attention to her clit again, learning as he went back and forth how much

pressure caused her to moan or writhe, and where she was most sensitive.

He had intended to make her come with his mouth, but as her breathing grew ragged, her fingers raked through his hair and tightened until he was pulling off her. He looked up her body, meeting her gaze when she raised her head. Her face was flushed, the blue-gray of her eyes all but swallowed by the black of her pupils.

"Not... not like that," she panted. "The first time... I want... together."

Marc's cock twitched beneath him. Grinning, he leaned down for a last, long lick that left her shuddering and started his way back up her body.

As his mouth trailed over her belly, he met the slightly rough and uneven scar that ran diagonally across her lower abdomen. She shivered as he caressed it, and he moved down again to follow it with his lips from one end to the other. He remembered the night she had been hurt, and how that had helped change Blake's attitude about fighting. Marc would have prevented her from getting hurt if he could have, but he was grateful that a good thing had come from her pain—grateful to her for showing his Childe what Marc had failed to teach him in decades: that not everything was about him and his enjoyment.

He slid up her body again, pressing kisses along the curve of her breasts and higher still until he was at her throat. He kissed along the warmed silver of her necklace all the way to her neck. Her hands, which had been gripping his shoulders for a while, tightened enough that he felt the pinpricks of her

nails digging into his skin. He raised his head to look at her, expecting to find fear in her eyes, but they were shut tight. He laid a small kiss across her lips.

"Kate..." He breathed her name like he would have a prayer. "I wouldn't bite you. You've got to know that."

She caressed his cheek with a trembling hand. "I do know it," she murmured. "But I'm not afraid." She paused, and her voice dropped even lower. "That's what scares me."

He considered her for a moment, taking in her words. She was hardly the first human to ever sleep with a vampire—or even two. When the time came, she also wouldn't be the first to allow herself to be bitten. He just wouldn't have believed that she would come to it so fast. Then again, underestimating Blake's powers of persuasion had never been a good idea. He wondered if Blake knew, or what he would think when she told him. It didn't even occur to him that she might want him to bite her first rather than Blake. And even if she wanted it...

He fastened his mouth on her neck again and sucked hard. She bucked underneath him, clutching at his shoulders and pulling him closer. He only drew back when he was sure he had left a mark. He didn't drink from humans, but that didn't mean he didn't enjoy marking a lover. He hoped he would be there to see Blake's reaction when he noticed. What would he think of it?

Just then, she reached between them and took hold of his cock, her hand burning and confident. With a small, secretive smile, she guided him to her folds, and Marc forgot Blake altogether.

After shooing Simon out of Kate's room, Blake had put the last touch on his preparations before leaving. He wished more than anything that he could have stayed, and maybe soon he would be invited to, but tonight was for Kate and Marc. He trusted Marc to make the night special for her, and Kate would do the same for him. The only dark blotch on the whole thing was that Blake was left with nothing to occupy himself other than his mind. He had a fairly well-developed imagination, but whatever he imagined would not be anywhere near the truth, he figured, and since he would get them to tell him about their night, what was the point of fantasizing about it until then?

He went back to the room he shared with Marc, staying there just long enough to grab his sword before making his way to the training room. He slid the scabbard onto his back and held Seneca in hand seconds after he entered the room. He nodded to a pair of soldiers on the first mat and walked over to the farthest one, already swinging the sword left and right. Running through balance exercises and practicing attacks and defense moves was the best way he knew to clear his mind, and in minutes he wasn't thinking about Kate and Marc anymore—or at least, he wasn't thinking about them constantly.

Half an hour into pushing himself to his limits, just as the familiar burn started spreading through his body, a soldier approached him with a training sword in each hand. There was no need to even say a word. Blake sheathed Seneca, took one of the training swords from the man, and thoughtlessly took position on the mat. It was no different

from the training he had done so far. The only change was that he had even fewer opportunities to let his mind drift to other things. All that mattered was the man in front of him, his next move, and how Blake would answer it. The rest of the world didn't exist anymore.

When the soldier, now limping slightly, bowed out of the sparring match, another one took his place. Then a third. To Blake, it was all the same fight; the men's styles were different, as were their strengths and speeds, but the swords clashed together with the same dull clanking noises.

Lost in his sparring, Blake didn't notice the comings and goings of the soldiers, not until his last adversary had thanked him and walked away rubbing his side. Blake straightened then, rolling his shoulders to relax them a little, and noticed the man standing just a few feet away with his arms crossed and a slight frown pulling at his eyebrows.

"Blake. A word."

Blake put the training sword on a hook on the wall behind him and turned back to eye Daniel warily. He didn't like Daniel much, and he was rather certain that the feeling was mutual. They had been civil toward one another since returning from the City after closing the breach there, but Blake had not forgotten angry words and threats, and he wouldn't forgive them, either.

"What now?" He stood in front of Daniel and crossed his arms. "We were using training blades so—"

Daniel stopped that thought with a dismissive gesture. "Spar all you want. God knows we all need training."

If Blake's supposed rashness wasn't what Daniel wanted to complain about this time, there was only one other topic that Blake could think of. He raised his chin a little higher and did his best to look down at Daniel even though they were the same height. "If it's about Kate again, you know where you can shove your concerns."

With a tired sigh, Daniel ran a hand over the gray stubble that covered his cheeks. "No, it's not about her either. It's about your Sire, actually." There was a hitch in his voice when he said the word 'Sire,' as though it were unfamiliar, and indeed Blake couldn't remember him ever calling Marc by anything other than his name. "Can we sit down?"

Without waiting, he started toward the benches that lined the far end of the room. His curiosity piqued, Blake followed. Daniel sat on the end of one bench, leaning back to rest against the wall behind him, his legs extended in front of him. He would have been the image of relaxation if not for the way his hands clutched the edge of the bench on either side of him, so hard that his knuckles were white. Wondering what this was all about, Blake sat astride the next bench, leaving a two-foot space between them. His scabbard felt awkward like this, and he unbuckled it before sliding the harness off.

Daniel watched him rest the sword across the bench before he said, "Did you ask Marc to sire you?"

Taken aback, Blake frowned at him. Whatever he had expected Daniel to talk about, his siring wasn't it. "What?"

Daniel gritted his teeth and looked straight ahead of him at the training soldiers. "Did you ask him, or did he just do it?"

"Why do you want to know?" Even as he asked, Blake was sure what thought was suddenly tormenting Daniel. He sneered. "Afraid he'll sire Kate?"

Still not looking at Blake, Daniel shook his head. "I told you. This isn't about *Kate*."

For a moment, Blake was wondering whether too much pressure had finally caused Daniel to snap. The man was not like himself, seeking Blake's company, asking these questions, all the while sounding as though he would rather have been elsewhere. His scent itself was pure confusion: fear and determination mixing together with eagerness. If he hadn't known any better, Blake could have thought Daniel was about to enter a fight he wasn't sure he would survive.

The flash of insight struck Blake like lightning—as stunning, and as blinding. His eyes narrowed, and he leaned forward, peering at Daniel as though he had never seen him before. "It's about you. It's about you wanting..." He blinked, the strangeness of his words hitting him before he even voiced them "You want him to sire you?"

Daniel didn't deny it; his only reaction was to turn his head to face Blake.

Blake whistled quietly. "I didn't think you had it in you."

"I don't." Daniel's words came out like the snap of a whip, his fear seemingly forgotten now, and his usual strength back to the forefront. "I just want to be sure I'll see the end of this fight. I just..." He took in a deep breath and closed his eyes for a second. When he spoke again, he was calmer. "Marc is a good fighter. I think he's a good man. I believe he'd be a good Sire." He let out a little snort at that, and the hint of a

smile brushed his lips. "At the very least, he's patient. Enough to put up with you."

Blake snickered and inclined his head, granting that point to Daniel. But if this was a game... "He's a great lover, too," he said, tongue in cheek. "Lovely dick. Thick and—"

Daniel's strangled cough stopped him short. "That," he said with a slight grimace, "I don't need to know about. I'm sure you keep him busy enough."

"That, I do." Blake grinned, and decided that he might as well deliver the killing blow. Daniel would know soon enough. Gossip ran through the base like wildfire. "Although I should say, Kate and I do."

Very slowly, Daniel blinked. Then he stared at Blake. A vein started pulsing on Daniel's forehead. Blake had seen other soldiers cower in front of this look, but it had never impressed him all that much.

"Kate..." Daniel said, but cut himself with a shake of his head. "I don't need to know about that, either. I don't *want* to know."

Satisfied that he had unnerved him enough, Blake relented. "What do you want to know, then?"

For an instant, Daniel looked at him as though expecting more unsettling news, and Blake was sure he would just leave. But Daniel took a deep breath and asked, "Did you ask him, or did he turn you of his own accord?"

A small smile tugged at Blake's lips at the memory. He remembered it as if it had only been yesterday. Marc had been a pain about the whole thing, claiming Blake needed to understand what he was asking before Marc would even

consider it. "I asked him," he said, serious now. "But he wouldn't have done it just for that. We already had a relationship."

A small frown creased Daniel's forehead at the word 'relationship.' That had clearly not been what he had hoped to hear. "Do you think if I asked him—?"

With a slight shake of his head, Blake stopped him in his tracks. "Daniel? Honestly, I don't know. To the best of my knowledge, I'm the only Childe he has ever sired. I couldn't tell you if he ever considered making more." He shrugged. "Why don't you just ask him? The worst he can do is say no." He couldn't help himself then, and let a devious smile push to his lips. "And if he does, you've still got me."

Daniel laughed, a full belly laugh that made the soldiers training at the other end of the room look toward them in surprise.

"You as my Sire?" he said as he calmed down. "I'm not masochistic. No. Thank you, but no."

He started laughing again, and this time Blake joined him.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter 4

The strands of light that floated above the bed were no brighter than distant stars when Marc woke up. Kate was draped across his body, a living and breathing blanket, but she didn't feel as warm as she had earlier. She even shuddered against him, and beneath his hand on her back, her skin was covered in goosebumps. Trying not to wake her, Marc reached for the sheet that covered little more than their legs and drew it up. She moved against him at the small movement, and he could feel her eyelashes fluttering against his chest. He rubbed her back slowly, wishing he had heat to offer to warm her up.

"Not too cold?" he murmured.

She rubbed her cheek against his chest, and it took him an instant to realize it was a silent no. "I'm all right," she said in a yawn, then raised her head to look at him. She was grinning, and Marc smiled back without hesitation.

"More than all right, in fact," she added and kissed him lightly.

Marc let out a quiet breath he hadn't realized he was holding. Part of him had been a little afraid that, waking up beside him, she would decide it had all been a mistake.

"Are you spending the night?" she asked softly, and it sounded like an invitation.

"That would be really nice." He caressed her cheek, brushing back the hair that had come loose from her braid behind her ear. "But I think I should go back to my room."

Her brow furrowed, her lips already parting for a question he could guess all too well. He traced her lips with his thumb.

"If I spend the night," he said, a chuckle barely hidden behind his words, "Blake will be here at the first morning light, and this bed is much too small for the three of us."

She snorted softly and gave him a small eye roll. "Good point. Are the beds in your room any bigger?"

He blinked in surprise, taken aback. Before he could reply—their beds *were* indeed larger, though they might still be a tight fit for three—she shook her head. Her smile took an embarrassed turn, and she ducked her head a little.

"I'm not saying... I mean, I don't want—"

He silenced her with a soft, chaste kiss.

"You don't have to explain yourself," he murmured. "Whatever we do, or not, is entirely up to you."

She nodded, and there was a gleam in her eyes that looked just a little like gratitude.

"Then I guess we're saying goodbye?"

Goodbyes, as it turned out, took a little while, and it was close to an hour later that Marc swiped his key card and entered his and Blake's room. It was dark, but Marc could see quite well without light; being a vampire had its perks.

His bed was waiting on the far side of the room, but it didn't feel right to go to it. Instead, he toed off his shoes, which he hadn't bothered tying up again, quickly undressed, and laid down behind Blake on the other bed: the one they shared, most days, when Blake wasn't with Kate. He curled his arm around Blake's waist, intending to do nothing more

than sleep, but the gentle contact woke Blake, and he turned around to face Marc.

"Mmm..." Blake closed the small distance between them and pressed his face to the crook of Marc's neck. "You smell like her. Nice."

Marc chuckled, at the same time embarrassed and relieved. He had expected that Blake would demand details, but he had also been worried that Blake's jealous streak might resurface when it was too late to stop things any longer.

"Wonder if you taste like her, too," Blake mumbled, and started licking a slow path down Marc's torso.

Marc gripped Blake's shoulder, his first instinct being to stop him, but somehow he couldn't come up with a good reason why he should. Besides, it was *Blake*. If Marc stopped him now, he'd be downright impossible to live with until he had his way.

"Did you go down on her?" Blake asked, the words sliding against the skin beneath Marc's navel like a caress.

Marc gave a noncommittal noise. Maybe Blake didn't mind offering blow-by-blow renderings of his time with Kate, but Marc didn't care to do the same.

"Bet you did," Blake said and licked a stripe up the length of Marc's hardening cock. "Bet you couldn't wait to get a nice good taste of—"

Marc's hand slid from Blake's shoulder to his hair. He tightened his fingers in the short strands hard enough to draw a pained grunt from Blake as he pulled his head up. Marc

knew his eyes were glowing as he stared down at his Childe; Blake's eyes gleamed right back.

"Why don't you stop with the color commentary," he said, the words rumbling out of him like distant thunder, "and put your mouth to better use instead?"

Blake snickered before returning to his task, and Marc was sure he knew what that sound meant: if Marc wouldn't share, there was still someone else Blake could—and would—question. Whether Kate answered was up to her; Marc didn't mind, one way or the other. He just wasn't one for storytelling himself.

"Fuck, Blake!"

His hips bucked clear off the bed, pushing his cock deep into Blake's mouth. Blake laughed around him, and Marc could feel the fangs pressing in on either side of his cock.

"If you cut me," he warned, but couldn't finish the threat. Eyes rolling back in his head, he let himself go slack again, except for his fisted hands, one gripping the sheets, the other still tight in Blake's hair.

Blake continued to slurp and swallow Marc's cock, never retracting his fangs even though he knew better than to bite without being invited to do so. Marc wasn't opposed to a bit of shared blood during sex, but on his terms.

Flashes of light sparked behind Marc's eyelids as the pressure built inside him, accentuated by Blake's fingers dancing on his balls, trailing fire and ice with each touch.

When the mood struck him, Blake could make a blowjob last what felt like forever, bringing Marc to the edge before drawing him back several times, usually until Marc was

knew what he or she was signing up for. They didn't always understand.

"Why would you want this?" he asked. "Is it only to live longer?"

Daniel answered without hesitation. "No. I'm not that greedy. I promised myself when I was a young man that I'd see the end of the demons. Now that it seems like that end is coming, I really wouldn't want to miss it by a few months or years."

Marc nodded. "I know the feeling. But do you understand what you're asking for?"

"What I'm not asking," Daniel said with a forced chuckle, "is for us to have the same kind of relationship you share with Blake."

That made Marc smile. He had been pretty sure Daniel wouldn't care much for that kind of thing. Of course, there was no way to predict whether he'd still feel the same when—if—he was turned.

"That's not what I mean. You're a leader. Can you follow?"

Daniel frowned. "I don't understand. I'm a soldier. Of course I can follow orders."

Marc settled more deeply in the leather chair and considered the man in front of him. Even wearing a casual gray shirt, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows and the topmost button undone at the collar, he looked exactly like what he was: a soldier. Not just that, but a leader, too. It might have been the way he held himself, or maybe the sheer presence that exuded from him. He was in charge, he knew it, and he wasn't afraid of his responsibilities. While that was

part of what made him a good leader, the same assurance did not always make for an easy transition into becoming a vampire.

"I'm not too demanding," Marc explained slowly, picking each word carefully. "But a new vampire *needs* to listen to his Sire. It's like... something inside you, like the need for blood and the fear of sunlight. If you don't listen, you'll be miserable, and you'll put yourself and the ones around you in danger. Can you follow, Daniel?"

For long minutes, Daniel did nothing more than look at him, his frown slowly deepening. Eventually, he sighed. "I don't know," he said quietly.

Marc nodded. If Daniel had given him any other answer, he wouldn't have believed him. "Good. Keep thinking about it, and tell me once you've figured it out."

It was the smell of insta-coffee that pulled Kate from a deep, dreamless sleep, and she hummed in contentment. Blake always went to get her coffee when he spent the night, and breakfast in bed was a luxury she had easily become accustomed to. She stretched her arms over her head, then adjusted the sheet over her. The feel of fine, heavy cotton sliding over her body brought the previous night to her in a flash. Not Blake, she now remembered, heat suffusing her cheeks. And she hadn't thought Marc would be there in the morning. Hadn't he awakened her to say goodbye with a kiss—or rather, a few kisses and even a little more?

"Awake?"

Her eyes snapped open at the whispered word, and she turned her head in the direction of Blake's voice. The strands

of light had faded during the night, and all she could see was a vague shape against the wall. She reached blindly for the lamp on the night table. It buzzed to life and cast a progressively brighter light on the room. Blake was leaning back against the wall. He smiled at her when their eyes met.

"Hey. Good morning."

She smiled back, clutching the sheet to her bashfully. "Hey, yourself."

"Breakfast?" Without waiting for her answer, he picked up a plastic tray from her dresser and brought it to her. She slid to the side and sat up, the sheet firmly held in place by her arms. Blake sat next to her, facing her, and placed the tray on her lap. Behind the usual cup of coffee and plate of toast, a glass half-filled with water served as makeshift vase for three roses, two pink ones that were still tight buds and a red one in full bloom. She touched a pink bud with a fingertip, as always marveling about Blake's talent for finding anything he wanted, it seemed. She hadn't seen flowers like these since she had been a little girl.

"Thank you. They're lovely."

His smile brightened a little more. She picked up a piece of toast and nibbled on the corner. She hadn't even swallowed yet when he asked, "So how was it?"

The bit of toast went down wrong and she coughed, forgetting to hold the sheet up as she covered her mouth with her free hand. The tray on her lap shook, and the coffee came dangerously close to spilling. Glaring at him through watery eyes had no effect, and he merely raised an eyebrow at her.

"What? You knew I was going to ask."

"Well, I'm not telling." She took a larger bite of toast, still glaring, daring him to make her choke on her food again. He didn't say anything but kept grinning. She looked at the ceiling in disgust. "God, you're—"

"Impossible, yes," he said with a shrug. "But seriously. How was it?"

"I was going to say incorrigible," she said, ignoring the question. She took a sip of coffee and closed her eyes, relishing the warmth as much as the flavor.

"Incorrigible, sure. But did you have a good time?"

Drinking more deeply, she looked at him again, ready to lash out. The words died on her tongue. He wasn't asking for a play-by-play of her night, she realized—though he might if she was foolish enough to give him an opening. He wanted to know if things had gone well, if all his scheming, all his claims that she wouldn't regret this had come to pass. As she put down her empty cup, she could feel a smile rising to her lips and let it.

"Yes. We had a good time."

It wasn't until she saw him relax that she realized he had been nervous. His smile never wavered. "I'm glad."

He started leaning over the tray, but the roses were in the way. She hurriedly caught the tipping glass before it could spill and turned to place it on the nightstand, next to the empty champagne bottle and glasses. While she did so, he picked up the tray from her lap and placed it on the floor. When he leaned in again, there was nothing to stop him from kissing her.

His lips caressed hers, soft as the cotton candy she had tasted once when she had been a little girl. Just as sweet, too. She dropped her eyelids to half-mast and parted her lips, inviting Blake's tongue inside. He not only slipped inside her mouth, he also moved closer to her on the bed, one hand cupping the back of her neck, while the other slid over her collarbone.

Her thoughts blurred for a moment, and she let his fingers sneak under the sheet. They left a fiery trail of sensations over her breast and stomach and were already reaching the apex of her legs when she realized what he was doing. She broke the kiss and caught his hand, bringing it back over the sheet.

"Oh no, you don't!" she said firmly when he gave her a surprised look. "I must reek of him."

She had heard him comment too often on the scent of her soap or shampoo not to know how keen Blake's sense of smell was.

He grinned, and the tip of his tongue peeked between his teeth. "You smell delicious."

He started moving over her again, but she clucked her tongue. "Blake, I was with another man just hours ago. I am *not* sleeping with you now."

He pouted. "You weren't with another man. You were with my lover. You think I don't like the way he smells?" His voice dropped to a whisper, and this time he licked his lips. "The way he tastes? The way you two taste together?"

Kate's eyes widened at the implication, and she practically leaped out of bed, escaping his advances. "Not happening."

She shook a warning finger at him when he leered at her. "And I mean it. I'll go take a shower now. And you and I are not doing anything."

She started walking backward toward the bathroom. He had seen her naked often enough that she cared more about keeping an eye on him than about giving him an eyeful.

He never took his gaze off her, but sighed dramatically. "Can I at least come in and wash your back? I promise not to be naughty."

He gave her his most innocent smile, and that surely should have been enough of a warning. She was weak. She let him come in with her.

Blake followed Kate into the shower and picked up the washcloth and bar of soap from the ledge. As he wet both and worked a lather into the washcloth, the scent of lavender filled the shower stall, and he smiled.

"Love that scent," he murmured.

She glanced back over her shoulder, beads of water clinging to her eyelashes like so many diamonds. Her eyes and smile shone even more brightly. "I know you do."

True to his word, he washed her back—only spending a little more time than absolutely necessary on her lovely ass—before handing her the soap and washcloth. Her hair was wet by then, her usual braid in disarray. He pulled the elastic tie off and carded his fingers through her hair, unweaving what remained of the braid. After pouring a dollop of shampoo into his hand, he started washing her hair, pressing his fingers into her scalp the way he knew she liked. This never missed—she tilted her head back and started humming tunelessly,

coming as close to a purr as a human throat possibly could. Blake grinned.

"Close your eyes." He reached up and angled the nozzle so that the water hit her head more fully. The shampoo sluiced off, helped by Blake's fingers raking through the gleaming strands.

As he brushed her hair back, he noticed for the first time the small, red mark on her neck just above the necklace, the broken capillaries so stark on her pale skin. Lust flared through him, and his cock, which had only been half hard so far, filled with need until it was brushing against her ass. She went very still when he touched the mark, first with a careful finger, then with his lips. He trailed kisses up her neck and kissed her earlobe just above the earring before murmuring, "Things must have gone even better than I thought, if you let him mark you like this."

Leaning in, he kissed the mark again, adding a small lick this time. She shuddered against him, and despite her warning that nothing would happen, desire was thick in her scent. She turned in his embrace and nestled her head beneath his chin, pressing her body to his and trapping his cock between them.

He ran a hand up and down her back, but always his mind returned to that small lovebite. "Do you like being marked, sweetheart?"

She groaned against his chest, and her right hand dropped to his ass for a punishing pinch. "I hate when you call me that." She looked up at him, her eyes full of reproach. "Why do you keep doing it?"

Smiling, he trailed his fingertips up her arm and shoulder, ending at her cheek. "Because you're beautiful when you're mad," he said and meant it. He stroked the corner of her mouth with his thumb until her lips curled slightly. "And when you smile. When you're happy." His thumb caressed her lips, and they parted, her tongue flicking out against the pad of his finger. "When you're horny." She hid her face against his chest at that, and his hand slid to the back of her head, cupping it lightly. "When you're shy. When you kick ass." As much as he tried to keep his voice level, it dropped to a murmur on his last words. "When I tell you I love you."

He could feel her entire body turn to stone against him and wondered if he had made a mistake, as a lump grew at the back of his throat. Very slowly, she pulled back and stared at him, blinking very fast to shake off the droplets of water that clung to her eyelashes.

"What did you—"

He didn't have the patience to let her finish. "I love you," he said, the words coming out in a rush. "I should have said it sooner. But I really do."

Her eyes widened a little more still, in shock or surprise but, he hoped, not in disbelief. Afraid that she would think he was teasing, he continued to babble, as though more words would convince her of the truth of the first three.

"Vampires aren't supposed to love," he said quickly. "And you shouldn't expect Marc to say the words because he's too stubborn to do it, but it's all a big lie, we can love just as well as humans do, and I—"

Her face suddenly broke into a beaming smile. "I love you, too," she said, and raised herself to her toes to press her lips to his in a brief and chaste kiss.

As he held her tightly to him, as tightly as she held him in return, he could feel her heart beating against his chest. It felt as wild as a hummingbird's wings, and for a moment Blake could have sworn it was his own heart beating so fast for her.

They remained under the spray of water only a moment longer before she reached behind herself and shut it off. They stepped out of the stall together, and without needing to say another word wrapped each other in towels that had once been thick and plush. They laid on the bed side by side, his arm at her waist and her hand on his cheek as she guided his mouth to hers.

They had kissed dozens, hundreds of times since the first kiss he had requested from her. It had never been as sweet as this one kiss, their lips and tongues coming together and apart again in a slow dance that needed no more music than that of her heartbeat, and the words still echoing through Blake's mind—and hers as well, he was sure.

Losing himself to the moment, he slid his hand from her waist to the top of her towel, where the tucked-in corner held it in place. He started pulling at it so that he could lie skin to skin with her, but she closed her hand over his fingers and stopped him.

"You promised," she reminded him.

Blake groaned as he remembered. "Sorry."

"Don't be," she said with a smile that seemed just a little strained. "I said I wouldn't sleep with you. I didn't say anything about kissing." She gulped. "Or biting."

He looked at her for a moment, waiting for the punch line, but she didn't add anything.

"Kate?" he murmured, afraid to understand what she meant, afraid to hope too much.

She touched his cheek lightly with her fingertips. "I'd promised myself that if you ever told me you loved me, I'd let you take blood from me."

"Kate..." Blake was surprised to find that his voice sounded almost choked. He pushed the words out anyway. "That's not... You don't have to do that."

"I know. But I want to."

"You do?" He stroked the hickey on her neck with his thumb. "That kind of mark doesn't come off, you know."

Her hand slid from his face down to his neck, and she caressed the bite marks there, scratching them lightly with a fingernail. "I know that, too."

Shivering, he kissed her, then ran his tongue over her lips. His mouth trailed over her chin and jaw, then to her neck. He followed the beating of her heart down to her pulse point and pressed a kiss there. "I love you," he said again. His mouth slid just a little lower, where the bite would not bleed as much.

Her fingers tightened on his neck as his fangs slowly dropped and pierced her skin. She gasped, then let out a little moan of pain. There were ways to work around the first

twinges of pain, but she had made him promise not to get naughty. Next time, maybe...

He pulled on her blood slowly, and her next moan was one of surprise. Still drawing small mouthfuls of her blood, sweet and warm just as she was, he smiled. No one ever believed before being bitten that it could feel good. Swallowing, he tightened the seal of his mouth around her and pulled one last time—hard. Kate let out a small cry and shivered against him as he slowly laved the bite marks with his tongue.

Afterwards, as he cradled her to his chest, he only had one thought. He had a human lover as fierce as she was beautiful, as strong as she was courageous. He had his Sire. He had to be the luckiest vampire on earth.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter 5

When Kate first left her room after her night with Marc—after offering her neck to Blake—it was to work over lunch with Daniel. She tried pulling up the collar of her shirt to hide the bite mark, but a slow blink from Daniel, not five minutes in, told her he had noticed. He fell silent for a few seconds, long enough for Kate to brace herself for the reprimand she was just sure was coming, but all he said in the end was, "I hope you know what you're doing. And don't be afraid to ask if they act like jerks and you need help kicking their sorry asses."

That was how she realized he knew about more than the bite. Heat flooded her cheeks, and she struggled for a few moments to regain her composure. Daniel continued thinking aloud about the results of the most recent explorations the squad had performed. Kate froze, struck by a thought that felt like a revelation and left her mind reeling: it didn't have to be more difficult than this.

Even though she had told Daniel to mind his own business, she had continued to worry what he and the rest of the squad would make of her having an affair with two vampires at the same time. Maybe she had worried too much, not that she would admit as much to Blake. Smugness was not his most attractive look. Maybe all that mattered was that she was happy—and she *was*, truly. Her heart felt lighter than she could ever remember. Maybe the squad was too busy trying to survive to care all that much with whom she spent her

nights. They'd gossip, certainly, because days were long in between patrols and hours had to be filled somehow, but eventually she and her lovers would be old news.

"Kate? You still with me?"

Blinking, she looked up from the bit of carrot speared on her fork to Daniel across from her. He was pointing at something on the map between them. She shook her head and tried to clear her mind.

"Sorry. Got distracted for a second."

He gave her a sharp look, and she added, "It won't happen again. What were you saying about the northern path?"

What was done was done, she decided. She didn't regret it, she wasn't ashamed of it, and if anyone had a problem with it, she would make it clear to them that it was her life and she could do whatever she pleased.

As it turned out in the next few days, though, curious glances were the extent of what she received. She could tell that Blake wanted to say, "I told you so," but he refrained, for which she was grateful. Things didn't change much at all, in fact. She continued to alternate sparring with Blake and Marc in the early afternoon, took her turns with them in the squad rotations for exploration patrols outside Lakeview, and worked with Daniel whenever he needed her. The only real change was that now, it wasn't always Blake who curled around her in her bed when they returned from patrol.

The only question that remained, in fact, was how long she would resist Blake's suggestion that she move into their room—or why she even resisted still. She doubted she would resist much longer.

"So you're going to do it?"

Marc gave a small start at Blake's words, and immediately chastised himself for his distraction. The middle of a reconnaissance patrol was far from the best time to let his mind wander. He shifted his hand on the hilt of his sword and pulled his gaze away from Kate's neck.

She was taking point for their three-men team, with Marc and Blake a few yards behind her on her left and right. Similar teams were spread through the woods every fifty yards or so. They took turns leading, but Marc was always most worried when she was in the front like this. Most distracted, too. It was too dark, and she was too far for him to see the bite marks on her throat, but he knew they were there, fresh again after Blake had spent the day with her. He trusted Blake not to take so much blood that she would be weakened, but that didn't mean he wasn't worried. It was so easy for a vampire to take too much even when they didn't want to...

"I don't bite humans," he finally answered Blake's question, turning his face toward him and keeping his voice as quiet as Blake's had been. "You know that."

Blake flashed a glance at him through the sparse trees. It was late in the winter, and although the air wasn't very cold, the trees had long since lost their leaves. Through the bare branches, the half moon shone enough that the sword in Blake's hand gleamed, a dash of silver leading his steps. His surprise stood out just as clearly. "So you're not going to turn him, then?"

It was Marc's turn to be surprised. Caught as he was in thoughts of Kate, he hadn't realized Blake was talking about Daniel. "I don't know yet," he said. "I need to be sure—"

Ahead of them, Kate had stopped. She turned back to look at them, a hand on her hip. With the moon at her back, Marc couldn't make out her expression, but her tone left no doubt about her irritation. "What is so important that you two are talking about it *now*?" she hissed.

The implication was clear: if there were demons around, it was dangerous for Marc and Blake to be chatting, dangerous not to be completely focused on their surroundings. Marc felt somewhat embarrassed: he knew better than that. Blake, on the other hand, laughed quietly before throwing a grin at Marc. "Isn't she beautiful when she's bossy?"

Kate huffed and turned on her heel, striding through the woods as though trying to regain ground—as though she were upset. The scent that drifted from her, however, told an entirely different story.

The squad found neither demons nor the breach through which they entered this dimension, that night. As they returned to Lakeview, the mood was subdued, and Kate still gave Blake the evil eye every so often, but she didn't pull away from him as he pressed his thigh against hers on the wooden bench at the back of the truck that was taking them to the base. By the time they arrived, her hand easily fell into Blake's. Marc pressed a kiss to her cheek and took Blake's scabbard and sword, wishing them a pleasant night. He found it adorable that Kate always blushed and ducked her head when he said it.

When Blake came back to their room by early morning, Marc had been thinking for a while about the patrol, and Blake's unexpected question. For him to ask while they were hunting demons, he must have really wanted to know, or been really bored. But even if he had been bored, why ask about Daniel's eventual siring?

"Would it bother you?" he asked as Blake climbed into bed next to him. Blake raised a questioning eyebrow at him, and Marc realized Blake had no way to know what thoughts had been turning in his head. He started over. "If I sired Daniel, would it bother you?"

Blake answered with a slow blink. "Should it?"

The words were innocuous, but there was something in his voice, something dark and wary that Marc didn't like one bit.

"I'm not saying I'm going to do it," he said slowly, watching for any minute reaction from Blake. "I'm not sure he understands what it entails, and I'm also not sure whether I want another Childe. I've already got my hands full with you."

Blake snorted and crossed both his arms behind his head. "Right. And it has nothing to do with the fact that Kate would freak out."

That, Marc hadn't considered, but as soon as Blake said it, he knew he was right. He hadn't mentioned anything to her because nothing was decided yet, but she needed to know before it happened—*if* it was to happen.

"I'll tell her. Tonight, I'll—"

"Don't." Blake yawned and rolled over onto his stomach. His next words were muffled, half swallowed by his pillow.

"Have Daniel tell her. Might help him decide if he really wants it."

It wasn't a bad idea. Marc ran a hand up and down Blake's back. The movement was familiar, although usually reserved for those times when the walls closed in on Blake until only soothing caresses could reach him anymore. "You still didn't tell me what you think."

Enough time passed without Blake answering that Marc started thinking he had fallen asleep. And then, a whisper rose, so low that he couldn't read any emotion behind the words.

"You'd still be my Sire. Wouldn't you?"

Marc's hand stopped at the back of Blake's neck and stayed there, heavy but not tight. "Idiot. I'll *always* be your Sire."

Blake made a sound that could possibly have been an annoyed huff. Or maybe it was a muttered, "I know."

Usually, Daniel's grand speeches were dull enough to put Blake right to sleep. However, when Daniel started his speech that afternoon with, "We have it," Blake whooped with the rest of the room. Daniel continued to explain who had found the breach, when and where, but Blake already knew everything he wanted to know: they would be fighting demons that night. Not just that, but they would be closing another breach.

"You knew!" he told Kate afterwards, when she had come off the dais, and his voice was caught between accusing and elated. "You've known since last night!"

She was grinning when she shook her head, her braid bouncing lightly on her shoulder. "Only this morning, actually."

"And you didn't come to tell me!" He covered his heart with his hand in a dramatic gesture. "I'm hurt, sweetheart."

She snorted and absently raised her right arm in front of her, an all-too-familiar gesture, to check the laces of her knife sheath. "Maybe not telling you was payback for that stupid nickname." Her grin widened a little more as she leaned closer. "Or maybe I told Marc before he went back to your room, and we decided you'd be a pain all day if you knew."

Blake's fake annoyance faded, replaced by a pang that was all too real. His lips twitched into a smile that he couldn't quite maintain. "You did?" he murmured, and he wasn't accusing anymore, but he wasn't far from being really hurt. He had brought them together, he was perfectly fine with them sleeping together, but if they shared things and deliberately excluded him—

"No." Kate's grin vanished in a blink. She stepped closer to him and threw her arms around his neck, threading her fingers through his hair. "I got the call after he left," she said very gently. "I was just teasing."

Blake felt like an idiot suddenly. He wove his arms around her waist and pushed a smirk to his lips. "Of course you were, sweetheart. I knew that."

For once, she didn't call him on the nickname. Instead, she peered a little closer into his eyes, as though searching for something behind them.

"I love you," she said, her words soft as petals. It was the first time she had said it when they weren't alone in her room. "You know that, right?"

Blake's eyes flickered to the marks on her throat. He leaned into her neck and pressed a kiss to them. "I do know that," he whispered. "And I know you love him, too. And it's all right, you know. If you love him more than—"

Her fingers tightened on his hair, pulling his head up. The next moment, her mouth crashed into his, hard enough that she cut her lip on his teeth. She kissed him without seeming to notice, pulling him closer to her until they were pressed together. Even when she ended the kiss, she didn't pull back. She stared up at Blake from just a couple of inches away. He didn't like the way her eyes shone like she was just moments away from crying.

"Marc is right," she said, and her voice squeaked a little. "You really *are* an idiot."

Blake couldn't object, not when he was calling himself much worse in his own head. "I am," he said, and pressed his lopsided smile to her lips for a soft, short kiss. "But you love me anyway."

"Heaven only knows why she does," a gruff voice said behind Kate.

Blake looked up to find Marc there. Hand on her shoulder, he was rolling his eyes, but there was a quirk to his lips that said he was teasing.

"She said you're an idiot," Blake said, tongue in cheek, "so I guess she loves *you* because she took pity on you."

"I did not say that!" Kate dropped her arms from around his neck and jabbed a finger at his chest. "Take it back!"

"Take back all of it?" Blake asked as he captured her hand in his. He used his hold on her to make her twirl in front of him as though they were dancing, drawing her back close to his chest so that she faced Marc when he asked, "You mean you don't love him?"

The startled look on Marc's face turned into a frown directed at Blake. Blake knew the two of them hadn't shared these words—one of them would have told him if Kate had said it, and he knew it would take Marc a long time to manage to voice the words, if he even ever did. They did love each other, though; he knew them enough to hear it every time they said each other's name.

"Stop playing," Marc started, but Kate stopped him by pressing a finger to his lips.

"I do," she murmured, drawing Marc's gaze back to her. "I do love you. Both of you."

Marc blinked, then slowly leaned in to press his mouth to hers. Smiling, Blake kissed her neck. It wouldn't be long now, before he had both of them in his bed, he was sure of it.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter 6

The sky over the horizon still burned with a dark red fire when the trucks left the base. Daniel had mobilized everyone, leaving only enough troops at the base to defend the fortified strip of land that linked the island to the rest of the world. The three trucks were packed, soldiers pressed together on the narrow benches. Marc sat next to Kate, her left hand in both of his.

Eyes closed and head pressed to Marc's shoulder, she seemed asleep, but her heartbeat gave her away to anyone who could hear it, and her scent completed the picture, sweet and a little spicy. She was excited. A little nervous, a little afraid, too, because they all knew fighting demons was never easy or safe, but mostly she was excited. Marc could understand that all too well. With each breach they closed, the end of the fight was one step closer.

On her other side, holding her right hand, Blake was just as excited; he, however, didn't have enough sense to be scared. Marc had long ago ceased to admonish him about it. Blake still enjoyed the battle too much for Marc's tastes, but at least his reasons for fighting now went beyond the simple thrill of violence. Marc knew he had Kate to thank for that change, and he did thank her often.

After fifteen minutes of rough riding on uneven ground, the trucks stopped behind what might once have been a warehouse. It was now little more than three barely standing walls and a caved-in roof, but combined with a protection

spell, it would hide the medical staff that was staying with the trucks to treat the wounded as quickly as possible. It only took Simon seconds to do the spell. He had perfected it in the past months, and as soon as he was done the trucks and those closest to them disappeared from view. He nodded a self-satisfied little nod and looked at the two other mages, who had joined the squad a couple weeks earlier. They were so vocal in their approval that Daniel had to shush them.

They called themselves mages, but to Marc they were little more than children. He doubted the youngest was more than seventeen, but she had the potential to be even better at magic than Simon was, and her partner was only a little weaker. They already knew how to close breaches, although they had never done so themselves, while Simon had two to his name. Daniel's superior had decided the three of them ought to work together and figure out a way to shorten the ritual, or to make it easier. Some days, Simon seemed to preen under the attention he received; at other times, his fear that he soon wouldn't be the squad's best asset anymore was all too obvious.

Under Daniel's quick orders, the soldiers fell into formation, with the mages protected at the center of the group. Daniel was in the front, along with the two soldiers who had discovered the breach almost by accident. Kate, Marc and Blake weren't very far behind. Everyone was advancing with weapon in hand. Marc's weapon was relatively new; he had picked it up after his previous sword had been bent beyond repair by a demon's clawed feet a few months earlier. The hilt and guard were simple, unadorned, the blade

as long as Blake's sword Seneca. Kate's was more ornate, the scrolls on the guard balancing the weight of the thinner, shorter blade. She was as deadly with it as Marc and Blake were with their heavier weapons.

This breach lay at the back of what had once been the parking lot of a strip mall. The squad had barely cleared the first destroyed building when the demons attacked.

"Get the mages to the breach!" was all Daniel had time to call out before the roars and howls of the beast-like demons drowned out the sounds of human voices.

The next few minutes were chaos.

At first, Marc tried to stay close to Blake and Kate. The three of them and four more soldiers escorted the mages through the fights between demons and humans and toward the breach. A charging demon distracted him, however, and he had to relinquish his position by Kate's side to stop the attack.

His adversary raised a huge half-moon axe. Marc grabbed his sword with both hands to parry the blow. It was all he could do to push the axe back; his arms still shaking from the impact, he started circling the demon, trying to find an opening. As most demons did, it wore armor of intricate leather and metal pieces, but the usual matching helmet was absent, perhaps because of the dozen or so spike-like bones that protruded from its skull.

Marc tried to remain focused on his fight as he attacked and defended in turns, but the temptation to look around and see how everyone was faring—where his lovers were—grew with every passing second. When a successful feint finally

allowed him to slash his sword at the demon's neck, almost but not quite severing it, he allowed himself a handful of seconds to look over the battlefield.

Already, he could see fallen shapes that were too small to be demons. In the distance, the breach was a large floating rectangle of light, and the blue flashes running across it could only mean that the mages had been successful in approaching it and had started working on their spell. Between him and the breach, dozens of fights were taking place, but he couldn't see Kate or Blake anywhere. A small voice inside him screamed, demanding that he find them and make sure they were fine. He silenced it as best he could. He would help them if the opportunity presented itself, but he couldn't afford to run across the battlefield, doing nothing more than look for them. Other people would die if he lost his focus. People like the soldier battling a demon alone just a few yards from him. He had a knee to the ground and seemed unable to get back to his feet. Marc went to help him.

The feeling of dread stayed at the bottom of his stomach as he fought, and every time he walked away from the dying body of a demon, he couldn't help but look around for them. It felt like hours before he caught a glimpse of them, and when he did, he let out a quiet sigh. They were fighting back to back, as they so often did, protecting each other. They'd be all right, he thought, relieved.

Yards away from him, the sparks of two swords clashing together caught his eye. He looked up just in time to see Daniel's sword break, and the sword of his opponent draw back to strike again. Marc started running, hoping beyond

hope that he wouldn't be too late. He fully intended to see Daniel come out of this fight—and the next one for that matter—alive. He liked the man, but he still wasn't sure he wanted to sire him. He had quite enough on his hands already with Blake's antics, and now that Kate had entered their lives—

Daniel ducked the first blow, but without a weapon he couldn't do much more than retreat. He stumbled on some rubble and barely avoided falling. It would have been better if he had. As he tried to regain his balance, the demon stabbed him low in the stomach and pushed up, impaling him on his sword. With a roar of rage, Marc threw himself at the demon, catching him by surprise and killing him in three powerful blows. When the demon fell down, Marc turned to Daniel. He had pulled the sword out of his body and was pressing his hands to the wound. Blood stained his lips.

"How bad?" he said, coughing up blood.

After making sure no demon was close enough to attack, Marc put a knee down next to him and gently lifted Daniel's hands. Blood dark as ink immediately flowed, running in tangled lines over Daniel's clothes and to the ground.

Marc clenched his teeth and forced his eyes away from the blood and back to Daniel's slowly dimming eyes. "Did you think about it?" he asked roughly. "Can you be a Childe?"

Daniel blinked very slowly, so slowly that Marc thought for a second that it was too late already. But two words passed Daniel's lips, barely audible in the continuing battle.

"Do it."

And Marc did.

Each time her sword or Blake's flashed like lightning across the night sky, each time metal on metal echoed like thunder, Kate could have sworn she felt electricity crackling through her, energizing her, pushing her to fight that much harder. While Blake attacked the demon high on its left side, she twisted down and struck on the right, sliding her sword beneath the edge of the armor plate that covered the top of the demon's thigh. She pushed up, hard, until she could feel flesh splitting, and the scrape of metal against bone. The demon cried out, the sound guttural and wordless.

"Fall back!" Blake shouted, and Kate instinctively obeyed, letting go of the hilt of her sword when she couldn't pull it out fast enough. She stumbled back just in time to avoid the swinging axe that would have cut her in two.

With a yell, Blake struck at the demon's arm, then its neck, then twice more, and the demon finally fell, a gurgle on its dying lips. Blood was splattered over Blake's cheek and chest, but he was grinning widely when he offered Kate his hand. She took it, and he pulled her up, drawing her close enough that she could feel he was aroused. His arm slid around her waist as he leaned in for a kiss.

She flicked her tongue at his lips and pushed back, both hands lingering over his chest just a moment longer.

"Focus," she said, chastising, but beneath her armored vest, her heart was beating faster suddenly, and it didn't have anything to do with the heat of the battle.

Blake laughed. Turning back to the demon, he pulled Kate's sword out of its body and twisted his grip on it to hand it back to her hilt first.

"Deathblow goes to me," he said, grinning. "That makes two more than you."

Her hand flexed on the sword's hilt. She started returning his grin, but her lips set on a grim line as she noticed movement behind him. "I think the game's over," she said, already stepping forward.

Blake fell into step with her at once. Only yards away from them, two human fighters were struggling to keep a demon away from the mages. Two more demons were approaching. Without needing to say a word, Kate and Blake split up, each of them rushing at one of the demons.

As she fought for her life—for the mages' lives—Kate caught glimpses of the rest of the fight. Silhouettes fighting everywhere; she couldn't tell how the battle was going. A shadow running in the distance: she would recognize Marc anywhere. Simon and the other two mages: how far along were they in casting the spell that would close the breach? And Blake, of course. He killed his adversary before she did and glanced toward her.

"I'm fine!" she called out, ducking a blow from the demon she was fighting. "The breach! Another is coming through!"

As she twisted her body around to attack, she lost sight of Blake. When she could see him again, he was by the breach, blocking the path of the demon that had just stepped out. She fought hard, trusting that he was doing the same. One of the fighters defending the mages fell only seconds after the demon he had been battling; with an anguished cry, the other one came to help Kate, his axe raised high and already swinging at the demon. They took turns slashing and hacking

at the monstrous being. It seemed to take forever, but it finally fell to its knees and then forward, its deformed face hitting the broken asphalt hard.

Kate wiped sweat and blood from her face with her arm, already turning around to search for Blake. He was still fighting by the breach. She started taking a step toward him, but froze mid-stride when a blinding flash of light erupted from the breach. All she could see were two silhouettes; the larger, broader one tackled the leaner, shorter fighter. They both stumbled through the breach and disappeared right along with the light. Her night vision damaged by the brightness, Kate had to blink several times before she could see anything again. When she did, she 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 words 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...

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?"

A few seconds passed before he answered, his words a choked murmur. "I don't know. I didn't feel him die, and I would have if... if he were dust. But I can't..."

His voice trailed off. She raised her face to look at him, blinking away the curtain of tears that was blurring her vision. He seemed a little lost, his gaze pointed at something behind her—where the breach had been.

"There's a link between us," he murmured after a moment. "Between all Sires and their Childer. A bloodline. I can hold on to it and call him back to me. Or rather..." His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed hard. "I should be able to call him to me. But there's nothing. I can't feel it, or him." His eyes closed and he pressed his face to the crook of her neck. "He's gone, Kate. Blake is gone."

The first tears started rolling down her cheeks.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter 7

As the truck brought them back to Lakeview, numbness slowly spread through Marc until he didn't know what he was feeling anymore, if anything. He let the movements of the truck rock him back and forth on the bench, uncaring of the way he was being jostled. He kept his eyes on Daniel, lying on the thin blankets at his feet. The rest of the soldiers in the back of the truck had asked Marc to cover his face, but he had refused. Daniel wasn't dead—or rather, he was, but he was not to be mourned. He would tell his soldiers as much in a few hours.

The truck was silent except for Kate's quiet sobs. Marc tightened his arm around her waist, pulling her closer to him. He hated that she was crying, but he didn't know how to comfort her. He wished he could have told her Blake was fine, reassured her like he had reassured the other soldiers, but he couldn't. He didn't know where Blake was, or whether he was still alive. He hadn't felt him die, but would the bloodline between them subsist if Blake were in another dimension?

When they arrived in town, the medical staff tried to take Daniel to the hospital. Marc, who had picked him up off the floor of the truck, refused to let go of him.

"You have enough wounded to take care of already," he pointed out, and each word tore at his throat. "There's nothing you can do for Daniel. His wound will heal on its own when he wakes up."

They tried to argue a little longer, but in the end they couldn't ignore the moans of pain and cries for help—not that Marc would have caved in anyway. He had lost a Childe already that night; he wouldn't let go of the other one so easily.

He carried Daniel up to the room he had shared with Blake, aware of and grateful for Kate's presence at his side. He could still smell the salt of her tears, could still see them rolling down her cheeks whenever he glanced at her, but she wasn't making any sounds anymore. Since his arms were full, she opened the door for him, using the spare key Blake had given her. She preceded Marc inside and turned on a table lamp. A soft glow lit the room. He could feel her eyes on him as he deposited Daniel on the far bed that had seen so little use. With his head on the pillow like this, Daniel looked merely asleep; in a way, he was.

When Marc turned away from the bed, Kate was still standing by the desk, one hand flat against the wall behind her as though she needed the support to remain standing. Marc forced himself to meet her eyes. If he had had a reflection, he thought, feeling numb, he would certainly have seen the same grief in his eyes that he saw shining in hers.

"I don't want to be alone," she murmured. She sounded as though she were talking around a mouthful of glass and each word was excruciating. "Can I..."

She didn't finish. She didn't need to. Marc went to her and drew her into his arms. Her own encircled him, her hands clutching at his back desperately, trying to pull him closer

still. Marc pressed his lips to the top of her head, and she shuddered against him.

They remained like that for long moments, clinging to each other and too hurt to share words. When Kate started wavering against him, no doubt exhausted, Marc drew her to the empty bed and made her sit down on the edge. Kneeling in front of her, he untied and pulled off her right shoe. The left one gave him more trouble; the laces were tangled, and demon blood had congealed over them, making them that much more difficult to pull apart. Marc worked slowly, tugging at the leather laces bit by bit, loosening sections before he could finally untangle the whole mess. When he looked up at her face, tears were again silently streaming from her eyes. He wiped at them with his thumbs, wincing when he realized he was leaving trails of blood on her skin.

"I'll be right back," he said softly. "Why don't you take off your scabbard and armor?"

She didn't move as he stood, but while he washed his hands and ran hot water on a towel in the bathroom, he could hear quiet noises in the other room. He returned to the bedroom to find her sitting on the bed again, her scabbard, protective vest, and jacket in a pile at the foot of the bed. He stood in front of her and placed a trembling finger beneath her chin.

"Look up, Kate. Please."

She followed the barest pressure of his finger and raised her face toward him. Her eyes were bloodshot, red rimming the gray and making her skin seem much paler as he gently cleaned off the blood, grime, and tear trails with the towel.

He combed her hair back with his fingers when he was done; her braid had come loose during the fight, and somehow she seemed that much frailer for it. She closed her eyes at his small touch, then shifted on the bed, pulling back until she was sitting in the center of it. Her hand pressed into the covers, inviting him to lie with her. Marc folded the towel to hide the stains of blood, placed it on the night table, and climbed in next to her.

Immediately, she curled up against him, her arm encircling his waist, her head easily sliding into the crook of his shoulder. They had rested together like this, although always in her room. After all Blake's scheming and prodding, it was only now that he was gone that she had come to this bed. The thought was bittersweet. Marc's hold on her tightened until a muffled sound warned him it was too much; even then, he didn't let go.

"We have to get him back," she said after what felt like an eternity, the words cracking as though her throat were too dry.

The frame of light around the curtains had grown, and the room was bathed in a dull light. It had to be midday already. Earlier, there had been sounds of joy in the hotel hallways and outside. The fallen soldiers would be mourned and remembered, but for now closing the breach was being celebrated. Marc had rarely felt so detached from the humans around him.

"We can reopen the breach," Kate continued when he didn't answer. "Simon will find a way. I'm sure he'll know how to do it."

Her voice wavered on the last words. She wasn't sure, no, but she wanted to be. Marc wished he could have had that confidence as well. All he could think of was that the only person he knew who had come out of a breach again had not escaped; she had been freed by the demons to work as their spy and agent. And that had only been after they had had enough time to break her and convert her to their cause.

Without realizing what he was doing, Marc reached again for the bloodline—and again found nothing. What was happening to Blake? Jen had never said straight out what she had been made to endure, but she had hinted at a few things, and sometimes her reactions had given away more than her words. It hadn't been pleasant. Death was the kindest fate demons could offer humans or vampires.

How long had it been for Blake already? On Earth, in this dimension, only hours had passed. But time was different wherever Blake now was. Jen claimed to have spent ten years on the other side, but she had only been missing in this world for less than a month. Did Blake know that? Marc couldn't remember if he had ever shared that tidbit of information with him. Was he losing hope, or was he clinging to the thought that someone would come for him? That his Sire would come for him. It was what Sires did—wasn't it?

"Will you come with me to talk to Simon?"

Marc forced himself to look at Kate. Her eyes were still very red, and the black-blue circles around them made her appear older. Grief shortened human lives faster than disease, hunger, or even fear. Unable to hold her gaze, he

turned his eyes to Daniel again, and made a half gesture toward him.

"I should..."

He couldn't finish. He had been about to say that he had to be there for Daniel, but Blake was his Childe as well. He was more than that, even if they'd never had any use for the words.

"Marc?" Kate said when he didn't reply. Her hand clasped his arm so tightly that her short nails bit into his skin through his shirt. "Please. We have to get him back."

He covered her hand with his and nodded. "Yes. Let's go."

They stood, hands reaching for each other and clasping at once. Marc glanced at Daniel again before leaving, and made the silent promise that he'd be back in time for his awakening. Until Daniel rose as a vampire, there was nothing Marc could do for him.

He only wished he hadn't be so scared there wasn't anything he could do for Blake, either.

Kate clutched Marc's hand all the way to Simon's room, two floors above his. She didn't know what she would have done if he hadn't been with her. She couldn't imagine not having him at her side when she had already lost Blake.

Her own reaction had shocked Kate. She had always prided herself on her strength. She was a soldier, had always been a soldier, and she knew that losing comrades was part of it. She had never lost a lover before, though, and had been wholly unprepared for the pain she felt.

As she glanced at Marc's expressionless features, she couldn't help but wonder—how much did *he* hurt? He wasn't

only Blake's lover; he was also his Sire. They had spent much more time together than Kate had even been alive. Was his pain beyond tears? Or was he waiting to be alone, maybe? She squeezed his hand gently, a reassurance to herself that she wasn't alone, and to him that neither was he.

She guided him to Simon's door, and only after she had knocked did she realize that she didn't know what time it was. Maybe Simon was asleep, maybe—

The door opened after only seconds and Simon appeared behind it, his clothes as rumpled as his hair. Tear tracks had left his face red, and as she and Marc stepped inside, he scrubbed at his eyes. He didn't look like he had caught much more sleep than she had.

"You've got to help us," she said. Her voice cracked, and she cleared her throat, trying to make it firm again. "We have to get him back."

Simon walked back to his bed, and he seemed to collapse more than sit. He grabbed a pillow and held it to his chest. "I can't."

She had heard the same words many times, over the years. Simon was fantastic when it came to using magic, but his fear got the best of him in too many situations, stopping him from reaching his potential.

"Of course you can," she said, tired but convinced of the truth of her own words. "You just need—"

"I *can't*," he repeated, and there were tears in his words as well as in his eyes when he looked back and forth between her and Marc. "I tried. When you told me he went through, I tried opening the breach back up. I tried until the fight was

wrapped up and they dragged me back to the truck. Ask the others. They tried to stop me, and I knocked Steven down."

He glanced down at his fist as he said it, touching his knuckles gingerly. There wasn't a mark on him, but Simon wasn't prone to violence, and if he claimed he had hit the other mage, Kate could only believe him.

"There was nothing," he murmured, looking up at her again. His gaze went back and forth between her and Marc, as though begging them to believe him. "I could sense absolutely nothing. I did all the spells I could think of. I tried my best. My absolute best. The breach is gone for good, and Blake—" The tears finally spilled, racing down his cheeks and falling to the pillow he was holding to him even more tightly now. He paid the tears no mind, his voice dropping even lower until he sounded like he was talking to himself. "He's gone. There's nothing I can do."

The floor felt like it was opening beneath Kate's feet. Without Marc's arm around her shoulder, she would have fallen to her knees. With quiet words she didn't comprehend, he guided her to the desk and made her sit down in the wooden chair in front of it. Simon's bag, the one that held all the ingredients he had ever needed for his spells lay there, knocked onto its side, the usually carefully lined up jars, bags, and bottles inside it in a jumble, some of them spilled onto the desk. And behind the bag...

Her breath hitched in her throat when she saw it, and she had to blink to clear her vision and make sure she wasn't imagining things. The sword was dull against the pale wood of the desk, its blade and hilt marred by blood, but she had no

doubt whose sword it was. She could see the inscription engraved near the hilt, and reached out to run a shaking finger over it.

"Seneca," she murmured, struck by another wave of grief.

She had asked Blake what the inscription meant several times, and each time he had given her a different answer, his smile as teasing as his sparkling eyes. She knew the words were in Latin, knew also that Simon could read them, but it had never occurred to her to ask him. She had been sure Blake would tell her, eventually. And now...

"I found it... on the ground," Simon said behind her, his words as pained as her own. "Where the breach used to be."

The tears resurfaced, and as strong as Kate wanted to be, there wasn't a thing she could do to stop them. So far, whenever she had thought of Blake, she had imagined him in that other dimension, surrounded by demons, trying to fight his way back to them—and in her mind, all they had to do was open the way for him to return. Somehow, the realization that he was without a weapon made her realize it wouldn't be that easy.

It also made her admit to herself that Blake might already be dead.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter 8

Clutching the doorknob to her room in one hand and Seneca in the other, Kate stilled and slowly turned to Marc. "I'll be all right."

Marc peered at her. He hadn't said a word since Simon had told them he didn't know how to reopen the breach. He cupped her cheek in his hand, running a thumb over her cracked lips.

"I thought you didn't want to be alone."

She shook her head slowly and tightened her grip on the hilt in her hand. "I won't be. I'm just going to clean up, and then I need to go down to Central Command. I'm still Daniel's—" Her voice started wavering. She swallowed hard and pushed on. "I'm still his second-in-command. I need to organize the patrol tonight."

I need to keep busy, was what she meant. She was sure Marc could understand that.

"Daniel will be awake tonight," Marc started, but she shook her head again, stopping him.

"But he won't be in any shape to fight, will he?"

"Not tonight, no," he conceded, dropping his hand from her face. "Maybe tomorrow."

"Then he can help us finish the clean up. But we'll start tonight."

Kate was surprised by how cold her words sounded, ice crystals glittering just out of sight. Marc's expression softened, taking an understanding cast that made Kate want

to turn away and hide. She pulled the door open, started to step inside, but stopped when Marc's hand ghosted over the back of her head.

"I can't go out tonight," he said quietly. "Daniel—"

"I understand. Tell him..." She glanced back at him over her shoulder. "Tell him I'll talk to him tomorrow."

There was something in Marc's gaze—pain, grief, loneliness, need—that caused tears to sting the back of Kate's eyes. She wished she knew how to help him, what to tell him, how to reach out to him, but it was all she could do to keep her own pain at bay and not let it overwhelm her.

She didn't want to say goodbye to him, would have felt silly saying goodnight when it was the middle of morning. She just nodded and pushed a smile to her lips—such a simple thing, and yet so difficult.

The door closed behind her with the soft click of the lock. She looked around the room. It seemed different, somehow. Or maybe she was. She walked over to the bathroom, only realizing she still held Seneca when she started undressing. She rested the sword across the sink. Flakes of dried blood detached, falling down to stain the white porcelain.

Suddenly, cleaning the sword was more important than cleaning herself. She didn't have proper supplies but at that moment she didn't care. She turned on the faucet and wet the blade, scrubbing at it with her bare fingers. She cut her fingertips and palm, but it didn't matter. She kept washing the demon blood off until the blade was gleaming, the way Blake always kept it. She dried it off carefully with a towel, barely noticing the pink stains her hands were leaving behind

on the fabric. When she was done, she looked into the mirror behind the sink. Her braid had come loose; hair framed her face, tangled strands giving her an almost wild look. Without thinking, she gathered her hair in a ponytail, twisting it in one hand. Her other hand was already reaching for the sword. It sliced through almost too easily.

It wasn't long before her lavender scented soap joined her hair in the trash basket. Also not long before she walked out of her room again, her hair still damp from her shower, Seneca gleaming in her hand. The first thing she did was find a scabbard for the sword and strap it at her waist. Then she got busy.

By the time night fell, she had contacted her superiors, reported fully on the previous night's battle, received orders and transmitted them to the squad. Everyone who was fit to fight climbed into trucks and left for the mainland. The breach was closed, but demons still infested the region; it would take days, weeks maybe, to secure the area so that civilians could start reconstructing. Kate intended to see every last demon dead, however long it took.

She just didn't know what she would do after that.

Daniel awakened to his new life with the dying day. Sitting on the edge of the other bed, Marc had been watching him for hours, waiting for the first signs that he was waking up. Most newly-turned vampires first awakened at nightfall, but not always.

When Daniel first started stirring, Marc stood and approached him, already rolling up his sleeve to bare his wrist. Daniel blinked very fast several times. When his eyes

finally remained open, they were burning with gold, with hunger.

"Bite," Marc said, offering him his wrist. "Drink as much as you want. You were hurt; you need blood to heal."

Daniel blinked again before doing as Marc said. His fangs sank in, tearing skin and flesh. Marc closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. Decades earlier, Blake's first bite had been just as rough.

The similarities continued playing out through his mind for the rest of the night, and the next days as well. With every new thing he taught Daniel, Marc found himself remembering Blake's first days as a vampire. Every memory was like a wooden stake plunging into his body, missing his heart only to leave gaping wounds.

When the squad returned that first morning, Marc sat in on the meeting between Kate and Daniel. New vampires sometimes had trouble controlling themselves, especially in the presence of blood, and Kate was bleeding. Scratches on the back of her hand, a nick on her forehead, a bruise on the side of her head, and matted blood in her newly shorn hair. Daniel's eyes flickered to gold every so often, but he never moved from behind his desk.

Marc found it difficult to look at her that morning; something inside her seemed to have been switched off: her warmth, maybe, or her liveliness. Even when she told Daniel she was glad he was fine, her mouth never even twitched toward a smile, her eyes never lit up. She barely even looked at Marc.

The next night, the squad was back to its cleaning duties, Daniel on the front lines, Kate at his side. Just yards behind them, Marc couldn't figure out which of them he ought to keep a closer watch on. Daniel's wound was all but healed, but he would need time before he became used to his new abilities. As for Kate, she was fighting with Blake's sword. When Marc had pointed out that it was too heavy for her, she had simply given him a flat, lifeless look. He could have taken it from her, but he hadn't managed to talk himself into it, not if it risked making her cry again.

She barely said two words to him that night. He didn't know what to tell her, either. He wanted to say he understood how much she hurt because his pain was just as deep, but every time he tried, the words remained stuck in his throat.

Days and nights succeeded each other, each identical to the last. It was ten days after the breach had been closed when Kate's battle fatigue caught up with her. She had been refusing to take nights off, going out with each patrol to hunt down the last of the demons. That night, she was hurt. Not badly—she had been wounded much worse before—but the injury to her arm was still serious enough that she was taken to the hospital on a stretcher.

Standing next to Daniel by the truck, Marc watched her go, hands fisted tight enough to draw blood from his palms.

"It can't go on like this," Daniel said, drawing Marc's eyes to him. He was rubbing at his nose, like he did every time he smelled blood. "I told you it'd end badly." His tone was as dark as his expression.

Marc shook his head. "Don't."

The quiet plea didn't deter Daniel, and Marc found that didn't surprise him much. A second later, he understood why he wasn't surprised—had Blake ever listened to him?—and a pang of loss echoed through him.

"She's hurt," Daniel insisted, now reproachful. "And I'm not talking about her arm."

Marc stared at him for long seconds until Daniel dropped his gaze. "So am I," he said quietly. "Don't twist the knife even more."

He had been about to finish that admonition with a quiet "Childe," but he couldn't make himself say it. That was what Daniel was, but in Marc's mind, the word applied first and foremost to Blake.

"Sorry," Daniel said, although he didn't sound as chastised as a new vampire should have when he was being reprimanded by his Sire. Again, Marc couldn't help but compare Daniel's attitude to Blake's, and found it all too familiar.

They remained silent for a little while, until Daniel finally cleared his throat and said, "Half the squad is leaving tomorrow morning."

Marc turned a frown to him. "What?"

Daniel shifted his stance. He seemed vaguely uneasy and wouldn't meet Marc's eyes. "My superiors sent orders. Half of us are leaving, the rest will stay until we're sure all the demons are dead."

Raking his fingers through his hair, Marc looked back toward the bridge that had taken them to the mainland for so long. He could barely imagine it without the blocks that

obstructed it—could barely imagine leaving the place where he had lost Blake. There was nothing left here, though.

"Where are we going?" he asked, looking back at Daniel.

Daniel shook his head. "You don't understand. You're not coming."

Marc stared at him. It didn't make any sense, and he would have said as much if Daniel had given him time. Shoving his hands in his black khakis' pockets, he spoke fast, as though to get over an unpleasant task more quickly, his eyes directed at something above Marc's shoulder.

"Simon's been trying to reopen the breach. He tried to enroll the other two kids to help him. Needless to say my superiors aren't too keen on that. And I don't like the way Kate has been fighting these past few nights. I need to get them both away from here."

"That might be best," Marc said carefully, "but what does that have to do—"

"My superiors were not as understanding as I expected about our... arrangement. They want to be sure I'll obey them and not you."

Marc took the words as he would have a punch. "You can't," he said, almost stumbling on the words. "You need me. There's so much you need to learn still, and you must—"

"I'll have to learn it on my own," Daniel interrupted him, and finally met his eyes again. "Believe me, I didn't think it'd go this way. I know I've got to stay close." His hand rose and clutched at his shirt right over his heart; he didn't seem to notice. "I can feel it. But it's not up to me. I may be your

Childe, but I'm a soldier first. I've got my orders. We part ways tomorrow."

Everything Marc was, everything he had ever learned or experienced told him this was a mistake. A fledgling couldn't be left alone so soon after being turned. It was his responsibility as Daniel's Sire to teach him all the little things that had changed: how to feed and how much, how to use his new strength, how to stay safe from the sun and resist the temptation when a human was bleeding somewhere close to him. He had to teach him about the Pacts also. He had to explain that their lives had a purpose greater than themselves. His clan had always held to the Pacts, even when humans had forgotten them. Marc was sure Daniel would understand. He wasn't as stubborn as—

He jerked back the instant he realized what he was doing and stumbled away from Daniel without a look back.

He wasn't trying to cling to Daniel because he was his Childe. He was clinging to him because he was his *only* Childe. Because Blake was lost to him, as much as he had tried not to think about it. Because, and it hurt to finally admit it, Kate was just as much beyond his reach.

Her right arm was still immobilized in a sling, so it was Kate's left fist that pounded on Marc's door that afternoon. She hadn't come back to his room since the night Blake had...disappeared. She hadn't been able to. Now though, she wouldn't leave until she talked to Marc.

It seemed to take forever before the door finally opened. Bare-chested, his hair tousled and his eyes very red, he appeared to have just been pulled out of sleep.

"Kate?" He blinked in surprise, his gaze dropping to her arm. "Are you all right?"

Tears pricked her eyes. She swallowed them back. "Daniel told me you're leaving."

He passed a hand through his hair, now frowning. "Funny, he told me the same thing about you."

He opened the door more widely. After hesitating for an instant, Kate walked in. She went to the desk and leaned back against it, while Marc sat at the foot of the bed, hands linked in front of him. He gave her a questioning look. "What did he tell you, then?"

"He said the squad is leaving Lakeview in the morning and you're not coming."

Marc snorted. "He left out the part where he forbade me to come. Something about his superiors not wanting me to have influence on him or something."

The knot of tension that had tied Kate's stomach loosened, and she let out a shaky breath. "I thought... I thought you were leaving me."

His eyebrows rose at that. His right hand started moving toward her, but fell back almost right away. "Leave you?" he repeated. "I wouldn't... You know I wouldn't abandon you. How could—"

"But I *don't*," she cut in, her voice trembling with the sobs she refused to let out. "How could I know when you have barely talked to me since..."

She couldn't finish. The words just refused to come out. If she hadn't been leaning against the desk, her knees would have buckled beneath her. Very slowly, Marc stood and

approached her. His hand was shaking when he laid it on her cheek.

"You haven't talked to me, either," he murmured. "You won't even look at me. I thought..."

Closing her eyes, she stepped forward and pressed her face to Marc's chest. His arms soon closed around her, slowly, almost tentatively. Kate started shaking. As delicate as the embrace was, it was still too tight for her wounded arm, now trapped between them, but she didn't care about the pain. She had endured far worse.

"I miss him so much," she breathed, the words muffled against Marc's skin. "And every time I see you..."

Marc pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "I know," he said softly. "God help me, I know. I miss him, too. And I've missed you. More than I can say."

His fingers threaded into her short hair and tilted her head up to him. She raised herself to her toes and met him halfway, crushing her mouth against his hard enough to hurt. He pulled her tighter against him still, his tongue pressing against hers as though trying to make up for lost time. Kate's free hand clawed at the cool skin of his back before sliding down to the waistband of his sweatpants. She started tugging them down as she rocked herself against Marc's growing erection. He gasped, breaking off the kiss.

"I'll leave the squad," she panted against his neck. "I'll go with you and—"

Marc's hand closed over hers before she could push his pants down. He squeezed once and then led her hand to his mouth. His lips brushed a soft kiss against her knuckles.

"You've got to go with them."

To Kate, the words felt as sharp as the tip of a knife slicing her heart.

"But I want to stay with you," she mumbled. She twisted her hand to thread her fingers with his. "I can't—"

He covered her mouth with the trembling fingers of his free hand.

"You have to stay with Simon." His voice had never been as empty of emotions. "Daniel said Simon has been experimenting. He's still trying to open a breach. Maybe once you're near another breach, he'll figure something out. Maybe he'll think of a way to bring him back, or help us find him."

She grabbed his hand and pulled it away from her lips. She had both his hands in her left one now, and she held on to them as tightly as she could, dimly wondering if she was hurting Marc, like he was hurting her.

"Simon can't help us," she said, the words uneven as her pain roiled through her like waves. "He said he can't. You were there. You heard him."

"I did." He freed his hands from her, but rather than putting distance between them, he held her close to him. She sighed when his arms closed around her again. "But I also know Simon. If you're there to push him, to remind him it's about—"

Kate closed her eyes and braced herself. Hearing the raw pain in Marc's voice when he pronounced Blake's name was like a blow, every time.

"—about *him*," Marc finished, "Simon will keep trying to figure out something. And when he does, you can send word to me, and I'll come."

"How?" Kate opened her eyes and had to blink several times before Marc's face emerged from the blur of tears she refused to acknowledge. "How will I contact you? Where will you be? What will you do?"

As Marc's mouth opened and closed without a sound, Kate stumbled upon a realization that froze her down to her bones. He didn't know the answer to any of these questions. He didn't really think Simon would ever find a way to get Blake back, did he? He had just given her hope again, only to snatch it back right away.

Her heart broke just a little more. She pressed a shaky hand to his shoulder and pushed away from him. She wavered a little, but she forced herself to stand straight, closing her fists to give herself confidence. Her arm hurt, blood and pain pulsing through it. She didn't care.

"Either you think we'll never find Blake again and you're making excuses so I'll go quietly," she lashed out, "or you don't care if we find him. I don't think I want to know which it is."

Turning around, she started for the door. He tried to catch her arm, tried to stop her—"Kate! That's not..."—but she didn't stop, didn't wait to hear the end of it. She shouldn't have come to talk to him. All she had done was inflict more wounds on herself, like she wasn't hurt enough already.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter 9

Seventeen months later

Light and shadows were dancing across the ceiling when Kate opened her eyes. She hadn't closed the curtains the previous night when falling into bed, too tired to do much more than strip, wash away the worst of the grime at the sink in the corner, and climb between the sheets. Even if there had been a shower in her room, she might not have found the energy to use it. She was lucky enough to have a room to herself—even if it was little more than a closet crammed full with a narrow bed, small dresser, and sink—rather than having to sleep in the dormitories with the rest of the squad.

She groaned as her body awakened, along with every little ache. Her last patrol had been brutal, with too many demons jumping out at the squad, and they had needed to retreat to cut their losses. Kate hated running away from a fight. It always drained her, mentally and physically, in a way that actual fights didn't. At least, she had told her discouraged troops as they returned to the camp, they had to be getting close to the breach if the demons were so intent on stopping them. She wished her heart did not tighten so painfully still every time she thought of a breach closing.

She had helped close three breaches in the year and half since she had left Lakeview. All three times, when she had stood close to the breach itself, almost close enough to touch, the same thought had crossed her mind—what if she jumped

through? Would she find Blake on the other side? Would she die like he had?

Pressing the heels of her hands to her eyes, she chased away the memory of that rectangle of light, and the two silhouettes stumbling to the other side. They would find the next breach soon. Then they would close it. Thinking of what or who might be on the other side of that breach helped nothing.

A year and half. Simon had never found anything. He had invented three dozens spells that Kate knew of—and she suspected he had sometimes tried without telling her—but while they all seemed to work when he cast them on other people, he'd never been able to tell if Blake was alive, never been able to pinpoint his location. It didn't mean anything, he assured Kate every time. Blake was in a different dimension, the rules of magic might be different there; everything might be different.

A year and half. Simon still hoped. Kate wasn't sure she did.

Without thinking, in a gesture that had become as habitual, as necessary as breath, she touched the two raised scars on her neck with the tips of her fingers. Sometimes, she could hardly remember what Blake's smile had been like—his real smile, the one he reserved for intimate moments, when he wasn't playing or teasing anymore and was simply happy.

Did Marc remember, she wondered at times. Did he still think of Blake, like she did, every time he raised his sword, every time he fought a demon? Did he still think of her, like she still thought of him?

A loud trill chimed on her night table. She reached for the phone without thinking, expecting to hear Daniel, surprised when it was Simon's voice instead that rose from the receiver. He sounded agitated.

"Kate, you've got to come down to Central Command. Fast."

She sighed. She was tired, and she had earned her day off. "What is it?"

The phone changed hands; next thing she knew, Daniel was repeating Simon's words. "You have to come down here, Kate. You've got to see this."

With another sigh, she promised him she'd be right there. By pure habit, she strapped her knife sheaths to her arm and leg after getting dressed then headed out. She doubted she would have to fight, but she always felt naked without the knives.

Central Command was across the street, and she slowed her pace as she exited the barracks, turning her face up to enjoy the sun a little more fully. As soon as she stepped into the building, she headed toward Daniel's office on the left, but quickly noticed the unusual commotion on the right of the main corridor, where the conference rooms were located. She changed course and forced her way through a circle of onlookers that were gathered around the entrance to the largest room. Dark mutters followed her, but she paid them no mind.

When she entered the room, she noticed the box lying on the conference table at once. It was roughly the size and shape of a coffin, and her stomach flipped unpleasantly at the

thought. She averted her eyes, and saw that Simon was standing at the back of the room close to the wall, as though he wanted to push through it or maybe disappear. His complexion had a distinct green undertone; it had been a long time since she had seen him so scared. She turned her attention to Daniel, who was talking sotto voce with one of Leawood's leaders. He nodded when he saw she was there, and she waited for him to be finished, looking back at the box. It seemed rather rudimentary, she now noticed, the planks that formed the sides and top all of irregular widths. A band of metal had been nailed around the sides, as though to hold them together. A second band secured the top in place.

"Kate. Thanks for coming so fast."

Crossing her arms, she turned to Daniel. The man he had been talking to was by the door, giving instructions to his men. "What is it?"

His eyes flicked to the box, and he frowned. "It was found last night on one of the main paths the demons take to reach the town."

"They lost it?" she asked, surprised. Demons rarely left anything behind.

"I don't think so, no." He handed her a piece of thick paper. "This was nailed on top of it."

She unfolded the note, and as soon as she read the first word, her throat became dry.

Marc,

You lost this and I thought you might want it back

Sorry, but it looks like it broke sometime along the way.

Jen

Looking back up at Daniel, she couldn't help but frown. "What is it?" she asked yet again.

Daniel, whose eyes had been on the box, jerked, startled.

"We were going to wait until we found Marc," he said very quietly. "But I think we'd better open it now."

"Why?"

A soldier entered the room, holding a large bolt cutter. At Daniel's nod, he started working on the metal fastenings.

"Because," Daniel said slowly, "whatever is in that box has a heartbeat."

Behind them, Simon whimpered. The same sound wanted to rise from Kate's throat, but she pushed it back. The metal binding snapped with a resounding crack. Daniel and the soldier pushed the top of the box off. Kate peered in, torn between curiosity and dread. When she saw him, she thought her heart would stop.

Marc had been feeling the tug of the bloodline for a week and a half already when he entered Leawood. It had awoken him, one early morning, the sensation of a rope wrapped around his heart and pulling him forward intensely familiar. He had given his regrets to the group of soldiers he had been fighting with and left their camp that same night to follow the direction indicated by the bloodline.

He had known, when he had parted ways with Daniel, that they would meet again, sooner or later. It didn't matter what Daniel or his superiors thought; a part of Daniel needed his Sire, needed to be taught, and shown what it was to be a vampire. It had only been a question of time before Daniel

caved in to his instincts and came back to Marc—or called for him.

The first time was three months after Daniel's siring. When Marc showed up at his camp, the look of surprise on his face had made it clear enough that he hadn't been calling for Marc on purpose. In times of great stress or need, it could be easy to cling to the bloodline for sheer support. Marc had done as much before. He winced every time the memory surfaced. He had done as much, and Blake had returned to him.

Daniel wasn't feeding enough, Marc quickly realized, and taught him again that very first lesson. He stayed at the camp for three days. Kate kept away from him the entire time.

Seven months later, it happened again. Marc was drawn to a different camp, and again Daniel claimed not to have been aware of what he was doing. Marc believed him. The part of Daniel that was pure vampire knew he needed his Sire, even if Daniel refused to see it. He was wounded that time, and not feeding properly again was hindering his healing. Marc tried to talk some sense into him, but Daniel refused to listen. His only recourse was to talk to Kate, tell her that Daniel, consciously or not, was starving himself. She listened, nodded, said she would talk to Daniel, but never so much as looked Marc in the eye. He left that camp wounded twice over, determined not to come back even if Daniel called for him again—and yet aware that he would come, however unwanted he was. Daniel needed his Sire, but Marc's need to take care of his Childe was just as deep.

Eight more months passed before this last call. Marc was only surprised it had taken so long. Was Daniel aware of what he was doing this time?

Although he assumed that Daniel had just reached his limit again, he couldn't help thinking that the call of the bloodline felt strange, stronger than it should coming from a vampire that had only been sired a year and half earlier. Instead, it felt as strong, as direct as the connection Marc had once shared with his Sire. But his Sire was long dead, having found death at a demon's hands just years into the invasion. Marc had never heard of the bloodline being used between anything other than Sires and their Childer, but he was almost wondering if an older vampire from his line might have been able to contact him in this way. It certainly was the feeling that came from the link, and it only became clearer as he neared the source.

Many cities across the continent hid from the demons behind walls as high and as thick as they could build; Leawood was no different. Marc drove all the way up to the metal doors before turning off the engine and leaving the car. A small door opened in the middle of the larger opening, just tall enough for a man to walk through—a short man. A guard walked out, wearing armor over his green uniform, a battered scabbard hanging from his belt. The clipboard in his hands seemed eerily out of place.

"State your name," he drawled, sounding bored. "And the reason for your visit to Leawood."

"Marc Harding. I'm a vampire—" It was always best to get that bit out fast. "—and I'm here—"

The guard's eyes had widened at his name; he actually started at the word vampire, and didn't let Marc finish.

"They've been expecting you," he said quickly, already turning back to the door and motioning toward it. "Get back in your car. Park on the left behind the wall. I'll call someone from the squad to take you there."

Before Marc could even get a word in, the guard was heading back to the wall, and there was nothing else for him to do other than what he had been told. Gritting his teeth, he restarted the car and drove in. By the time he killed the engine again, a young woman was jogging toward him, dressed in the familiar black uniform from the squad. For just an instant, Marc thought it was Kate. Her hair was too light, though, and she was too tall, too thin. Kate was shorter, curvier. More beautiful.

He felt a pang at the thought. He had wondered many times, since beginning his journey, whether Kate was still with the squad. He'd wondered if he would see her. If she would want to see him this time. If maybe...

"Sir? This way please."

Marc nodded absently at the girl's squeaky words—and she *was* little more than a girl. Had Daniel relaxed his standards? Was he allowing younger people to join? Were things going so badly that he needed more soldiers regardless of their age?

Marc didn't ask any of that. There would be time to get answers later. For now, all he did was follow the girl, and the tugging of the bloodline. He wasn't all that surprised that they were leading him in the same direction. There was no doubt in his mind which one he would have followed if they hadn't.

The girl didn't say a word as she led him through wide, open streets to a military camp just minutes from the wall. Every so often, she glanced at him, and Marc could only wonder what was on her mind. He didn't ask about that, either.

They finally reached a building. Marc stopped in front of it and reached out to rest a hand on the girl's shoulder. She practically jumped at his touch and turned wide eyes to him.

"I'll find my way from here," he said, trying to soften his words with a smile. "I know where I'm going."

"But Commander Waller said—"

"I'll tell Daniel you did what you were supposed to," he placated her and, without waiting for an answer, entered the building.

Up, the bloodline called. Down the corridor on the left. Marc listened until he was standing in front of a door. He took a deep breath and then knocked. He only had to wait for a few moments before it opened. Every thought vanished from his mind when, rather than Daniel, it was Kate who appeared across the threshold.

She seemed as shocked to see him there as he felt, her eyes widening and her hand tightening on the edge of the door until her knuckles were white. Deep circles darkened her gaze as she stared at him for a long moment. She looked so tired, so sad...

"Kate..."

Hearing him whisper her name seemed to break her daze. Opening the door wide, she threw her arms around Marc and pressed her face against his chest. Marc was startled enough

that he needed a couple of seconds before he returned her embrace. After the way they had parted, after how cold she had been toward him the last time he had talked to her, he had not expected that she would receive him so warmly if they met again.

"I'm so glad you're here," she said, her voice muffled against him. "I wasn't sure you'd get my message. And I never expected you'd come so fast."

Marc's right hand stilled, his fingers tangled in the hair that was still as short as she had cut it the day after they had lost Blake. It barely reached her shoulders. "What message?"

She pulled back and looked at him with puzzlement. "You didn't... Then how did you know he was back?"

A flash of pure heat coursed through Marc, making him lightheaded. He stared at her and had to wet his lips before he could ask, "Blake? It's Blake?"

She frowned at him. "If you didn't get my message," she said slowly, "and if you didn't know he was back... How did you know you had to come here?"

He touched his chest, palm flat above his heart. "He called me." He was all but choking on the words. "Vampire thing."

Her eyebrows rose high, and he could tell that she had questions, but only one thing mattered at that moment.

"Where is he?" he asked, pushing the words past his dry throat. "I need to see him."

She grabbed the hand still pressed over his chest and squeezed it as she said very formally, "Come in." The invitation allowed him to step inside the apartment, and he followed her into the living room. She picked up a piece of

paper from a cabinet and handed it to him with a trembling hand. "Here. It's addressed to you. It came with the box."

Marc took the paper but didn't unfold it yet, instead asking even though he was afraid he already knew the answer, "What box?"

Kate's eyes were shining wetly as she answered. "The box in which we found him."

Marc's eyes narrowed and he could only stare hard at her. "*What*?"

She hiccupped and closed her eyes tight, rubbing at them with fingers that came away wet with tears. Before she could get a grip on herself to explain, the sound of an opening door drew Marc's eyes to the hallway on his right. He turned in time to see Simon come out of a room in the back. He closed the door behind him and walked over to the living room. Marc's eyes were still glued to the door behind him. He had tuned out the tug of the bloodline in the past few minutes, but now he could feel it more strongly than ever.

"He's in there, isn't he?"

From the corner of his eye, he saw Kate nod. "He is, but..." She sighed. "You've got to understand. It's Blake, but at the same time..."

When she didn't finish, Marc turned to her. Her eyes, full of tears, were staring at the piece of paper in his hand.

"Like this says, he's broken."

With anticipation gnawing at him, Marc finally read the note. When he was done, his hand clenched around it until the paper was crumpled into a tight ball. He dropped it to the floor and, without another word, started toward the closed

door at the end of the hallway. Toward the source of the cry for help he had been following for a week. Toward his Childe.

As soon as his Master walked in, Blake knew he would be punished. Of course he was going to be punished. Wasn't he always? He shouldn't have let himself be convinced to climb onto the bed. He should have known better than to let them convince him. The bed was a trap. It was *always* a trap. Presented as a reward, offered as a gift, dangled in front of him as the proof that he was unworthy, but always a trap.

A trap that ended with his blood spilled in punishment. If he was lucky, it would only be *his* blood.

As he kneeled in front of his Master, head low and hands behind him, Blake could only think of the many infractions he had committed since they had let him out of the box. Too many. His Master had to know. That was why he had come back. That was why he would punish Blake now.

Closing his eyes tightly, Blake tried to stop his body from shaking. Showing fear never helped. Showing fear always made things worse. But not showing fear always caused others to get hurt instead of him.

He wished he could still have hoped for death, but he had learned long ago that it was useless. As harshly as he was punished, he wouldn't die. He'd just live to stumble again, disappoint his Master again, and be punished again.

Over and over and over.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter 10

For long, unending moments, Marc remained frozen in front of a kneeling Blake, trying to process what was going on but unable to do so because of the impossibly fast heartbeat that filled his mind, echoing loudly and leaving room for nothing else.

Blake was human again.

Human.

It was impossible. He had reached toward Marc through the bloodline, the contact so strong it had almost seemed physical, and no human could have done so.

Yet his heartbeat was undeniable, as was his ragged breathing. Slowly, Marc squatted in front of Blake, his fingers briefly fleeting to dark curls that looked like they had been cut recently.

"Blake? Look at me."

The shiver that shook Blake's body when Marc spoke was enough to ascertain that he had heard, and yet he seemed to hesitate; it was only after Marc repeated the words that he looked up, his reluctance all too apparent. There was nothing in his eyes save fear.

"Any reason why you're down there?" Marc asked, trying to keep his voice non-threatening.

There was no response, not even a blink.

"I spent so much time trying to get you to shut up and show some respect, so why don't I feel any happier now that you finally do both?"

The teasing fell flat, and again there was no answer. Raking a hand through his hair, Marc stood up. And noticed—how could he have missed the scent?—the growing stains of blood on the back of Blake's white t-shirt.

"You're hurt," he said as calmly as he could. "Why don't you get back on the bed rather than make things worse?"

Predictably, Blake didn't react, and he merely kept looking up at Marc, straining his neck to do so. Marc sighed.

"Get on the bed," he said, his voice stronger, and wasn't surprised when Blake hurriedly stood. What he hadn't expected, however, was the renewed shaking, and the way Blake fumbled with his clothes, clumsily getting rid of the bloodied t-shirt, loose sweat pants, and boxers before scrambling onto the bed on his hands and knees.

Marc took a step back at the sight offered to him. With the t-shirt gone, he could see what had caused the blood stains. Innumerable lines crisscrossed Blake's back, old scars that had completely healed but were covered by fresher ones that had reopened with Blake's movements. The marks covered him from his shoulders to the back of his thighs; someone had taken their task very much to heart. What twisted Marc's gut the most, though, was the assumed posture, clearly submissive, clearly sexual, clearly proof that flogging wasn't the only thing Blake had endured.

"Don't," he managed to say, pushing the words out despite the tightening in his throat. "Just... Just lie down, OK? Rest."

No reaction, no movement.

Gritting his teeth, Marc approached the bed and took hold of Blake's arm. He pushed him until Blake fell on his side,

revealing tightly closed eyes and a hard, painful-looking cock. Marc averted his eyes, tried not to think for the moment about all the implications of what he was witnessing, choosing to focus instead on the black tattoo at the very top of Blake's right thigh, a diamond with a different symbol drawn above each line.

Blake's eyes fluttered open as Marc took in the tattoo, the state of arousal, and the marks that crisscrossed his torso in a mirror image of his back. For the first time, something other than fear appeared in his gaze. Fear was still there, but mixed with it so intricately that Marc might not have noticed if not for the matching scent now coming from Blake, lust was undeniable.

Marc thought he was going to be sick.

"Rest," he repeated as he stepped back, knowing enough not to expect an answer by now and nonetheless hoping that Blake's voice was finally going to fill the room. Blake simply watched him go without moving or opening his mouth to speak. Marc felt almost relieved when he closed the door, and he took a few seconds to compose himself before going after answers. He had known what he would find at the end of the bloodline beacon wouldn't be good; he could never have imagined this. This was not the Blake he knew, and he could only begin to guess what had been done to Blake to change him so.

Feeling mentally exhausted, he headed back to the living room; Kate was on the sofa, legs raised in front of her and her arms wrapped around them. Simon waved a greeting

from his seat in an armchair. Marc remained standing, but he leaned against the wall for much-needed support.

Kate raised her head from where it rested on her knees. "How did he react to you?"

Marc hesitated about how to reply. He doubted that '*he offered himself to me'* would make it any easier to get answers.

"He was... calm," he said after a few seconds. "But scared. How does he react to you?"

Kate sighed and hid her face against her legs again. "He panics whenever he sees me, and usually finds a corner and bangs his head on a wall. If I try to stop him, he curls down on the floor and cries."

"So I've been taking care of him," Simon piped in. "He doesn't get upset when he sees me. Not scared either."

The touch of smugness and pride did nothing to comfort Marc. Had Blake offered himself to Simon as he had to him? The idea of it was very disturbing, but somehow Marc doubted that Simon could have talked about taking care of Blake so casually if that had been the case.

"Did he say anything?" he asked, his eyes questioning the two of them in turn. "Has he said anything at all since he arrived here? Did he explain—"

"He can't talk," Kate interrupted him. "His throat..."

She reached out to touch her own throat and her voice died with the gesture.

"We think they poured something down his throat and damaged his vocal chords," Simon supplied when Kate

faltered. "It looks fairly recent, too. Like they did it just before sending him to us."

Marc took a few instants to process this. It explained why Blake hadn't said a word to him, but it created more questions. Why return him to them but without his voice? Was it a warning? Sheer cruelty?

"That's not all they did," Simon continued. "They gave him a tattoo, and that looks fairly recent, too. I've been researching it, but I haven't found much so far. The symbols have different meanings in different languages, but no two of them are from the same language."

Marc nodded absently. "Jen had a similar tattoo. On her thigh, too. Maybe it's the demons' way to mark their prisoners."

He let his gaze wander to the closed door behind which Blake lay. Closed, but not locked, he realized, and was about to ask whether Blake had tried to leave the room at all when Simon asked, frowning: "How did you know it's on his thigh? Did he undress?"

After a flickering glance at Kate, Marc turned to Simon. "He did. You don't sound very surprised about it."

Simon let out a long-suffering sigh as he rose from his seat. "It's been a pain to keep clothes on him. I'd better go and help him get clothed again."

Marc's brow furrowed as he watched Simon go. He remembered, almost two years earlier, pushing Simon toward Blake as part of their game. Blake had then been more than capable of refusing unwanted attentions, but that wasn't the

case anymore. Rather, it was Marc's responsibility to make sure Blake was safe.

"You trust him?" he asked out of blue, indicating the direction Simon had disappeared with a tilt of his head.

Kate gave him a puzzled look.

"Why wouldn't I? He's been a big help with Blake, seeing how I can't even get in the same room with him." Pain bled through her words. "He's been taking care of his wounds and clothing him and calming him down when he's agitated. I don't know what I would've done without him."

Marc bit back his doubts, although a bad feeling continued to nag him, like an itch at the back of his neck he couldn't quite reach.

"What about feeding? What has he been eating? He's little more than bones."

Kate sighed tiredly.

"He refuses any food or drink. He hasn't taken in anything since he arrived, not even water, and it's been a week now. He should be dead, or dying."

"But he's not," Marc muttered to himself, thinking about what it all could mean.

"Wait a minute," Kate started, sitting up, then shook her head. "No, that can't be it."

"What?"

She frowned as she looked at him.

"You said he... called you? Some vampire thing? But he's human now. Or at least, he has a heartbeat. How could he call you, then?"

Marc shrugged, at a loss as to what to answer. He knew he had been led to this apartment by a cry for help made by a vampire from his line; he also had heard Blake's beating heart with his own ears. The fact that these two things contradicted each other did not make either any less true.

"Maybe he's not completely human," Kate finished her thought. "Maybe he doesn't need food but blood!" She jumped to her feet, and there was a fire in her voice and eyes that had been missing only an instant earlier. Marc at last recognized the woman he had first met in the foggy streets of the City. Defeat didn't suit her.

"I can get blood from the vampire supplies. Or just give him some of mine, it'll—"

Whatever else she said was lost to Marc as all of his attention shifted to Simon, who had just come out of Blake's room. There was a small, satisfied smile dancing on his lips, but more than that it was his scent that caught Marc's interest. Before even being aware of what he was doing, he had intercepted Simon's path and thrown him against a wall. He held him in place with a hand at his throat and snarled.

"What. Did. You. Do. To. Him?"

The last word had barely passed his lips when Kate was pulling at Marc's arm, trying to let him let go.

"Marc! Stop it! What—"

"He reeks of Blake's come," Marc growled, never looking away from the trembling human in his grip but aware that Kate's hands on his arm were stilling. "I'm giving him one chance to explain how that happened before—"

"Before *I* deal with him," she cut in, the anger in her voice matching Marc's. "One chance, Simon. Better make it count."

Stuttering and stumbling over words, Simon explained in a breathless voice that he had noticed in the past couple of weeks that Blake never touched himself if he got an erection—and didn't seem to lose it, either.

"It... it lasted three days... the first time. And he... he hurt. He looked like he hurt. A lot. So I helped him."

Whether it was because of Marc's grip on his neck or the words he was saying, Simon was now crimson.

"You fucked him?" Marc shook him for emphasis. Simon's immediate indignation was more telling than his words as far as Marc was concerned, and he slowly let go of the man.

"No! Of course not! I... I touched him. That's all. Just touched him so he wouldn't hurt and..."

Marc tuned the whiny boy's voice out and stepped back, for the first time realizing that he had been ready to kill a human because he had thought he had been hurting Blake. It had been a very long time since his impulses had taken him over so completely. It seemed that by answering Blake's silent cry for help he had opened the door to instincts he had rarely followed before. Blake had been hurt. Tortured. Marc wouldn't let it happen again.

And judging by the invectives Kate was unleashing at Simon, neither would she.

* * * *.

His Master was shouting.

The words meant nothing to Blake. Only the tone mattered, and the level of his Master's voice. He was angry. He was very angry. That was never good. Angry meant pain, and blood, and more pain. Very angry meant that he would look for new ways to hurt Blake. Crueler ways. He'd hurt him in such a way that Blake would be begging to be punished, begging with his eyes and hands and mouth and words, let it be over already, punish Blake instead, it was his fault, always his fault, forever his fault.

Scrambling off the bed, he curled his body in a corner, hiding his head in his arms, hoping not to hear—

Too late. He was always too late.

She started shouting, too.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter 11

"What happened to you?"

Marc had not expected an answer, but the vacant look in Blake's eyes as he stared at him made him wince nonetheless. He could still hear Simon pleading with Kate in the other room, repeatedly pointing out that she needed him to take care of Blake and she couldn't just send him away like that. Any second now she would throw him out, Marc was ready to bet on it. And if she didn't, Marc would. Simon might have meant well, but his actions were hardly a solution.

When Marc entered the room, Blake was already on the floor. He shuffled forward on his knees, head bowed, hands hesitating at the hem of his t-shirt.

"Keep your clothes on," Marc quickly told him. "And stand. Or sit on the bed. No reason for you to be on the floor."

He needed to repeat the words more forcefully, making them an order, before Blake hesitantly obeyed, a questioning, wary flame in his eyes as he briefly glanced at Marc. It was almost as though Marc had given him two conflicting orders, and he wasn't sure which to obey. As before, his hands came up to start tugging at his clothes, but this time Marc expected the response and stopped Blake before he could take anything off and made him sit on the edge of the bed.

"Are you hungry?" Marc asked, another question that aimed more at filling the heavy silence than at getting a reaction from Blake. "I'm sure you must be famished. You

look like a bag of bones. Not that you've ever had much flesh on..."

Under Marc's curious gaze, Blake looked down at himself, a crooked finger poking lightly at his thigh before he hugged himself with both arms. He realized, then, that Marc was observing him, and his eyes slid down to the floor, filled with an emotion Marc wasn't sure he recognized. Shame? More fear? At least, this proved that Blake understood everything Marc was saying and not only a few words, which Marc had started to suspect since the simple mention of 'bed' seemed to mean 'strip and get in position.'

"How about a little blood?" Marc continued, very attentive now to how Blake might respond to what he was saying. Disappointingly, Blake remained impassible at the mention of blood. "Kate said..." A definite flinch there, and Blake's eyes flew to the door for an instant, as though he expected Kate to enter. "She said she could get you animal blood, but I'm thinking you might need something stronger to start healing properly. You want to try?"

Blake's gaze was back on him, wary and tired, and Marc had to quell the sudden urge to shake him until Blake moved, growled, whined, or did anything at all. Instead, he sat at the desk, the only other furniture in the room except for a small dresser, and emptied the glass of water that had been set there in the pitcher nearby. His fangs extended, and he slashed his wrist before holding it above the glass. Blood slowly started filling it, so dark it almost seemed black in the poor light dispensed by the bedside lamp on the dresser. When it reached about an inch high, Marc pulled his wrist

back and mindlessly licked it clean, knowing it would close within seconds. It wasn't enough blood to satisfy a presumably ravenous vampire, but there was this small question about what Blake was exactly. If blood wasn't on his diet, it wouldn't take much to figure it out.

Moving the chair back so that he could turn and see Blake, Marc held the glass toward him.

"Fresh from the tap. Or as fresh as you can get tonight, seeing how you don't seem ready to let Kate open a vein for you."

It was only when Marc had reminded her that, by her own admission, Blake panicked whenever she got close to him, that Kate had agreed it made more sense for Marc to try. Somehow, the idea that Blake might enjoy her blood more than Marc's was as upsetting as the thought that he was hurt at all. Another effect of the way Blake had called him for help, undoubtedly. Marc really needed to rest and clear his mind.

Blake stared at the glass for a long time, and Marc wondered whether he could smell what was in. He never even started to reach for it.

Standing, Marc moved closer to Blake and placed the glass practically under his nose.

"Take it, Blake. Drink."

Blake's left hand twitched on his thigh, and Marc stared at it. How could he not have noticed before now the state of Blake's hands?

"All right, I'll hold it for you, then. But you've got to help me."

Marc let out a small growl of frustration as blood trickled down both sides of Blake's mouth but—he would have bet on it—very little if anything at all passed his lips. Blake flinched back at the sound, spilling more blood on his chin.

"I thought I mentioned something about you helping me," Marc grumbled. "But I see you're as cooperative as ever. Nice to see that whatever they did to you, they didn't change you that much."

There was a box of tissues on the desk next to the water pitcher; Marc put down the nearly empty glass and lightly wet a couple of tissues.

"Here, clean..."

He cut himself short when he remembered the state of Blake's hands. All ten fingers were unnaturally crooked and bent, probably broken and set wrong on purpose. Someone would have to do something about that, some day. Marc didn't want to think about it, didn't want to start planning already how he would break these once perfect fingers to allow them to heal properly this time.

Without adding a word, he dabbed at Blake's lips and chin with the wet tissues, cleaning the blood off. If he refused to feed, be it human food or blood, how long would he last before wasting away? Would they have to force-feed him? Hardly the best solution seeing his mental state, but if there was nothing else they could do...

As Marc thought and tried to find a solution, Blake's eyes flickered down, so briefly Marc almost missed it. Then he did it again. The third time, Marc realized it was his wrist Blake kept glancing at. The blood had clotted, the cut was all but

healed, but it seemed to fascinate Blake the way the glass had not.

"OK, let's try," Marc murmured, and reopened the cut as before.

Blake's eyes widened when Marc extended his arm toward him, and this time they flickered up, toward his face. Blood was slowly flowing from the cut and sliding along Marc's wrist, a drop forming and threatening to fall any second now. Before it could, Blake carefully leaned forward and flicked his tongue at the blood. His eyes narrowed in distinct pleasure, and he came very close to smiling as he took another small lick. And another. The touch evoked a tactile memory for Marc, and his body responded to it as it had for decades, hardening instantly.

Muttering to himself, Marc sat on the bed next to Blake, his back resting against the wall behind him as he tried to make himself more comfortable. At this rate, it would take Blake all night to take in the equivalent of a small mouthful. Another flash of fangs widened the cut slightly, and after a moment's hesitation Blake started feeding again, still with small, delicate licks. Even with the state of his mangled hands, it would have been easier for him to hold Marc's wrist rather than lean toward it like this; yet, his hands remained on his thighs, and he never touched Marc with anything over than his tongue and lips. Marc could only wonder whether Blake's fingers had been broken because he had dared touch—himself? Someone else?—when he had not been supposed to.

For a long moment, Blake fed from him, so painfully slow that Marc had to reopen the cut twice more before Blake pulled back, apparently satiated. The entire time, Marc tried to figure out what would come next. This town was under attack, and it hardly seemed like the best place to nurse Blake back to health. Familiar surroundings might help ground him back into this world, too.

Marc had a house up north, in a small town so insignificant—and so hard to reach, wedged between two rivers and a mountain—that it had escaped both demon attacks and attention from refugees. He and Blake had lived there for a few weeks at a time over the years, whenever one of them, or both, was hurt badly enough to need rest.

The next night, he decided as he watched Blake curl into a ball and drift into sleep. They would leave the next night.

It had been a long time since his Master had offered him more than a few drops of blood.

A very long time.

Blake was wary at first, afraid that it was yet another test. Was his Master trying to see if he knew his place, knew what was proper? Would he call Blake greedy, chastise him for taking too much blood from him, and reclaim every drop—and even more?

He tried to stop himself when the slashes in his Master's flesh first closed, tried to pull away, but already his Master had reopened the cut, already he was offering his wrist back to Blake. And Blake was so hungry...

Maybe—undoubtedly—he would be punished for this later. But at least, just this time, he would quell the pangs of hunger that had twisted his insides for so long.

Goosebumps erupted all over Kate's arms, and she crossed them, standing as tall as she could make herself, and nevermind that Marc still towered over her. "No way."

Her voice was flat, and for that she was grateful. Throwing a tantrum or even appearing agitated would help nothing. She had to show Marc that she was serious. Show him that she wasn't going to let him take Blake away again after she had been sick with worry for so long. Show him—

"You do realize I wasn't asking for your permission, right?"

If her voice had been expressionless, his was pure ice. She tried to suppress a shiver as the cold slid down her back and held on to her calm by her fingernails. She tilted her chin a little higher and stared him down.

"If you think I'm going to let you take him away from me without a fight, you're in for a surprise."

For long seconds, he returned her stare levelly. It was hard to remember in that moment that they had been lovers. That she had felt something for him—that she still did. All that she knew was that he was trying to take Blake away. She had regretted often enough allowing Simon—allowing herself—to give up at Lakeview. She wouldn't give up again. She would never be able to look at Blake again if she did.

Eventually, Marc let out a quiet sigh. "You're as stubborn as he is," he murmured, and sat down on the sofa. "Sit with me," he demanded, and she wouldn't have complied if he hadn't added a tired, "Please, Kate."

She came to sit at the other end of the sofa grudgingly, her arms still crossed as she faced forward while he shifted sideways to look at her.

"Try to think this through." He reached out to rest a hand on her shoulder. When she stiffened at his touch, he let his hand fall away again. "If I leave Blake with you, what are you going to do with him? You said yourself he becomes hysterical if you get anywhere near him."

"I'll find someone to take care of him," she stated, chin held high with determination.

Marc didn't hesitate. "You'll find someone. Someone like Simon, you mean."

She looked at him with wide eyes. It was a low blow, and she wouldn't have expected it from him. She could see even now that he wasn't happy about having said it; his mouth was twisted as though he had had a bad taste on his tongue.

"I'm not accusing you of anything. There's no way you could have known—"

"But I should have," she interrupted him, shaking her head. "I should have seen—"

"No." He reached for her shoulder again, and this time she let him. "Don't blame yourself for this. Please, Kate. Tell me you won't blame yourself."

She couldn't find anything other than earnestness in his gaze, and she wished for a moment that she could tell him what he wanted to hear. Try as she might, though, the words refused to come.

"I'm the one who brought Simon in." Tears were trying to force her way to her eyes, but she refused to cry. She had

cried too much over Blake already; she wouldn't cry anymore now that he was back. "I'm the one who asked him to help. I should have..."

A dry sob stopped her from finishing. She shut her eyes as tightly as she could, hoping to stop the tears, but she could feel them trickling from the corners of her eyes anyway. Marc's hand on her shoulder squeezed gently at first, but when she didn't manage to calm down, he tugged her toward him, catching her arm with his other hand and pulling her into his lap.

He closed his arms around her, tentatively at first, then more firmly when she didn't protest. How could she have protested, though? She felt as though it had been years since anyone had hugged her; decades since anyone had tried to comfort her. She had missed him, too—maybe not as much as she had missed Blake because of the anger and guilt that colored her memories, but missed him nonetheless. When he had shown up to check on Daniel, over the past year and half, she had always been jealous that he wasn't checking on her, too. And at the same time, she would have resented him if he had. She was no child. She wasn't weak. She was a soldier, and she could take what life threw at her.

Clinging to that thought, she struggled to get a grip on herself, and let the soothing motion of his hand on her back, rubbing slow, regular circles, guide her back toward calmness.

"Don't blame yourself," he said again. "The past is the past. Blake will get better. That's all that matters."

She raised her head from his shoulder and, after surreptitiously wiping her cheeks, looked at him. Deep circles darkened his gaze and made him look exhausted.

"It's all that matters," she repeated. "But I want to help. I *need* to. As much as you do."

For an instant, his mouth twisted, and she was sure he was going to object that he had a larger claim to Blake than she could ever hope to have. But after heaving a little sigh, he nodded.

"I know you want to help. And if I thought you could, I'd let you. But until Blake starts getting better, I think it'd be good if it was just the two of us. And if we were somewhere quiet. Somewhere peaceful. Far from any breach or demons."

"I could help," she insisted. "I could—"

"Kate... He freezes when I say your name. You said yourself you can't be in the same room."

The simple idea of losing Blake again—of losing both of them—was making her sick to her stomach. "I could help," she said again, now whispering.

Marc pressed his lips to her forehead. "When he's better. Give me a few weeks to bring him back, make him remember who he is. Then you can join us and he'll be glad to see you. All right?"

She wished he sounded more sure of himself. She wished she could believe it would truly be that easy. She also wished that she hadn't been certain he would leave with Blake regardless of what she said.

"All right," she murmured. "But I want to say goodbye to him."

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter 12

For the third time, Blake was on his knees seconds after Marc entered the room, and as he had done the previous night, Marc stopped him before he could start to undress and told him to sit on the bed instead.

"I thought you were sleeping," Marc commented as he set the bundle he had brought down on the desk. "Good thing that you're not. If we do this tonight, I guess you'll have calmed down by the time we leave tomorrow. Probably best that way."

Blake's eyes remained on the floor, and if Marc hadn't known any better, he would have thought that Blake wasn't listening—or understanding.

"I'll go get Kate," he continued. "She wants to say goodbye."

As Marc had suspected, Blake reacted at Kate's name; he started shaking so hard Marc thought for a second that he was sobbing.

"Hey, none of that, now," he admonished. "She's not going to hurt you, just talk to you. And I'll be here. OK?"

Even as the words passed his lips, Marc realized how stupid they were. The scent of Blake's fear had increased the second Marc stepped inside; how could the assurance that he would stay there be of any comfort? Still, he would be present, to prevent Blake from hurting himself, and to see exactly what effect seeing Kate had on him.

Leaving Blake where he sat, Marc went to find Kate; she was still in the living room, exactly where he had left her, but her eyes seemed redder than they had been earlier. She had requested a chance to give Blake a proper goodbye. She seemed surprised when Marc told her they would do it right then, rather than the following night when Marc and Blake would leave, but she followed nonetheless, pausing for a few seconds at the door, out of sight, until Marc called her in.

Marc wanted to remain on the side and observe, but he simply couldn't. As soon as Kate stepped in, Blake's fear peaked and he became agitated, his eyes darting between her and Marc. Within seconds, he was kneeling again, arms covering his head as though he expected blows to fall on him. Marc caught the back of his neck as he was getting ready to bang his head on the floor.

"Calm down," he said, quiet but commanding. Blake stilled, but he was trembling. Giving Kate a look that asked her to stay put for a minute, Marc drew Blake to his feet. When he understood that letting go would mean that Blake would sink down to his knees again, he held him upright with his arms around Blake's waist, practically supporting all of his weight.

A glance at Kate was all it took for her to step forward, a little hesitantly, until she was standing right in front of Blake. She talked quietly, calmly, and even though Marc tried not to listen to the one-sided conversation he had no part in, he still caught the tone of her voice, still heard her say words of love and offer promises of revenge. It was more than a goodbye, and Marc couldn't help feeling that she should have kept her

words for when Blake would be able to appreciate and respond to them.

Supposing that he would ever be able to do either thing again.

She reached toward Blake's face at some point, and Blake jerked away so violently that he pushed Marc back one step. Her hand hung up in the air for an instant before falling to her side.

"Thank you," she murmured, making eye contact with Marc for the first time, before returning her attention to Blake. "Get better, Blake. We miss you."

As she closed the door behind her, Marc slowly released his hold on Blake's waist; predictably, as soon as he was free Blake was once more back on his knees, once more shaking. But this time, Marc soon noticed, he was sobbing. Almost silent sobs, except for the ragged breaths accompanying them, which shook Blake's body harder than ever. Marc watched him for a while, at a loss as to what to do. Something in him demanded that he make Blake's crying stop by whatever means necessary, but as long as he wasn't hurting himself, Marc was reluctant to impose his touch on Blake and witness his augmented fear once more.

His eyes fell on the bundle he had left on the desk; maybe that would calm Blake down. Walking around the kneeling man so that he could face him, Marc tugged away the loosely wrapped fabric and uncovered Seneca, gleaming in its scabbard. He placed it in front of Blake as he squatted down. He had never wondered about Blake's sword until Kate had asked if he would take it when they left.

"Calm down, Blake. Enough tears. Look what I've got for you."

It took long seconds for the sobs to finally subside. Blake, however, seemed thoroughly uninterested by the weapon in front of him. It was almost as though he couldn't see it.

"Kate kept it for you. We thought you'd like to have it back. When you're ready."

What he didn't say was that he hoped that someday Blake would be himself again, and hold Seneca with the confidence and poise he had once possessed. Witnessing the utter lack of recognition in Blake's eyes, however, was heartbreaking. Marc wrapped the fabric around it again and stood, returning the bundle to the desk. Maybe he'd let Kate keep it, after all, until she came back to them.

"You look tired," he lied. "Time for good, not-completely-vampire guys to go to bed."

With a sickening inevitability, Blake roused at the last word, stood, and started stripping. Marc prevented him from taking more than his pants off. How many times would he need to stop the programmed response before Blake understood he didn't need to obey old rules anymore?

"Lie down," Marc said, gently guiding Blake to the bed. "Sleep."

Short instructions—orders, really, even if the thought was disturbing—seemed to work best, and Marc was pleased to see Blake close his eyes. His cheeks were still damp with tears, and Marc had the urge to reach down and dry them. But when he did, barely conscious of what he was doing, Blake's eyes shot open, his heartbeat suddenly became

faster, and his hands, for the first time, came toward Marc, grabbed him, tugged him, until Marc was lying on the bed next to him, too stunned to even protest. Blake barely had any flesh on him, and his hands were useless, and still he had managed to pull Marc exactly where—presumably—he wanted him.

Long after Blake had fallen asleep, Marc still didn't dare move. He had wanted to talk to Kate, spend some time with her, and make sure she was all right, but Blake's calm heartbeat stopped him from leaving. After the fear Blake had shown toward Marc earlier, this was an unexpected development and one to be grateful for.

By early morning, Marc awoke with a start. He hadn't meant to fall asleep, and for a few seconds he was disoriented, unsure where he was exactly and whose body his arm had curled around. He soon remembered, and as he did, he realized what had woken him.

The scent of blood.

In his sleep, Blake must have scratched at the tattoo on his thigh, and blood was seeping from under his boxers. Marc made a mental note to trim Blake's nails and bandage the scratch if need be before capturing Blake's wrist and allowing sleep to claim him again.

Steeling herself, Kate took in a deep breath and raised her hand. She knocked on the door twice. The hits were sharp, almost angry as they reverberated down the hall. She heard shuffling noises inside and steps coming closer to the door. The lock rasped, metal on metal, and the door opened slowly, revealing a disheveled Simon. His eyes, red and bloodshot,

widened when he saw her standing there. He swallowed heavily and asked in a small, almost childish voice, "Are you... are you going to beat me up?"

As hard as she tried to hold on to her anger, she found it slipping away from her, like water she couldn't quite hold in her cupped hands. He had cried, just like she had—although judging by his appearance, he had cried a lot more than she had. He didn't have anyone to comfort him, a sneaky little voice reminded her. She refused to listen to it. He didn't deserve to be comforted. She had been blind and naive, but he had known exactly what he was doing.

She crossed her arms and frowned. "Yeah, because that's something I do all the time. Beat up fellow soldiers."

He flinched at that, and she rolled her eyes at him. "Don't be stupid, and let me in. We need to talk."

He opened the door wide and retreated inside until the back of his legs hit the bed. He sat down, so fast it seemed it was more an effect of his legs giving out rather than him choosing to sit. Without ever taking his eyes from Kate, he fumbled behind him for a pillow and pulled it to his chest as though it were armor. As before, she was struck by how much he acted like a child.

After stepping inside, Kate closed the door behind her. There was a desk on one side of the room, magic supplies neatly arranged over it. She briefly wondered what kind of spell he had been working on, but dismissed the thought. It didn't matter. She drew the chair and planted it with a soft thud less than a foot in front of Simon. She straddled it and

crossed her arms over the back, then rested her chin on her arms.

For a long moment, she observed him, her gaze as cold and intimidating as she could make it. It wasn't long before Simon started fidgeting under her stare, and not much longer after that that he cleared his throat and said in a very small voice, "So... What did you want to talk about?"

She let guilt and shame gnaw at him a little longer before she finally explained why she was there.

"Jen." The word felt like a curse on her lips. Just thinking about her, she could feel her anger rising again. She held on to her calm the best she could. "You're going to help me find her."

Simon's eyes widened, and he started shaking his head. "I... I don't think that's a good idea. She's not a nice person, and I—"

"Nice?" Kate interrupted him with a snort. "What do I care if she's nice or not? I don't intend to sit down and have a cup of insta-coffee with her."

Simon swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down before he made himself ask, "What do you want with her, then?"

"She knows what was done to Blake." She felt a pang of pain at the thought and closed her eyes briefly. She wished she could help Blake, but Marc was right. She couldn't even be in the same room as Blake without sending him into a panic. She would find another way to help. "I'll make her tell me."

"But... but..." Simon was holding the pillow to his chest so tightly that he was shaking. "She's a vampire. And she works with demons. How are you going to make her do anything?"

Kate smiled at that, but judging by the way Simon blinked very fast, it wasn't a nice smile. "You'll help with that, too," she said, her voice leaving no room for protest. "First you'll do a localization spell. I'll capture her. Then you'll put her under a truth spell, and I'll question her."

And then, she finished for herself, she would kill Jen. A small repayment for what her allies had done to Blake.

"But... what about the... the breach?" Simon seemed to be grasping at straws. "They need me here to close it. And then Daniel will want to go somewhere else, and—"

"We'll close the breach here first," she grudgingly acquiesced. "And I'll deal with Daniel. Once we're done here, you and I will hunt. You owe it to Blake."

Pushing herself off the chair, she returned it to the desk. She expected Simon to raise more objections, but he remained quiet until she reached the door.

"I was only trying to help him," he murmured, stopping her before she could turn the handle. "You know that, right?"

She turned her eyes to him, and was surprised to find that he had stopped shaking so hard.

"I'd never hurt him," he insisted. "Say you believe me."

Kate left without another word. She believed that he had not wanted to hurt Blake, but whether he wanted it or not, he might have done just that.

And if the guilt from it motivated him into doing what his fear would have prevented otherwise... Well, she wasn't

above using all the weapons at her disposal. And Simon was certainly the best weapon she had to find Jen and force answers from her.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter 13

Marc woke sometime in the middle of the afternoon and was startled by the dark eyes mere inches away that were fixed on him intently. Blake flinched when he realized that Marc was awake, eyes immediately cast down as he retreated as far as the bed would allow.

"You pulled me in here, so don't play the offended maiden now," Marc grumbled with a yawn. He sat up in bed and tried very hard not to notice the bulge tenting Blake's boxers. "I'll go see if Kate got that blood like she said she would."

The only word Blake reacted to was, again, Kate's name, and frustration rose in Marc when he understood that, despite the confrontation of the previous night, nothing had changed. Blake was still just as scared of her, for whatever reason. Showing him how to be Blake again promised to be quite a fight. Hopefully, it wouldn't be a literal one.

The trip to the kitchen was uneventful, except for Kate biting down on her bottom lip, probably in an attempt to keep her remarks to herself. He didn't linger in the kitchen, and instead returned to the bedroom as soon as he drank some blood and warmed some for Blake.

"If you even think about getting on that floor, I swear I'll kick your ass."

Blake froze, one bare knee already on the ground, and he diffidently looked up as Marc stepped inside the room.

"Get on your feet," Marc demanded, his tone leaving Blake no choice. "And put your pants on."

Slowly, so very slowly, Blake stood, clearly unsure about whether he was doing the right thing or not. Without even realizing what he was doing until he had voiced the words, Marc encouraged him with a quiet, "Good boy." He winced at the patronizing tone of his voice, but Blake seemed to be reassured by the praise, and he stood a little straighter.

"Pants," Marc reminded him.

Blake bent down to pick up the sweatpants he had taken off to sleep; he struggled to put them on, and as Marc watched, he felt a pang when he remembered what his mind had been trying to suppress: the horrible state of Blake's hands. Apparently, pushing clothes off was easier done than putting them back on. And to watch Blake fight a pair of sweats—and lose—was curiously painful.

Blood washed over the edge of the glass when Marc set it down on the desk, his hands shaking with nerves the same way Blake's were with effort.

"I'll help you," he said, taking the pants from Blake and squatting down. Doing so brought him uncomfortably close to the erection straining Blake's boxers, but he ignored it the best he could and instead focused on getting Blake's feet inside the pants legs. A small voice in his head reminded him of what Simon had said, but he refused to even think about jerking Blake off. To help him get dressed was one thing. To give him an orgasm when he was so damn scared of Marc was completely different. It didn't matter that he knew Blake's body well enough to make him come in seconds, he would not...

He blinked, realizing that although Blake's pants were in place, he was still down with one knee on the floor, his hands on Blake's hips, his gaze on the almost obscene tenting that pulled at the soft fabric. Standing up, he cleared his throat and turned back to the desk and the glass of blood there.

"Pig's," he announced as he picked up the glass and faced Blake again. "Tastes terrible, but we don't have much of a choice for now. I'll let you drink from me again after you've had this. You need to feed more to get stronger."

As soon as they were settled, they would get into some kind of pattern, Marc decided. Feed at regular hours, so that Blake wouldn't go hungry until he was able to feed by himself. Finding a source of human blood might be a good idea also; Blake had a lot of healing to do, and he didn't seem to be getting better as quickly as a vampire would have.

It took a few seconds for Marc to suspect that Blake wasn't going to drink from the glass any better than he had the first time, and Marc didn't have the patience to start teaching him how to do that right there and then. He drained the glass himself and reopened the slashes in his wrist.

At nightfall, Marc went to get his car so Blake wouldn't need to walk around Leawood. Kate waited for him to return by pacing through the living room of her suite. Daniel had used his influence to get her an apartment when they had found Blake, going as far as to yell at the camp's administrator to get what he wanted. Kate supposed she would have to move out again now, but she didn't care. She didn't want to be alone in the overly large suite, with nothing

to distract her from the fact that she hadn't been able to help Blake.

When the front door opened and Marc came back in, she stopped in front of him and looked him in the eye.

"Do you really have to leave so fast?" she asked, hating how her voice was trembling. "Maybe if you stayed a few more days..."

She trailed off when Marc cupped her cheek in his hand. "A few days wouldn't change anything, Kate. I'm sure you know it."

She covered his hand with hers and nodded. "I know, but..." She sighed quietly. "I've lost you two once already. It hurts to lose you again."

Marc drew her to him and wrapped his arms around her. "You're not losing us," he said, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. "It's just for a few weeks. You have the directions to find us. We'll be waiting for you." He slipped a finger beneath her chin and tilted her head up. "Both of us."

She raised herself to the tip of her toes and pressed a short kiss to his lips. "All right," she murmured. "A few weeks."

She hugged him again before going to her bedroom so Blake wouldn't see her and become upset. She hadn't told Marc about her plan to find Jen and get answers from her; she didn't want to raise his hopes in case she failed, nor did she want him to tell her it was too dangerous. What else was she supposed to do for these few, long weeks?

If Marc had needed further proof that Blake, whatever he now was, wasn't a vampire anymore, a simple look in the

rearview mirror, angled to show the back seat, would have sufficed. Blake was laid down under a blanket, curled up like a child. His eyes were scrunched tight, giving away his state of discomfort.

Marc's eyes returned to the road, and his jaw clenched. He wouldn't touch him. He refused to do it. Not like this, not when Blake was still reeking of fear.

He wouldn't. Period.

The slash across his wrist was no more than a thin red line now, but Marc could still see it in his mind, blood welling to the surface between Blake's small licks. Hardly the most efficient way to feed, and Marc had needed to reopen the cut twice before Blake had finally pulled back, apparently having had enough, although Marc doubted that so little blood could be sufficient. That kind of feeding also had a major drawback; it had been arousing, almost painfully so, for both of them, and by the end Blake had been literally trembling with need. Yet Marc had held on to his resolve and left the room, telling Blake that he wasn't Simon and that he would have to take care of himself from now on—or stop being so scared of him.

It had been more than obvious when Marc had returned, having finished his preparations for their trip, that Blake had not found any relief. The scent of his arousal somewhat lessened when Marc had forcibly guided him out the room. Wide eyes looked in all directions, undoubtedly searching for Kate, who had hidden out of sight at Marc's suggestion. Leading Blake out to the car had not been a pleasant exercise, in great part because the sight of a trembling man, barefoot and held tightly around the shoulder by another

man, raised more than a few eyebrows on the short way to the car. Marc tried to ignore the pointed looks and instead started a list in his head. Shoes, which Kate had apologized for not having bought yet, thinking that Blake wouldn't need them for a while. Blood, preferably human. Changes of clothes. Medical supplies. First and foremost, though, they needed a safe place to live. A two-night drive should take care of that.

A fresh wave of lust rose from the back seat, and Marc sighed. Sunrise was an hour or so away, and it was time to find a place to rest for the day. Neither of them would be getting much sleep, however, if Blake's scent of need remained so strong.

His thumbs drumming on the steering wheel, Marc tried once more to distract himself and think about anything but Blake's arousal. He had told Kate where to find them, when the time would come, and made her promise she would wait for him to contact her before she came. He hoped she would listen to him. She was good at following orders when they pertained to fighting and the squad, but he didn't know if she'd be so amenable when his orders involved Blake. It might have been easier on her if he had given her more time with Blake, but if Blake's reaction to her hadn't changed in the week before Marc's arrival, it wasn't likely to change any time soon.

From Kate, Marc's mind jumped to Daniel. He had been in town, but Marc hadn't had the chance to see him and make sure he was all right. He was worried that Daniel still didn't feed enough, but with Daniel refusing his help, there wasn't

much he could do about it. He knew why this was happening—knew that, when hunger pushed at a young vampire, any human nearby became all too tempting, and it was easier to ignore the hunger altogether rather than feed on animal blood and crave human blood with each mouthful. This was why having a Sire was important, and he still reeled that Daniel hadn't allowed him to be as much for him.

The distraction worked until Marc pulled into the parking lot of a roadside hotel, but it was hard to fool himself any longer when he had to help Blake out of the car. Marc couldn't do much about the sight Blake made, barefoot, trembling and hard beneath the blanket wrapped around him. He slipped an extra bill to the bleary-eyed receptionist when he started to look like he would be trouble.

The room was barely larger than the bedroom at Kate's apartment, with two rather small beds crammed inside it, but it did have an attached bathroom. Marc made sure to close the curtains—Kate had told him Blake could bear sunlight now, but *he* couldn't. Too tired to think clearly, he told Blake to get in bed while he himself slipped into the bathroom for a quick shower. He returned to the bedroom, a towel wrapped around his waist, and was startled by what he found, even though he later admitted to himself he ought to have expected it.

Blake had once more interpreted his words over-literally, and he was on his hands and knees on the bed, eyes closed tightly and head bowed. His cock was straining toward his belly, harder than ever, the tip glistening with precome. Frozen by surprise, Marc remained immobile for an instant, all

too aware of the way his own body was reacting to the display.

"I'm not going to fuck you," he said gruffly. "So you might as well lie down." The tension in his voice made it unclear whether he was trying to convince Blake or himself.

For a few more seconds, he tried to decide what he should do. Blake would never be able to sleep in that state, and it was doubtful that Marc would, either. He was still convinced Simon had been wrong to literally lend a hand, and he loathed the idea of doing the same, yet at the same time he recognized that not doing anything would be extremely cruel. In the end, he made up his mind, and if he wasn't happy about his decision, he would have to learn to live with it.

"Blake?" he called out quietly. "Stand up. Please."

Blake's eyes opened and looked at him, questioning and wary, yet he obeyed and stood lithely. And immediately started sinking to his knees in front of Marc.

"God, no! That's not..."

Noticing the rise in Blake's fear, Marc calmed his voice and helped Blake stand again.

"That's not what I meant," he continued in a more even tone. "We're going to get you cleaned up, OK? You must be sore after that long drive; it will relax you."

Blake, of course, did not answer, but he allowed Marc to pull him into the bathroom, and he stepped into the shower when asked. Marc turned on the water and observed him for a second, wondering whether he would wash by himself. Blake did not move one way or the other, and examined his hands with a blank look when Marc suggested that he start

washing. Marc ground his teeth and joined him, dropping the towel around his waist after a brief hesitation.

"Let's start with your hair," he said, resigned, and lightly guided Blake's head under the spray before pulling him back. Picking up the small bottle of complimentary shampoo, he poured it directly onto Blake's scalp and started massaging the soft locks gently.

After a few tense moments, Blake began relaxing into his touch, and soon followed Marc's light prodding to rinse off the shampoo. Picking up the bar of soap, Marc tried to make his touch as clinical as he could as he started lathering Blake's thin, scarred body. The marks on his back had closed, thanks to the blood he had ingested, but they were still red, and far from healed. Trying to distract himself, Marc began talking as his hands stroked and cleaned.

"If... No, *when* I catch the bastards who did this to you, I swear they won't have any skin left by the time I'm done with them. Although anything I'd do would be far too fast."

He did his best to steady his hands as he stroked down Blake's arms. "I always loved your skin. Flawless and pale as the moon. You have no idea how many days I spent just watching you sleep."

Blake was shivering now, but for the first time in the last few days there was no fear tinting his scent; instead there was nothing but pure, raw need. Tentatively, Marc reached around Blake's body to lather his torso, wincing slightly when his erection came to rest against Blake's ass. Blake didn't seem to mind, though, and if anything he leaned back slightly, his back brushing against Marc's chest.

"I wish I didn't have to do this, not like this," Marc murmured as his soapy hand slowly slid down to Blake's cock. He held it tight, the way he knew Blake liked best, and started stroking: fast, even strokes designed to make Blake come as quickly as possible. "And I hope you understand I'm not trying to take advantage of you. I just want you to be able to rest." A thought occurred to him as Blake seemed to tense against him, as though he were fighting pleasure. "Do you need permission? Because you have it, if you need it. Come whenever you're ready. Knowing you, you'll give me hell about..."

Marc's voice failed him as Blake's body arched against him, his head coming to rest on Marc's shoulder. Gently, oh so gently, Marc washed off Blake's come before encircling his waist with both arms, relishing the way Blake was now comfortably leaning against him. He knew he should have turned off the water and tucked Blake in bed now that he was as relaxed as a content cat, but somehow he was finding it difficult to break the moment. Blake's constant fear had been unsettling, and he was afraid that things would return to square one as soon as they stepped out of the shower. And yet, they couldn't stay there forever. With some difficulty, he let go of Blake and reached around him to turn the water off.

"Time for..." he stopped himself before he could say 'bed.' Maybe that particular word should be banned, at least for a little while. "Time to dry off and get some sleep."

As quickly as he could, he ran a towel over Blake before leading him to his bed. Blake looked sleepy and easily slipped between the sheets, his eyes closing as soon as his head

touched the pillow. Marc watched him for a moment before shaking himself out of his torpor and glaring at his own still-hard cock. Another shower seemed to be in order.

His Master had changed the rules—again.

He did that, sometimes. Whenever Blake became too used to his routine, whenever the reasons for punishment seemed to become less frequent, the rules changed. At times, they were stated clearly, spelled out for Blake along with the punishment for breaking each and every one of them. That was what Blake liked best: knowing exactly where he stood, and how to remain standing. The other option was more frequent but much less pleasant. It involved days of endless beatings as Blake figured out the new rules, one by one, every time he broke one without meaning to or even being aware of it.

This time, it seemed to be a little of both. His Master had voiced some changes; others, he had only hinted at. Blake was confused. Was it a trick to make him stumble and earn his biggest punishment yet? A test, whose expected outcome was his failure, but how badly he failed would dictate how strongly he was punished?

All he knew, when he let himself be tucked into bed, was that his Master had not been so gentle with him in years—no, decades. The last thing he wanted was to disappoint him now.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter 14

Three nights after Marc left with Blake, the squad closed the breach near Leawood.

By midmorning the next day, Kate dragged Simon to Daniel's office. They were both exhausted still—she from a long fight, Simon from the breach-closing spell and what she suspected was too little sleep—but the sooner they informed Daniel about their plans, they had decided, the better. They had also agreed that she would do the talking. Simon stayed back, practically hiding behind her, as though he would rather be elsewhere. Kate could guess why all too easily; she doubted that Daniel would be happy to hear that his second-in-command and his best mage were deserting him, and lately he had been quick to get into shouting matches with whoever displeased him.

When she explained herself, though, Daniel only gave her a resigned look. Leaning back in his chair, he put down the maps he had been studying and considered Kate. "I was surprised you didn't leave with them, so I can't say this is unexpected. I don't suppose there's anything I can say that would make you change your mind?"

Kate relaxed a little. "No, there really isn't."

It was all a formality, really. Anyone who joined the squad was free to leave at any time. In effect, few people ever quit once they enrolled, not unless they were wounded to such an extent that they couldn't fight anymore. Ever since she had made her decision, Kate had been feeling a thread of guilt at

the thought of leaving her comrades, but it was only temporary. She would return to fighting. And when she did, Marc and Blake would, as well.

Daniel passed a hand over his face. He looked tired—even more so than he had the past few weeks. He'd been driving the squad hard, harder than he ever had before being turned, and Kate had needed to remind him, once or twice, that they didn't all recuperate as fast as he did. Lately, though, he had seemed as worn out as he had been when still human.

"What about you?" he asked, his gaze shifting toward Simon. "How can I convince you to stay? You know the squad needs you."

Simon let out a tiny sound that sounded like the squeaking of a mouse. Kate glanced back at him. Head ducked and shoulders raised defensively, he looked as though Daniel had yelled at him rather than asked a simple question.

"The other mages," he began, but quickly stopped and started again. "I mean, they know how to close breaches. You don't really need *me*."

His lips twisted into a grimace at the admission. He had always been proud of what he could accomplish with magic, and his success with breaches was what he was most proud of. It couldn't be easy for him to say that he was replaceable.

"I suppose they'll be able to make do without you," Daniel said with a small sigh. "They'll have to."

Kate looked at him in surprise. "They?" she repeated. "You won't be with the squad?"

"I won't, no," Daniel said with a small sigh. "I've decided to take a break."

Kate's eyes widened and she took a half step closer to his desk before she knew it. She could hardly believe Daniel would abandon the fight. After all, he had asked to be made a vampire just so he could see the end of the demons' invasion. A slew of questions on her lips, Kate tried to figure out what to ask first—and noticed the wary look Daniel threw at Simon. He had confided in her more than once, and she in him, but neither of them was as close to Simon. She'd ask *why*, she decided, but later.

"What are you going to do, then?" she asked instead.

Daniel shrugged, then stood, turning toward the bookshelves behind him. He had once owned a collection of mismatched items from the time before the demons, collectibles and every day items alike, but ever since his siring he had been giving them away, one at a time, and he now only had a handful of objects left.

"I'm not sure. I haven't really thought about it."

Kate didn't have to think twice. "Come with us," she offered. "Help us."

He looked up from the glass horse in his hands. His eyebrow was raised questioningly. "Help you do what?"

Long before she had finished explaining how she intended to find Jen or why, she knew he would come along. All she had to do, really, was mention Marc's name, and his interest was piqued.

When all was said and done, driving north through an embattled land to a small, quiet town and arranging to have the butcher deliver blood to them every few days was a piece of cake, especially when compared to the first task Marc

tackled once they settled down: getting Blake to feed by himself, and in sufficient quantities.

It took Marc eight days and successive attempts, using a baby bottle, a sippy cup, a spoon, a large bowl, and a syringe, before he found the miracle instrument that would allow Blake to feed without needing to use his damaged hands.

He cursed himself at length for not having thought of using a straw right away, even more so when Blake sipped the warm blood without hesitation. His eyes closed as he did so, but the smile Marc expected never came. Worse, Blake didn't finish the mug, drinking only about a third of it.

"Finish it," Marc demanded, pushing the mug on the table so it was an inch or so closer to Blake. Blake's eyes remained on the mug for a few instants, flickered very briefly toward Marc on the other side of the table, and he finally bent to the straw and slowly drank the rest of the blood. Again, his eyes closed, but this time they were scrunched tight, as though the blood tasted foul.

"You need to feed more," Marc encouraged him. "So that you'll heal faster. Do you understand?"

Marc should have been used to not receiving an answer, even a wordless one, but Blake's silence and blank looks continued to frustrate him immensely, even more so because he couldn't show displeasure without causing Blake to instantly drop to his knees. Thankfully, that was the only time Blake did so anymore; repeating over and over that Blake shouldn't be on his knees and glaring at him until he stood had finally convinced him that Marc meant what he said and

that whatever prior rule had been in effect was now null and void.

Finding out what other rules existed was still a big part of what Marc needed to do, but it was hard without feedback from Blake. He still wasn't sure whether or not touching himself was a rule taught to Blake or if it was a consequence of his hands being next to useless.

Whether it was one or the other, the result was the same, and Marc dreaded to discover that, for whatever reason, Blake had become aroused. He dreaded it because of the ritual that followed: a shower for Blake and relief from Marc's hand, then the same for Marc once Blake was tucked in bed.

He also dreaded it because, each time, it became a little easier to make Blake come, a little harder not to push things further; each time, he remained with Blake under the spray of burning hot water a bit longer, and with a little less guilt. But the scent of raw fear always came from Blake as strongly as it had the first time Marc had laid eyes on him in Leawood.

A few days after Blake started feeding with a mug and straw, the realization that Marc was getting too comfortable with their routine was what helped him make up his mind about what the next step would be. It had to be Blake's hands and relearning how to use them in any way he wished, including on himself. Before that, Marc would need to set the bones properly again. Which implied breaking them first.

Upon convincing Blake that the floor wasn't an option, Marc had given him an alternative. The house was sparsely furnished, but it did have a sofa and armchair arranged by a fireplace in the front room. Marc had taken the habit of

lighting a fire there after he noticed Blake shivering from what seemed to be cold, and he had managed to persuade Blake that the sofa was his. After some reticence, Blake had taken a liking to the slightly battered but comfortable cushions, and he now spent his days there, sitting with his bare feet folded under him, eyes lost in contemplation of the fire. His nights too, if Marc didn't send him to bed.

That was where Marc found him after he had made his decision. He almost sat on the sofa next to Blake, before changing his mind and pulling the armchair closer instead. He wanted Blake to have one thing entirely for him, and sitting without being invited might have been seen as an invasion.

Sitting on the edge of the armchair, he held out his hand, palm up, toward Blake. "I'd like to see your hands," he asked, trying not to make it an order. Another thing he was working on: giving Blake as many choices as possible.

Blake's eyes remained on his outstretched hand for a while, and slowly, haltingly, he offered his own hand in return. For an instant, the two were next to each other, and the comparison was almost grotesque, Blake's fingers sticking out at odd angles while Marc's lay together, perfectly flat. Breaking the moment, Marc took hold of Blake's wrist and pulled it slightly toward him. He examined the bent fingers at first only visually, then very gently touched each one, holding them between thumb and forefinger and searching for the lines of fracture. This much was painful to Blake as the trembling of his body and tightening at the corners of his eyes gave away. It was only the beginning of pain, however. Marc examined Blake's other hand the same way before leaning

back in his armchair. All of them. He would need to break all ten fingers, most of them in two places, before he could realign the bones and allow them to heal properly.

"Would you like to be able to use your hands again?" he asked, a tremor in his voice. "Hold things? Take care of yourself? Get clothed alone? Spar?"

The last one he added as an afterthought. A few times, he had noticed Blake's eyes on him when he opened the French windows in the living room and stepped onto the patio at night. With his sword in hand, he ran through series of exercises to keep himself in shape. He missed sparring with Blake as they had once done almost daily.

For a long time, Blake didn't react, to the point that Marc wondered if he had understood. And then, so slowly that the movement seemed involuntary at first, Blake nodded. Marc stifled a relieved sigh.

"It will hurt a lot," he thought necessary to add, and almost could have believed that Blake was going to roll his eyes at him. "I think I can get you some human blood. That should help you heal faster."

Blake remained motionless at that statement, and Marc hesitated. It was nighttime, and he could go right then and see if the butcher who sold him animal blood had been able to procure expired human blood bags from the town's hospital, but if he did it would be the first time he left Blake alone while he was awake. He thought for a moment about telling Blake to go to bed and locking his door, but finally decided against it. Locking Blake up when he was asleep was one thing; doing it while he was still awake and risking his

claustrophobia's return was altogether different. Blake was learning to trust him little by little, and this was a good opportunity to show the confidence was returned.

"I will go now. I should be back in an hour or so. All right?"

Blake's gaze returned to the fire. Marc didn't insist and quietly left, his mind already on the grim task ahead of him. It wouldn't be the first time he hurt Blake, or the first time he tried to heal his wounds, either.

His Master was gone.

Blake used to wish for more time alone, time to think and plot his escape and cling to his own mind, but those wishes were long gone. There was nothing left but his Master and the rules. Whenever his Master left, Blake could only wonder why he had left, where to, and when he would be back. And whether Blake had earned himself a punishment by the time he returned.

This time, Blake thought he understood where his Master had gone, and why. He held his hands in front of him and observed them as carefully as his Master had. They hurt. They always hurt. He had grown used to the pain, though, and it was nothing more than a dull feeling at the back of his mind. When he had to use his hands for anything, it hurt more. He was used to that, too.

His Master's hands, on the other hand, were perfect. They had always been. They could be brutal, at times. Lately, they had been gentle. But Blake had learned that they knew just the right way to hold a whip or to curl in a fist to inflict the maximum amount of pain. They knew, also, how to break bones.

His body started shaking. He wanted to get closer to the fire, close enough to finally feel warm, but he didn't dare to. The sofa was his. Small and lumpy, but his. At first, it had smelled like his Master and him, both scents mixed together, but now it was only his scent that permeated the cushions. It was comforting, a reminder that his Master had given it to him. Blake wasn't too sure why—he understood punishments, but rewards were foreign to him, always offered in order to trick him. Maybe it was only another test. Maybe if Blake didn't show his appreciation for the gift, it would be taken away from him. And so he remained curled on the sofa, his eyes drinking in the heat of the fire the way his body could only dream of doing, his hands lying inert on the cushions.

He lay there, immobile and alone, inadequate and broken.

As promised, Marc returned with bags of human blood, as well as some medical supplies. Having assured himself that Blake was still on the sofa, he warmed one of the blood packs and put the other one in the fridge for the next day.

"No complaining, now," he said as he brought the mug to Blake. "You need to drink it all so you'll..."

The tear tracks down Blake's face were too obvious to miss, even though his cheeks were dry.

"We don't have to do it today," he mumbled, faltering. It was the first time since they had left Kate, the first time since he had sobbed after her goodbyes, that Blake had cried, and Marc felt strangely uneasy at the sight of those dried tears. He must have caused them, even if he didn't know how. He did know he would soon cause more.

Blake's answer, however, was to pointedly lean forward toward the mug until Marc reflexively brought the straw within his reach. He drained the full mug without having to be reminded, although with the same half-aborted grimace after a few mouthfuls.

As Marc took the mug back to the kitchen, he thought hard and fast. He had tried not to linger on the details so far, but things would undoubtedly be easier if Blake were unconscious.

He struck from behind, a precisely placed blow that knocked Blake out before he could realize what was happening. Then he set to work, jaw clenched tight enough to hurt as he methodically found each badly healed fracture again, snapped it as cleanly as he knew how, manipulated the bones softly and bound them to metal armatures to keep them straight as they healed.

Long ago, before he had ever met his Sire, he had believed he would one day become a doctor. He had started studying for it, and over the decades had tried to help with first aid on battlefields whenever he could. He only hoped he knew enough to do this correctly—and he *had* to do it; he was sure it was the right thing to do.

Knowing it was the right thing, however, did not make breaking those seventeen bones any easier.

When he was done with the last one, Marc was sure he was about to be sick. He could only hope everything would heal properly and that he wouldn't need to do this again.

Taking great care not to touch Blake's hands now that he was finished, he picked him up—so frail, still; too frail—and

carried him to his bed. Mentally exhausted, he didn't even think of undressing Blake, and simply laid him on the bed before spreading a spare blanket over him.

He spent long minutes watching Blake in the semi-darkness, half wishing that he would wake and somehow tell Marc that it was OK, the pain wasn't too bad and it was worth it. But Blake remained unconscious, and Marc eventually, reluctantly, left the room.

Good thing he had thought of getting some alcohol on his way home; maybe the whiskey would stop the shaking of his hands.

His Master had given him a lesson today.

It was an old lesson, learned and relearned in blood too many times to count or remember. A lesson as old as time itself. A lesson Blake had learned for the first time as a human—so long ago, so very long, sometimes he couldn't remember what it had been like to feel a heart thumping inside his chest or to feel warm; remembering that he had a heartbeat again was like a little death every time.

It was an important lesson.

When he had been a child, scavenging for food, hunting for a safe shelter in a town too crowded already with refugees, he had learned that even the most friendly face or demeanor could hide ugly things. Hunger and fear could turn the nicest people into ruthless creatures.

When he had been turned, he had thought, for decades, that there was finally one person he could trust: his Sire. That trust had been shattered in an instant the day his Sire had

abandoned him. Even his return hadn't fully healed Blake's wounds. He had forgiven, but not forgotten.

And then his Master—

Blake shook his head on the pillow, chasing those memories away.

His Master had reminded him of that primordial lesson. He ought to be grateful. And if he had been stupid enough to forget again and need another reminder, it was his own fault. He had no one to blame but himself. He wouldn't forget again, though. This time, he had learned his lesson once and for all.

He would never trust anyone again.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter 15

Localization spells, according to Simon, were among the easiest to cast. That didn't mean they were always helpful.

Using the piece of paper they had found nailed to the box, Simon performed many spells to find Jen. At first, all they indicated was a general direction, and Kate, Daniel, and Simon had traveled that way, Daniel hiding from sunlight beneath blankets in the back of the car. Traveling by night was too dangerous when they didn't know a particular region or whether it was infested with demons or not. Even by day, Simon usually enveloped the car in magic that would make them all but invisible if they stumbled on a group of demons. The demons didn't like to fight during the daytime, but that didn't mean they wouldn't.

They left Leawood with enough supplies to last them a few days—human food and blood for Daniel—but eventually they had to stop and buy more. Money didn't mean much in these troubled times, and they soon realized that a night or two of fighting with local military groups gave them more credit than actual currency.

The problem, as Simon explained it, was simple enough: Jen was traveling, too, and the spell could only pinpoint where she was the moment it was cast. They were following her west and south across the continent, Jen traveling by night while they tried to catch up by day. They would get to her, eventually—or at least Kate told herself as much every time the doubts chimed too loudly in her mind.

She couldn't help wondering how Blake was doing, and whether he could speak again. Marc had said vampires could heal any injury with sufficient blood, but she still wasn't sure what Blake was now. She wondered how much progress he had made and how well Marc was coping. She wondered, mostly, whether he would remember her when she next saw him. She missed him and Marc terribly.

Sometimes, she wished she hadn't agreed to let Marc take Blake away. She could be more helpful being there, she told herself in those moments, than by chasing the shadow of a woman across endless miles. That was when she usually remembered that Blake wasn't even able to look at her, and the anger returned, burning brighter and fueling her for another day or two.

It all became more difficult, however, the night Jen disappeared.

"What do you mean, disappeared?"

Fisting her hand in Simon's shirt, she pulled him closer and glared at him as though he had just told her he was single-handedly responsible for the demon invasion. She knew, dimly, she was being unfair, but there was no one else she could blame.

"Let him go, Kate."

Daniel's fingers curled around her wrist and squeezed lightly. She released Simon, but continued to glare. He was very pale, and beads of sweat were pearling on his forehead.

"You said she was here," she said, trying to control her temper, but her voice still shook. "You said she's been here for days—"

"And she was!" Simon cut in, wringing his hands in front of him. "When we left this morning, the spell pointed at this town, like it has for the past three days. But now there's nothing!"

Kate looked around her. The streets were deserted except for a few men in mismatched uniforms, all heading toward the fortifications without particular haste. They had passed the fortified walls just after sunset descended on the small town. The wall guards might not even have opened the gates for them if not for the two armored trucks slipping out of the town at that moment. Kate had gritted her teeth when Simon had informed them he couldn't possibly do any magic before eating; she had refused to stop for lunch, and eating in the car made Simon nauseous. Finding a place to eat had taken some time, as had Simon redoing the spell three times with the same lack of results.

"She might be dead," Daniel said with a wary look toward Kate. "If Simon can't find her anymore, she might have been discovered as a traitor and staked."

Simon nodded vigorously, but a bad feeling was twisting Kate's stomach, and it didn't have anything to do with the overcooked beans they had been served for dinner.

"A traitor, yes," she murmured, looking at the sleepy streets around her again. "She might be dead. Or... she might have betrayed someone else. Do you remember—"

A sudden alarm started blaring through the streets, lights popping up at every window. From where the three of them stood, they could see a flurry of movements over the fortifications, could hear the bang of metal on metal.

"She betrayed them!" Kate cried out, loud enough to be heard over the alarm. "Like she betrayed us in the City!" She ran to the back of the car, opened the trunk and pulled out her sword before handing Daniel his own.

His expression when he took it was mixed shock and fury. "You mean—"

"I bet she was in one of those trucks we saw riding out. I bet this town's leaders were in those trucks, too. She must have led them right to an ambush, like she did to us. And then..."

In Kate's mind, the night they had closed the breach in the City stood out more clearly than ever. She had been so sure she would die, and then Blake had barged through the streets, yelling as he attacked the handful of demons that protected the breach while Simon worked on the spell to close it. Jen had jumped through before the spell was completed. And during the entire thing, demons had attacked the squad's base. It was only Marc's quick thinking that had prevented a massacre.

She met Daniel's eyes, and knew at once that he had just come to the same conclusion she had.

"She went through the breach," he said loudly, his gaze turning from Kate to Simon. "What kind of protection spell can you whip up for the town?"

Simon's eyes widened, in fear or surprise, Kate couldn't have said. "I... don't know. I have to think."

"Then think fast," Kate said, and started running toward the fortifications. She hadn't come there to fight demons, but

that didn't mean she'd stand still and watch a city be destroyed.

For the five weeks it took for Blake's hands to heal—rather than the half-dozen days a vampire would have needed—Marc carefully took off the splints every few days to check on the healing. Thankfully, he didn't need to break anything again, but even his gentle manipulations made Blake grind his teeth in pain. Never, however, did Blake close his eyes to fight the agony. Since he had awoken, the afternoon after Marc had taken care of his hands, there had been a wary glint to his gaze, as though he expected to be hit again.

With that blow that had rendered Blake unconscious, Marc knew that he had shattered the trust Blake had started to have in him. He wished he had thought before acting; his only defense was that he had meant to make things easier for Blake—and himself, admittedly—but he doubted explaining that to Blake would change anything. Instead, he resumed their established routine, and feigned ignorance of the renewed fear permeating the air. As weeks passed and it finally became obvious that the broken hands were healing, Blake's scent gradually started losing its fearful edge again, to Marc's relief.

Once a week, he could offer the convalescent human blood to help the healing, but for these meals as for all others, Marc always needed to nudge Blake into drinking all he was offered. He had started suspecting that Blake, since he was not fully a vampire, might not need as much blood as Marc did, but he decided to keep on demanding that Blake drink all

he was offered, at least until his hands were completely healed.

Something amazed him, though. From the little he knew, Blake had spent decades in demon hands, if not more. Yet after only a few weeks, he was feeding, albeit reluctantly, without needing to be offered blood from a wrist as he had first seemed to require; he wasn't falling to his knees or offering himself anymore; and more and more often—not often enough still, but it was a start—Marc caught glimpses of annoyance, amusement, or exasperation in his eyes, and it was a definite improvement over the blank looks that had been his only expression for so long. Because of all of this, Marc had no doubt that Blake's mind would heal as his body did, slowly but surely. He would regain his voice and cutting tongue. What would he say, then? Would he reproach Marc for not coming to find him through the breach? Would he accuse Marc of taking advantage of his body like Simon had? Would he hate Marc for seeing him so weak? He had always tried so hard to hide his weaknesses...

The day finally came when, upon inspecting Blake's hands, Marc proclaimed that they were fully healed. He breathed a double sigh of relief; he wouldn't have to remember what he had done every time he saw the splints, and at the same time the mental torture of touching Blake and making him come without being touched in return was about to end. The physical obstacle of broken fingers was gone, and Marc was determined that whatever mind block might exist would soon be nothing more than a memory.

"We're starting two things today," he informed Blake as he removed the last splint. "First, you probably need to relearn how to use your hands. It's not going to be fun, but I don't see a way around it. Can you try to move your fingers?"

There was a now predictable delay between Marc's request and Blake's compliance; it sometimes seemed that Blake was testing his limits, taking more and more time to do what Marc asked, as though to see how long it would take for the punishment to fall. It was irritating, but Marc tried his best not to show it and waited as patiently as he could. After a few seconds, Blake's gaze, which had been set on Marc, dropped to his hands, and a line of concentration—or was it pain?—appeared on his forehead as he slowly wiggled his fingers. It was more than Marc had expected him to be able to do, but it was clear that there was room for improvement.

"We'll work on that," Marc said quietly, then cleared his throat. "And we'll work on having you take care of your own needs. No more playing in the shower. You understand what I mean?"

Blake's expressionless look revealed nothing, and the nod Marc hoped for never came. It didn't matter, though; he wasn't planning on giving Blake a choice on this particular issue.

After a little more than a week, Marc didn't know anymore who, of him or Blake, was more frustrated.

Blake was taking the reeducation of his hands very seriously, and spent hours upon hours squeezing the foam ball Marc had found for him. His cooperation, however, stopped there.

Marc wasn't sure what had triggered Blake's arousal this time. Sometimes it was feeding, sometimes it was an accidental or innocent touch, and sometimes it happened at night, although Blake's scent on those mornings, desire and fear mixed tightly, made it clear that his body was reacting to nightmares rather than dreams. Whatever the cause this time, it had been four days already that Blake's sweatpants had been tented by an erection, and Marc had long ago stopped trying to understand how Blake's body could perform this particular trick. He had also stopped wondering how uncomfortable and painful it was; he only needed to look at Blake's face to know.

"I'm not going to help," he once more told Blake on the fourth night. "If you want to come, you'll have to do something about it yourself, because I'm done with that. I know you understand what I'm saying, Blake, so stop torturing yourself."

And stop torturing me, he mentally added. Blake's scent was driving him mad.

Leaving Blake where he sat on his sofa, Marc strode to the kitchen. The warmed but tasteless blood failed to quench his thirst for something else altogether. If anything, feeding accentuated his awareness of Blake's desire permeating the air. He had to get out of the house, he resolved. There were no demons to slay in this town, which was one reason why Marc had chosen it, but a simple walk might clear his thoughts. His decision made, he left the kitchen.

"I'm going out for..."

He lost his words at the sight when he entered the living room. Blake was kneeling on the floor, head bowed, hands flat on his thighs and legs slightly spread and displaying the purple, painful looking cock that strained against his stomach. Marc's eyes briefly strayed to the tattoo at the top of his thigh; nail marks slashed through it. Blake looked up at Marc after a few seconds, and the pleading in his eyes was both unmistakable and overwhelming.

Marc's already half-hard cock twitched, and he unconsciously took a step back, contradicting his body's demand that he move forward.

"Not going to do it," he heard himself say, his voice rough and unconvincing. "I won't, Blake. Hear me?"

He didn't expect an answer, but for once, he got one as Blake slowly shook his head. Marc's simmering frustration grew into plain anger.

"Touch yourself," he demanded harshly, his fists closing tight at his sides. "Now, Blake. Do it."

Marc's eyes followed the bead of sweat that pearled on Blake's forehead and slowly rolled down his cheek and neck; Blake didn't move.

"Don't make me repeat myself, Childe."

The word rolled off Marc's tongue without him being really aware of it; Blake heard it, however, and a distinct thread of fear rose from him even as his hands twitched lightly before stilling again.

The fear calmed Marc's anger a little, enough for him not to lash out, but it didn't sway his determination. He stepped toward Blake and could see his growing anticipation, but he

refused still to give in. With measured movements, he knelt in front of Blake and looked straight at him.

"I am not going to touch you anymore," he repeated once again. "Not as long as you're so damn scared of me. But I swear that you will."

With that, he reached toward Blake and took hold of his right hand. He brought it to Blake's cock. Dark eyes widened, and Blake tried to escape his grip, but Marc only tightened his hold until both their hands were curling around Blake's dick.

A needful breath escaped Blake's lips, loud in the silence of the house, so close to a moan that for a second Marc was sure Blake had regained his voice.

"There we go," he said quietly, soothingly, even as he guided their hands up and down Blake's cock with regular strokes. "See? You're touching yourself, and no one is hurting you."

Blake licked his lips, his eyes closed, and Marc could tell that this wouldn't take long. Thankfully. His own dick was ready to explode, and the sight offered to him threatened to make him come without any other stimulation. He had forgotten how striking Blake was when pleasure held him; he almost regretted having always stood behind him in the shower the last few weeks. Almost. He probably would have lost his mind long ago and fucked Blake senseless if he had seen him like this every few days. As it was, he had to restrain himself not to push things any further than what was already happening.

"Come on, Blake," he urged, afraid his control was going to snap any second now. "Let it go. Just..."

Blake's hand seemed to move faster under his own, guiding rather than being guided, and Marc was about to release it when Blake's eyes opened again, his pupils so dilated that they left only a thin rim of brown; his body went rigid but his gaze never left Marc as his orgasm finally swept over him, strong and shattering.

For a couple of minutes, neither of them moved as Blake slowly regained his breathing and Marc tried to control his body. Finally, Marc was able to let go and stood with some difficulty.

"Time for sleep," he uttered. "Get cleaned up and then get some rest. OK?"

Without waiting to see if Blake would reply in any way, he walked to his room, shaking, and closed the door behind him. Leaning back against it, he undid his pants and pulled his cock out. His hand was still covered in Blake's come; it didn't take more than three frantic strokes for him to fall down the same abyss, the image of Blake's pleasure dancing behind his tightly shut eyelids.

He didn't dare come out of his room after that, unsure how his control would fare if he met Blake now. He could hear the shower running, so at least Blake was listening and cleaning up. Lying down on his bed, he listened intently, imagining Blake under the spray: washing the come off his hands and belly; turning off the water and stepping out of the shower; toweling himself dry; getting back to his room and sliding between the heavy cotton sheets; curling his hand around his hardening dick; stroking softly just like Marc was doing now; teasing himself rather than seeking quick relief until it

became too much, and all that mattered was letting sensations take over and swallow everything.

It took a long time for Marc to fall asleep, and when he finally did, Blake haunted his dreams, memories of past nights mingling with fresh fantasies until they were undistinguishable from each other. He woke up early in the morning, panting, instinctively reaching for the brown-haired head that had been between his thighs only seconds earlier, before realizing it had only been a dream.

Hands clenched in the sheets, he stared unseeingly at the ceiling, his mind slowly coming to grips with what had really happened and what he had only dreamed, and he couldn't help but wonder how long he would last in these conditions before he started taking advantage of Blake. He had been close, so very close the previous night; he couldn't let anything like that happen again. He wanted Blake, but he wanted Blake to want him, as well. He wouldn't sleep with Blake until Blake was well enough to say yes, and mean it.

Deciding that washing off the scent of dried come and lust before Blake woke was probably the best thing to do, he slipped out of his room, frowning in disapproval at the clothes still strewn across the living room floor. With a sigh—some things would never change, and Blake leaving a mess behind him was one of them—he picked up the socks, sweatpants, boxers, and t-shirt and brought them to Blake's room. The door was open, Blake never closed it, and Marc stepped in quietly, dropping his bundle in the clothes basket.

It was Blake's heartbeat that alerted him that something was wrong, and when he turned to him and saw him, tense

and struggling against ghosts in his sleep, kicking at the covers that trapped him, Marc immediately knew that he was having a nightmare. Again. Without a second thought, he came to the bed and gently closed his hand on Blake's wrist, preventing him from clawing any more at the already bloodied tattoo. Blake's eyes shot wide open, and he stared at Marc in the darkness, his heart still beating too fast.

"It's all right," Marc murmured. "It was just a nightmare; you're fine. Safe."

The words seemed to calm Blake, and Marc forced himself to keep talking.

"No one is going to hurt you. Not even me. You're safe. You know that, don't you?"

As it so often happened, Blake merely stared vacantly in front of him and didn't reply; Marc had rarely wished for an answer more than he did at that moment.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter 16

* * * *

Seven more weeks passed before they found Jen again. By the end of it, Kate was ready to stake her on sight, questions be damned.

The first five weeks, there was no trace of her whatsoever. Every morning and every night, Simon did the localization spell, Kate standing with crossed arms at his shoulder, but there never was any result.

They remained in the town they had helped save from catastrophe. Daniel had claimed he wanted to take a step back from fighting, and so Kate was surprised when he helped reorganize the soldiers that protected the town, and called in the squad hierarchy to send reinforcements. He trained the new recruits and organized reconnaissance missions to find the breach. When they had found it, he made the speech that was now all too familiar to Kate. She gritted her teeth the entire time. She understood the importance of closing this breach, and every other one they could find. She also understood that, as far as they knew, Jen had gone through it, and who knew where she would come out again if they closed it?

On the night of the closing, when she was standing just feet away from that shimmering rectangle of light, she was tempted, more than ever before. With slow, careful steps, her sword tight in her hand, she approached the breach, tried to

peer through. She couldn't see anything. Maybe Jen was standing right on the other side, maybe all Kate had to do was step through, grab her, and pull her back. Maybe it could be that easy.

Miracles were possible; she knew it now. Blake had come back to her. But she couldn't go back to him until she found Jen.

She was just two steps away from the breach when Daniel's hand closed over her forearm and jerked her back.

"Have you lost your mind?" he shouted at her, eyes wide and worried.

Kate honestly didn't know what to answer.

Three days later, Jen reappeared on the localization spell. Simon was so surprised that he dropped the candle he was using to focus his magic and set fire to his maps. Kate could have screamed in frustration—and probably did, too. A few moments later, though, they had new maps, and Simon was performing the spell again under the attentive gazes of both Kate and Daniel. Jen was hundred of miles away, far enough that they would need several days to reach her.

"We've got... we need to leave right away," Kate said, tripping over her own words in her haste. "We can be—"

"Wait a second," Daniel cut in, laying a hand on her shoulder. "How about we go at it a different way this time? So we don't rush there only to find that she's jumped through again."

Kate was so full of energy and frustration, she could barely stand in place. She started pacing the small room. "What different way?" she snapped. "We need to get to her—"

"And we will," Daniel placated her. "Maybe we just don't need to do it alone." He pointed at the map, his finger tapping a town close to where the spell said Jen was. "I've never heard of this place, but the map is recent enough that it should still be populated." His finger moved further south to a larger point. "This town, though, I know. The squad has troops there. I can contact them, ask them to send a few people to look for Jen. I've reissued the warning about the way she operates, but the smaller towns don't always get the news. She might be trying to pull the same plan again. If she is, the squad can stop her before she can do any damage and hold her until we get there."

Kate gritted her teeth and thought hard and fast. She didn't like this plan, didn't like the idea that someone else might capture Jen when they had been looking for her for months now. But she had to admit that it was probably better than running off wildly and arriving too late again. "As long as they understand they shouldn't kill her," she said at last.

Daniel made the call. Six days later, they received word that a woman had been captured following the information they had given. She said her name was Ella, and her description did not match the one they had given, but she was a vampire, and she had approached the leaders of the town with claims about knowing where the breach was and how to close it.

Before an hour had passed, they were in the car and took turns driving until they arrived.

Days passed, and the only notable change in their routine was that Marc no longer nagged Blake to drink all the blood

that was put in front of him. Instead, he observed that Blake always drank the same amount, and was comforted in his belief that he didn't need as much blood as a vampire did. This once more raised the question of what he was exactly, feeding on blood but with a warm, beating heart in his chest; healing almost as slowly as a human but with a thoroughness that was definitely that of a vampire, if the perfect smoothness of his back was to be believed. Would he ever know what had happened to Blake to make him this hybrid of sorts?

Something that absolutely did not change, to Marc's immense frustration, was Blake's refusal to bring himself to climax. Four days after what Marc had sworn to himself would be the last time he helped so directly, they were back to square one, with Blake naked, on his knees and silently begging, and Marc struggling not to do far more than what Blake might want.

"Not this time, Blake," he denied even as his body answered quite differently. "Not again."

Blake merely stared at him, hands closed in tight fists on his thighs, exactly as he had four days earlier. The message was clear; he had gotten what he wanted like this before, and he certainly thought he would get it again the same way. But he wasn't counting on Marc's resolve.

And Marc's resolve wavered with each passing second as Blake's eyes begged him far better than his words had ever done.

Unable to say anything more, Marc picked up his jacket and strode out of the house and into the familiar, welcoming

night. He locked the door behind him more out of reflex than real need; so far Blake had never shown any interest in going outside.

He walked for a few minutes, not realizing where his steps were taking him until he stepped into a bar. Eyes briefly turned to him, but it wasn't the first time he'd had a drink there and no one questioned his presence. He found a seat in a quiet corner, ordered a beer and a shot of whiskey, and tried, very hard, to think of anything, anyone but Blake.

It didn't work.

All he could see in front of him was Blake, wanting and pleading. All he could smell was the scent of Blake's lust, precome, and pain. All he could feel was the texture of his skin, the warmth of his flesh, the pulsing of his cock when he—

Raising his hand to catch the waitress' attention, Marc gave up on the beer and asked for more whiskey. It didn't make him think any less of Blake, but at least it damped that nagging, guilty feeling that he was perpetuating whatever abuse had been inflicted on Blake. Then again, wasn't it also abuse, if of a different kind, to deny Blake the release he so badly needed? It was a slow torture of both body and mind. And Marc was being a part of it by refusing to help.

He realized it was the alcohol speaking; he wasn't drunk enough to delude himself that far, but he also was certain that, however late he returned home, Blake would be exactly where he had left him, and even more desperate, if that were possible.

All the way back to the house, he repeated to himself that it was the last time, the very last time he was doing it, that after that night it would be over and he wouldn't falter again, for Blake's sake and for his own sanity. He said it to Blake, too, in very clear terms, even as he sunk to his knees in front of him and reached for his hand.

But when Blake arched under their combined touch, his breathing so close to a whimper, Marc could only curse himself at the realization that, without a doubt and until he found a way to break through Blake's barriers, this would happen again.

Or worse, he would forget that it was Blake's conditioning that was causing him to request to be touched, forget that Blake had no way to stop him, and go too far. And that was a possibility he refused to live with.

His Master wanted something from him, but Blake couldn't, for the life of him, figure out what it was.

His mind felt slow and sluggish, and it was hard to think, sometimes more so than others. When he could think, however, when he could cling to ideas long enough to put them together like the pieces of a puzzle with no pattern to guide him, he always became frustrated with both himself and his Master.

Before this small house, before the box, before his voice had been taken from him, Blake had been at least allowed to ask for directions. It would earn him a few kicks, or a few lashes of a belt or whip, but these were nothing when compared to the alternative: not giving his Master what he desired as soon as he desired it.

But now... Now, he couldn't ask, and couldn't guess either. He thought his Master wanted him. Wanted to fuck him. He had to; he had been hard every time they had showered together, hadn't he? Blake had been so sure he would take him, then. So sure once he did, the games and tricks would be over. But not only had his Master not fucked him, he now refused to touch Blake. That wasn't new, of course not, and more than once his Master had made Blake hard and kept him that way for days, as though to see how long he could stay erect, maybe. On those occasions, though, coming had been forbidden. And the other times, when his Master had only wanted his own pleasure before granting Blake his release, it had been clear what needed to be done.

Now, nothing was clear. Nothing was explained. His Master continued to try to trick him into touching himself, and seemed to get angry when Blake didn't. He had paid too much of a price to learn this lesson, though; he would never forget it again.

With smiles and quiet words at first, then harder looks and snapped orders when it didn't work, Daniel cleared the room until only he, Simon, and Kate were left to face the prisoner. The rest of the squad and town leaders would have their turn at interrogating her when they were done—unless Kate staked her before that. The presence of the wooden stake at the small of her back, wedged between her pants and belt, was almost comforting. In just one movement, she could put an end to Jen's life. She wished she could have brought Blake back to his old self as easily.

They had arrived in the town only minutes earlier, but the squad had been warned about their impending arrival, and Jen was waiting for them. Seated on a plastic chair, hands and feet bound in chains that were shackled to the floor, she held herself with her head high, as though she were in charge and the rest of them were only there because she allowed it. The only sign she gave that something was going on was a small flinch when Simon threw a handful of glittery powder at her.

"Is it done?" Daniel asked, stopping his pacing to stand next to Simon.

He was peering at Jen, eyes intent and unblinking.

"Simon!" he snapped, drawing his gaze to him. "Is it done yet?"

Simon swallowed hard and nodded, looking back at the woman again. "I... I think, yes. But there's... something around her. Like... some kind of magic. It looks... weird."

"What kind of magic?" Kate asked from behind them. She was standing in the back of the room, arms crossed over her chest as she waited for Simon to be done.

"I'm not sure. But I think... she looks different, doesn't she?"

He glanced back at Kate as though asking her opinion. Kate came forward, and for the first time took a good look at the woman. Her hair was longer than it had been in the city, and much lighter, almost blond. Her eyes had been brown then, but they were now green. Even the shape of her face was different, somehow, her body curvier, shorter. But nothing could disguise the glint in her eyes.

"She does," Kate said. She thought about asking the woman to identify herself, but she didn't know if Jen was her real name, or Ella, so it wouldn't prove anything. "Did you betray us in the City?" Kate asked instead.

Jen gave her a look of utter contempt. "Yes."

Drawing a chair in front of Jen, Kate straddled it and rested her arms across the back. She drew the stake from behind her belt and held it tight in her hand. Jen's eyes flicked toward it for a second, and although her expression didn't change, the tension in her shoulders cranked up a notch.

"Are you taking orders from demons?" Kate asked, her voice level and cold.

Again, Jen looked and sounded scornful. "Like you don't know that already," she scoffed. "Yes, I work with demons. Stop wasting my time and—"

"How long have you worked with them?" Kate interrupted her, keeping her voice calm, despite her growing irritation.

"Nine years. At least, it's been nine years in this dimension."

It didn't really matter how long Jen had been a traitor to their world, but Kate couldn't make herself ask what she truly wanted to know. She had tracked this woman for weeks, but now she was scared to hear what had truly happened to Blake.

"Is that why they took you to their world?" she asked, delaying yet a little more.

Jen rolled her eyes at her. "Don't be a fool, child. They wouldn't need to do that if I had been working for them, now, would they?"

"I don't know," Kate said, shrugging. "You tell me. Why did they capture you?"

"Because I was there?" Jen's composure started to crack, as did her voice. "Because I was a soldier, just like you? Because they—"

Kate stood again, pushing the chair away. She crossed her arms and glared down at Jen. "Not like me. I'd never betray—"

"You spend a week in one of their jails, and then we'll discuss what it is that you'd never betray." Jen closed her eyes briefly, and her lips stretched into the mockery of a smile. "Not even that. Spend a day there. Just one day."

Behind Kate, Simon made a small, whimpering sound, and Kate knew exactly why. She wasn't far from doing the same. Blake had spent a lot more than one day in a demon cell.

Taking a deep breath, she asked her next question, yet again faltering before she could ask what she truly wanted to know. "What did they do to... to you?"

"What do you think they did?" Jen's voice hardened, shards of ice in her words lashing out the way she couldn't do with her hands. "They broke me. They made every day worse than the last until I would have done anything to get out. I'd have given them my Sire and all my Childer on a silver platter. And all they asked was for me to spy for them. I'd have been a fool not to do it."

Her chin was up, and for all that she was seated when Kate was standing, she seemed to be staring down at Kate. There was no beginning of apology in her expression or tone. Kate found herself at a loss for words. Could Jen really be this cold?

"Once you were released," Daniel said, coming to stand by Kate, "you could have run."

Jen shrugged her shoulders. "Run where?" she asked. Her tone was scathing. "There are breaches everywhere. And they have the means to find me if they want to. I'll die before I give them a reason to jail me again."

For the first time, an emotion was creeping in her voice other than contempt: fear. The sudden contrast was startling, and more than Jen's words, more than the fact that Jen couldn't lie while under Simon's spell, it was this fear that convinced Kate that what Jen had experienced on the other side of the breach must have been as horrific as she said. Even more so.

Kate's throat felt dry as ash suddenly. She wanted nothing more than to walk out, find something to drink, wash herself and scrub her skin until she felt clean again. She had to know for certain, though.

"Did they do the same thing to Blake?" she asked, hating how her voice shook on his name.

Behind her, Simon let out another quiet whimper. Kate didn't look to him, but Jen's eyes flicked to him for just a second before coming back to Kate.

"I wasn't there, but I suppose they did."

Kate's hand clenched on the stake until she could feel the wood digging into her skin, splitting it. Jen's nostrils flared. Daniel pulled away, walking to the back of the room.

"You sent him back to us," she said, stepping closer to Jen and glaring down at her. "How could you not know—"

"Calm down, child," Jen cut in sharply. "I'm a spy and traitor. Do you think they bother telling me anything about their plans?" She snorted and shook her head. "I didn't know they had him until a few days before they released him. I saw him there and told them he was Marc's Childe. They told me to track Marc down. I didn't find him, but I knew he visited you sometimes, and I knew where *you* were."

Kate wasn't sure, at first, whom Jen meant by 'you.' The way she looked at all three of them in turns, finally ending on Simon, only caused Kate to wonder even more. Could the demons possibly know or care who was fighting them? All that humans saw of the demons was brute force, endless waves of attack with little to no thought behind them. But that wasn't really true, was it? Their use of Jen—and Kate wasn't naive enough to believe she was the only spy they had—hinted at long-term strategy. Was returning Blake to them part of that strategy? What could they possibly expect to gain from that?

"Did you put him in that box?" Simon asked, speaking up for the first time since the beginning of the interrogation.

Kate glanced at him over her shoulder. All color had drained from his face, leaving his eyes to stand out like dark pits.

"I didn't put him in it," Jen said, sounding unconcerned. "But I knew he was inside."

Simon jerked forward, and for an instant Kate thought he would attack Jen. He stopped short of being close enough, though, hands fisted and trembling at his sides. "You monster! How could you—"

Jen's chin tilted up, back to its full arrogance. "You think sticking him in a box is the worst they did to him? Or me?"

"What *did* they do to you?" Kate asked again. She was afraid get a full answer, but at the same time, she needed to know. This was why they had tracked Jen down for all these weeks. If she was going to help Blake, she needed to understand what had happened to him.

"I can't," Simon whispered, his words edged with lace-like panic. "I'm sorry, I..."

When Kate turned to look at him, he was stumbling back toward the door, eyes wide and teary. Daniel moved over and opened the door for him, closing it again as soon as he had passed it. He crossed his arms as he leaned back against the wall again, and met Kate's gaze coolly. *He* wasn't going to run out on her, and for that she was grateful.

"You don't care what they did to me," Jen said, a bitter laugh coloring her voice. "What you are really asking is what they did to Blake. But do you really want to know? Do you want to hear they starved him? Vampires can go for months without blood, but the hunger..." She shook her head, laughing bitterly. "Oh, no human could ever know what the hunger is like. No human could endure the beatings, either. They'd let me heal, give me just a drop of blood, and once I

was better they'd just start all over again. Or do worse." Her voice was rough now, gravelly. "Demons' anatomy is not compatible with ours, but they found volunteers in their jails. Humans and vampires whose spirits were shattered beyond sending them back here as spies. But demons can use magic just as well as your boy wizard can. Better. So it wasn't strangers I saw during all of the time I spent there. It was my friends. Old lovers. My own Childer. They tricked my own mind into choosing its own worst nightmares, and made me live through them, day after day after day."

It was only when Kate felt the solid, unyielding surface of the door behind her, the handle digging into the small of her back, that she realized she had moved away from Jen as she talked. She couldn't go any further without running away like Simon had. At that moment, she wished more than anything that she could have fled, too. But she couldn't. She owed it to Blake to get all the answers she could.

"Is that..."

When she faltered, Daniel's hand settled on her shoulder, and Kate jumped, startled. She glanced at him at her side. He gave her a faint nod, his hand squeezing lightly. She nodded back, his support giving her the strength to finish.

"Is that what happened to Blake?" she asked, looking back at Jen.

A few seconds passed before the flames glowing in Jen's eyes died down. She seemed to deflate under Kate's gaze, and looked away for the first time. "I told you, I don't know," she said quietly.

"Why did they let him go?" Daniel asked and received the same answer.

"I don't know."

"Did they break him, too?" he insisted. "Did he agree to spy for them?"

Her gaze returned to them, as cold as ever. "I don't know. Maybe. I did what I had to in order to survive. I'm thinking you got fangs for the same reason. Who knows what Blake agreed to?"

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter 17

Vampires didn't get headaches. Hangovers, yes, but no headaches. Yet Mark hadn't drunk enough to get a hangover, so why was his head throbbing in pain? It had to be the stress, he decided. Too much worrying about Blake and whether he was helping him or crippling him even further. Too much wondering what he could do to change the status quo. Too much denying that he wanted little more than to take Blake to bed and fuck him senseless until he had his Childe back.

To make things worse, a persistent knock on the door woke him by mid-morning, only minutes after he had finally managed to fall asleep. He had half a mind to not answer, but after a few instants the knocking was accompanied by a voice—"Marc, it's Kate"—and almost instantly Marc could pick up the fear in the air, even though Blake and he were in different rooms. If he didn't make her stop now, Blake would soon be out of control, Mark supposed as he hurried to the door.

He had to stand to the side when he opened the door. Sunlight bathed the front steps. For an instant, it seemed to him that Kate was glowing. And then he saw her eyes, and something tightened painfully inside his chest.

"Oh, Kate... What happened?"

She stepped inside and into his open arms. Closing the door behind her, he held her tight, more concerned with each second that passed without a word.

"Kate," he repeated quietly. "Tell me."

She didn't raise her head from where her cheek rested against his chest. "We found Jen," she said, barely louder than a murmur. "She told us..."

When her voice trailed off, Marc looked down at her. Gently cupping her face, he tilted her head up toward him. "Told you what?"

Her mouth opened, but before she could say a word, a quiet noise behind him caught both their attention. Her hands tightened almost painfully on Marc's sides. Without letting go of her, he slowly turned back. He expected to find Blake cowering in fear on the floor at the sight of Kate, and was surprised to find him clearly uncomfortable and ready to bolt out of the room, but still on his feet. Thankfully, he was clothed; Mark's frequent reminders that clothing was not optional seemed to have gotten through to him, and he only disregarded the rule when he wanted physical attention.

"Why don't you sit down on your sofa, Blake?" Marc suggested, curious as to whether Blake would listen and take the few steps that would bring him to his spot by the fire—but also considerably closer to Kate. She seemed to understand that something important was happening because she remained quiet for the long moment it took Blake to finally start moving, her breathing shallow and quiet. Blake's eyes never left her as he walked to the sofa, until he sat down and became hidden by the back of it.

"He looks better," Kate murmured, choking a little on the words.

"The question is, how much better," Marc mused aloud. The scent of fear was still there, and Marc wasn't sure that Kate's continued presence wouldn't eventually send Blake into hysterics. Then again, he wouldn't know until they tried.

"Sit with us for a while," he offered. "Just a few minutes, to see if he remains calm."

She nodded and followed him to the sitting area.

"The sofa is Blake's," he warned her when she looked as though she would sit there. "Take the armchair instead."

Marc busied himself with the fireplace, throwing wood in and reviving the embers until bright flames were dancing over the logs. When he turned back to them, neither had moved. He remained standing, leaning back against the mantlepiece so he could see both of them at once. His gaze stayed on Blake as he took note of every twitch, every flicker of his eyes between Kate and him, every nuance in his scent. Fear remained present, as an undertone, but it was nowhere near as strong as it had been when Kate had said her goodbyes months earlier.

A small movement of Kate's brought Marc's attention to her. Her eyes flitted to Blake, then her eyebrows rose questioningly. Marc could guess what she wanted and nodded slowly. She flashed him a quick smile before looking at Blake.

"I'm so glad to see you're better," she told him, leaning ever so slightly toward the sofa. "I've missed you terribly. I wish I could have come back sooner."

When Blake only answered with a blink and a wary glance toward Marc, Kate's smile fell. She looked at Marc again, this time asking quietly, "Can he talk?"

Mark shook his head. "Not yet. It took weeks for his hands to heal; it'll probably take a lot longer for his voice to return."

If it ever does, he finished for himself.

Her eyes flickered to Blake's hands. Blake noticed and buried his hands between his knees, curling a little more into himself as though hiding in shame.

"He's been feeding by himself," Marc added, putting as much pride and approval as he could in his words. "He doesn't need a straw anymore."

"Do you have enough blood?" she asked, sounding concerned. "He still looks thin, maybe ..."

Her voice trailed off when Blake suddenly closed his eyes tight and wrapped his arms around himself. A thread of sour shame was rising in his scent.

"He's much better," Marc said quickly. "Slowly filling in. It's just a matter of time for that, too."

Blake opened his eyes, throwing a cautious, almost questioning glance in Marc's direction. Kate, on the other hand, didn't seem convinced, but she nonetheless nodded. "Any other progress?"

There was a slight pause, during which time Marc tried to come up with an explanation for why he had done the same thing for which he had nearly ripped Simon's throat out that first night, before realizing that she had no way of knowing and he certainly wasn't going to admit to it.

"Everything takes time, Kate. It's almost incredible how far he has come in so little time. Don't ask for too much too fast."

For a second, she seemed ready to argue, but then she changed her mind. "You're right," she conceded. "It's just... it hurts seeing him like this."

Something shifted in Blake's scent, in the way he held himself, in the tightness at the corners of his eyes. Marc reacted immediately and stepped forward, his eyes urging Kate to rise and come with him.

"I think it's better to cut the visit short," he explained when she hesitated. "He's starting to get agitated."

She appeared a little reluctant still, but she nonetheless followed, her parting smile to Blake doing nothing to calm him. With a glance toward Blake to make sure he would be all right, Marc accompanied her to the door. She stepped outside into the sun and shivered, both her hands rubbing at her arms.

She turned back after taking a deep breath and offered Marc a shaky smile. "Thank you."

"What for?"

She gave a small shrug. "Letting me see him. Taking care of him. Making him better."

Marc bit back the comment that he wasn't doing any of it for her. In a way, he *was*. He nodded. "What about you?" he asked quietly. "How are *you*?"

She took a few steps away and into the sun, her back to him again, head tilted up. "Lonely," she breathed. "Tired." She shook her head and threw a smile back at him. "I'm fine. Or I will be. You?"

Marc wished he could have reached out for her, both to comfort her and allow himself to find comfort in her, too.

"Lonely and tired just about sums it up." He dropped his voice. "Maybe you could come back tonight. Late, when he's asleep. You could tell me what you learned from Jen."

Her face fell. "I'll come back," she agreed. "But not tonight. Daniel said he'd like to visit you. Maybe... maybe he can tell you about it."

The chains that bound Marc's heart tightened a little more. He had long ago guessed what Blake must have endured. He wished Kate had never known.

His Master brought *her* in to see Blake.

Seeing her—seeing her whole and healthy, with no blood marring her face or body, no fear or pain in her eyes—filled him with awe. He had been worried, since his Master had taken him away. Worried about her. Worried for her. He knew she was a prisoner, just like he was. She had always refused to give him details, but he had guessed much more than he had wanted to know.

And so, along with the awe, he was scared. Scared for her. Had she been brought in to be punished in his place? It had happened, sometimes, when his Master had been in a particularly cruel mood. Had Blake finally failed that test he couldn't understand? Would she be stripped, beaten, or worse yet—would Blake be forced to drink from her until only the barest flicker of light remained in her? That had only happened once, and they had dragged her away before he could know whether she would live or die. That had been before they took his fangs away, and he'd almost been glad when they had. He'd never bite her again, never steal her life

or anyone else's. It had been weeks before he had seen her again, and by then—

Hurt.

She was hurt.

She said so.

The word rang, clear and loud like a cannon through Blake's mind. Memories rolled through him, each grimmer than the last, and he could do nothing to stop them. Closing his eyes, he curled himself into a tight ball and tried not to whimper.

Kate took her time to return to the small hotel where she, Daniel, and Simon had rented rooms. After weeks of driving around the country, walking through brick-paved streets and feeling the sun on her face felt nice. She wished the sunlight could have warmed her, but she felt frozen to the bones, and it had little to do with the cold draft sliding down the nearby mountain and running through the small town.

She still couldn't get used to how relaxed everyone she saw appeared to be. She had visited and defended close to a dozen cities since joining the squad, and in all of them, the sense of urgency had always been present on all the faces: these cities had been under siege, and even in the middle of the sunniest day, when a demon attack was as unlikely as the sudden end to the fight, no one had ever been able to forget that the demons would return, and more fighters would fall.

In Riverton, that undercurrent of expectation and dread was absent. The fight and the demons weren't completely forgotten, of course not. When Kate and the two men had arrived in the small hours of morning, they had been stopped

by policemen, who had demanded to know their names, why they were in town, and who had proceeded to explain to them about the town's rules. Apparently, living in a place that remained untouched by demon attacks had a price, and a heavy one at that. Visitors were allowed to remain for no more than two months, and had to check into the town's only hotel so that they could be found easily. People who wanted to live in town permanently had to prove they had sufficient resources to contribute to the community's life and help buy all the supplies that weren't produced locally. When she had heard this, Kate had immediately thought of Marc, and wondered if he had those resources; he must have, for he and Blake had been there for longer than two months, and the address he had given her wasn't that of the hotel. There was so much about him she still didn't know. She had thought she had time and that she would be able to discover more about him and Blake as time passed, only to have that time stolen from her with Blake's disappearance. Now she hoped she might have the chance again to ask those questions, not so much because the answers mattered, but because it would mean spending time with them. She had missed them so much...

When Kate finally reached the hotel, Daniel was alone in the room he shared with Simon.

"He went to see if he could find me blood," he explained to Kate as he let her in. "I told him I have enough for a few more days, but he went anyway. I think he just wanted to walk around."

Without thinking, Kate looked at the cooler in the corner of the room. She had been the one who hunted down food and blood supplies as they traveled, and she knew how much was left in there. She also knew that Daniel could and would stretch the two small jars and make them last a week or more. But she had been around vampires before him, she had watched them feed, and there was something else she knew: there was barely enough left for a day if he fed as much as he should. She didn't think she had seen Daniel feed enough in months. There had to be a reason for his bursts of temper, and the way he starved himself was her best guess.

"I've walked around for a while myself," she replied absently. "It's a nice town."

He frowned at her words. "You didn't find Marc?"

"Oh, I did, yes. I talked to him for a little bit. Blake—" Her throat tightened when she said his name and she had to push the rest of the words out. "He's better. Not fully healed but... better."

Better didn't really mean much, but she didn't know how else to describe Blake. He hadn't cowered at the sight of her, hadn't tried to hurt himself, and that was a good thing, she supposed. Kate had thought a lot about what Jen had said, and she had finally figured it out. The fear Blake had demonstrated every time she had been close to him ever since they had pulled him out of that box could only mean one thing: whatever torture had been inflicted on him, the demons had used magic to make him believe it was Kate who had inflicted it on him. That was why he couldn't stand to look at her. It broke Kate's heart just to think about it, and she

only wished she could have told him she wouldn't hurt him. She had tried, when she had sat close to him that afternoon, but the words had refused to come. She would go back, though, and next time maybe it would be easier to look at Blake without wondering what horrors he saw when he looked at her.

"Marc wants to see you," she said abruptly, shaking away questions she didn't really want to answer and looking straight at Daniel as she lied to him.

"See me?" He didn't sound too happy at the prospect. "What for? Didn't you tell him what we found out?"

"Actually, I had to leave before I could. So you can tell him about that, too."

Daniel observed her for a moment, his gaze sharp and unforgiving, like he suspected what she was up to. She returned the look without flinching. He had told her more than once not to worry about how much he fed, but she did worry. He was her friend, had been so for years, and he had taken care of her in the past. It was the least she could do to try and return the favor.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter 18

For the rest of the day after Kate's departure, Marc left Blake alone in the living room and retreated to his bedroom, although he kept a close ear on him. He needed to know if Blake could calm down from seeing Kate on his own, without Marc's intervention. For hours, Blake remained on edge, his scent too jumbled for Marc to make much sense of it, his heartbeat fluttering like the wings of a frightened bird trying to escape its cage. Staying away was one of the hardest things Marc had ever done.

He only came out at nightfall to warm blood for himself and Blake. He had just finished his dinner and was still trying not to admonish Blake to finish his own when two sharp knocks on the door announced Daniel's arrival. As soon as he opened the door, Marc realized that Blake wasn't the only one whose feeding habits left something to be desired. As a human, Daniel had never been bulky, but his clothes now seemed a size or two too large. A pang of guilt rang through Marc. He should never have agreed to leave his Childe to his own devices. He had known from the start that it was a mistake, and he should have gone with Daniel anyway, whether his presence was wanted or not.

"Come in," he demanded gruffly before Daniel could say a word. "This way."

He led the way to the kitchen and was already pulling a jar of blood from the fridge when Daniel followed him in.

"Sit down," he said as he filled two mugs almost to the rim before setting them in the insta-oven.

The feet of a chair scrapped on the floor behind him. "Kate said you wanted to talk to me?" Daniel said, sounding diffident.

Marc turned to look at Daniel and crossed his arms. Yet again, he could only feel guilt and sadness at how thin Daniel had become, his face gaunt and lined, and it took him a few seconds to realize what Daniel had said. He frowned, his mouth already opening to say that Kate had told him that Daniel wanted to see him, but he realized why she had sent Daniel to him. She had noticed Daniel wasn't doing well, and had figured Marc would want to know—and would be able to help. More than ever, Marc regretted having left her, regretted all those months spent away, and only hoped that he hadn't broken everything between them beyond repair.

The oven dinged, and Marc used the pretext to fix his face with a neutral expression before he sat across from Daniel and pushed a mug toward him.

"You left the squad to help Kate find Jen, then?"

Daniel never looked at the mug, but his nostrils flared, giving away that he was all too aware of the blood waiting just in front of him. "I did," he said curtly. "And this wasn't necessary, I already fed."

His small gesture toward the mug stopped short of touching it. He curled his hand into a fist on the table.

Marc reached out and pushed the mug further toward him. "Somehow, I don't think you're being all that truthful."

Without so much as a hint of gold burning in his eyes as a warning, Daniel swept the mug off the table with a raging hand. It tumbled to the floor, shattering to pieces and splattering blood in long crimson trails.

"You're calling me a liar?" he all but shouted, standing so abruptly that his chair tumbled to the floor behind him.

Marc remained seated and held on to his calm, his only outward reaction being a raised eyebrow. "You're going to pick up that chair," he said slowly, "sit down, and feed. Or I will *make* you feed, and you might not enjoy it all that much."

Teeth bared, Daniel glared down at him. It occurred to Marc that things would have been much easier if Blake had been defiant like this. Then Marc would have known how to react; he had decades of practice in dealing with outright defiance.

"I *said*," he all but growled, "sit down, Childe."

Daniel started shaking, as though he wanted to obey but was fighting the instinct. It took years, even decades before a Childe stopped feeling the need to obey their Sire, and even if Marc hadn't been close enough to assert his authority over Daniel in quite a while, the need was still there. A muscle ticked angrily in his clenched jaw as he picked up the chair, slammed it down and sat. Marc pushed the second mug toward him.

"I'm not hungry," Daniel muttered, but the fleeting look he cast at the mug betrayed him.

Marc snorted. "You think I can't see that you're starving yourself? Stop acting like an idiot and feed."

With another filthy glare at Marc, Daniel slowly reached for the mug and pulled it to him. He held it in his hand long enough that Marc started losing patience.

"*Feed*," he demanded, his tone leaving no room for protests or delays, and Daniel finally picked up the mug and brought it to his lips. His eyes closed tight as he drank in deep mouthfuls, and Marc shook his head at the barely concealed pleasure he could read on his Childe's face. Why did he have to sire the two most stubborn men he had ever met?

As soon as Daniel had lowered the mug again, Marc grabbed it and stood. He had refilled it before Daniel even realized what he was doing.

"I've had enough," Daniel said hurriedly, "I don't want—"

"Quiet, Childe," Marc interrupted curtly. "You have enough when I say you do. Why can't you see you're weakening yourself by not feeding enough?"

The oven buzzing behind him, he turned back to Daniel and observed him for a few seconds. Sullen and bitter, Daniel was nothing like the leader Marc had once admired, and Marc doubted he was the only one who had noticed. Kate must have seen it if she had been troubled enough to arrange this meeting, and others must have seen it, too.

"They kicked you out, didn't they?" he asked quietly, drawing Daniel's eyes to him. "That's why you went with Kate. You didn't have anything else to do."

Daniel didn't reply, but he turned his face away, refusing to look Marc in the eye. The oven dinged, and Marc brought the mug to him, although this time he remained standing.

"I told you last time I saw you. Not feeding enough doesn't just weaken your body. It also makes you short-tempered and irritable. You can't lead anyone that way."

Daniel didn't reply. He still hadn't touched the mug. Marc rolled his eyes at him and sighed. "Drink it. Now."

After a beat and with obvious reluctance, Daniel did as he was told. Marc was watching him when he caught movement by the kitchen's entrance. He was surprised to find Blake there, only half of his face peeking out from behind the edge of the wall as he peered in. When Blake realized Marc had noticed him, he retreated out of sight, but after a few seconds he reappeared again, just one dark eye observing the kitchen. Curious as to what Blake found so interesting, Marc pretended not to see him this time. He wanted to see how long Blake would stay, and whether he would come any closer.

As it turned out, he didn't, but he did stay just outside the kitchen as long as Daniel was there. Marc quickly gave up on berating him about feeding, and told him to return the next night at the same time. Daniel seemed to understand at once that Marc intended to make him feed again. Whatever he thought of that, he didn't say, and left without a word. Marc wasn't sure he would return, but that wasn't a problem. As long as he stayed in town, Marc wouldn't have much trouble finding him if he needed to.

After cleaning the broken mug and spilled blood from the floor, Marc returned to the living room and sat down in his armchair by the fire. Blake was still next to the kitchen entrance, his back now to the wall, his gaze on Marc, though unreadable.

"Do you remember Daniel?" Marc asked, deciding not to comment on Blake's uncharacteristic bout of spying. "I sired him almost two years ago now. He's just as stubborn as you ever were."

Blake's heartbeat stuttered, and too late Marc noticed how frustrated he sounded—how angry.

"Just as stubborn," he repeated more calmly now. "But I didn't hurt him. Just like I won't hurt you. Nobody will hurt you." Marc's voice dropped to a tired murmur, and he closed his eyes. "I wish you'd believe that."

After a couple of seconds, slow steps announced that Blake was approaching. Marc opened his eyes just in time to see him take his place on the sofa, facing Marc, sitting cross-legged with his back to the armrest. He didn't make a sound, but he held Marc's gaze for an instant before turning his eyes to the dying embers in the fireplace.

Afraid to read too much into this simple look, Marc didn't say a word, nor did he move. He watched Blake slowly doze off, his head resting against the back of the sofa. There were deep shadows under his eyes, and Marc knew why. He wasn't the only one who had had a long, emotionally charged day.

Now, though, as his body slowly shifted until he was lying down on the sofa, one hand resting on his stomach and the other arm thrown behind him, Blake seemed to have found sleep, and without bad dreams to...

No. Not so easy. There they were.

It started with a slight change in Blake's heartbeat and in his scent, so slight that Marc could easily have missed it. A thread of fear, nothing like the overwhelming terror of some

past nights, but still fear just the same. Fleeting emotions passed over Blake's features, too fast to clearly identify, but the general impression was that his dream, whatever it was, wasn't pleasant. Marc stood, ready to shake Blake awake and end the nightmare, but as he did, he noticed the beginning of tenting in Blake's sweatpants, and the hint of desire in his scent, mixing with the always-present fear.

Sitting back down, Marc continued to watch Blake sleep, and wondered what images were arousing and scaring him at the same time. Had he been subjected to the abuse for so long that his body had eventually accepted it as normal, and now reacted to it as though the touches were welcome? It wasn't the first time Marc thought this, not the first time he had tried to think of a way to break the cycle. Not the first time Blake's scent had aroused him even as it twisted his guts.

He missed his Childe, missed the stubbornness he had seen echoed in Daniel, missed Blake's smile and deviousness. Missed his body, and his mouth, too. Sometimes, he wondered if Blake would ever touch him again without fear gleaming in his gaze. He felt guilty at the thought, selfish, but almost two years with no relief other than that of his own hand had left him starved for touch, and more and more often he was afraid that it might affect how he treated Blake, how he touched him when, confronted with his need, he caved in.

A sharp intake of breath pulled Marc out of his thoughts, and he froze, the heel of his hand pressed against his crotch. Blake, leaning back against the armrest of the sofa, looked at him not with fear but with undisguised fascination, his fingers

twitching where they rested close to the now-obvious tenting in his sweatpants.

There wasn't much point in pretending nothing was going on, Marc decided. Or maybe he was just too aroused to want to pretend.

"That looks uncomfortable," he said, pushing the words past the knot in his throat. "Want to get out of your pants? I know I do."

His hands were shaking a little as he unfastened his pants and, lifting his hips off the armchair, pushed them and his boxers down to expose his cock. Blake's eyes widened slightly at the display, but he didn't follow suit as Marc had expected.

"That's OK," Marc continued, his voice as unthreatening as possible. "You don't have to do anything you don't want to. But you can do anything you want. Like, for example..."

Marc hissed lightly as he curled his fingers around his cock. He felt a little foolish about displaying himself like this, and he only hoped that Blake would respond with more than a twitching of his fingers on his thigh.

"I used to love watching you touch yourself," he confided with some difficulty, aware that his words were what could potentially make a difference but uneasy as always in verbalizing sex. "Think you could do it now? I know you want to. Come on, Blake. Help me here. Help yourself."

Marc continued to stroke himself under Blake's attentive eyes, desperate for a reaction, yet so shocked when it came that his hand faltered and stilled for an instant. Very slowly, as though he would stop at the first hint of Marc's reprobation, Blake hooked his thumbs under his pants

waistband and pushed down. His cock sprung free, and the sight caused Marc's hand to start moving again, regular strokes, tight fist going up, looser down, spreading his precome along his length to ease the motion.

"That's it," he encouraged quietly. "Now just wrap your hand around your cock. Let me watch you. Please."

Marc could have sworn the 'please' was what did it. Blake's hand trembled when he took hold of his dick, but he did, without Marc's hand forcing him to, and that was all that mattered.

"Good boy."

The praise rolled off Marc's tongue too easily, and he regretted it just as fast, until he realized that it spurred Blake on. Slow moves at first, almost hesitant, as though Blake had forgotten how to pleasure himself, gradually faster as he followed Marc's lead, his hips arching off the sofa, his mouth opening on harsh pants.

Mindless words fell from Marc's lips, more praises mixed with pleas to continue, a senseless babble that seemed to reassure Blake and give him confidence. And while Marc knew abstractly that he should have been glad that Blake was finally touching himself, finally putting an end to the torture he had been inflicting on the both of them, all he could think of was how striking Blake looked, so close now, skin flushed, eyes closing in pleasure, bottom lip caught between his teeth, hips pumping into his tight fist until at last, at long last he was coming, pearly white coating his hand, Marc moaning for the both of them.

It had to be a test.

Blake couldn't imagine that it was anything other than a test.

His Master had made up a new game, another one whose rules he hadn't explained, but Blake thought he understood.

If his Master demanded it from him, he was allowed to touch himself. Not for his pleasure, though, of course not. For his Master's. He had to offer him a good spectacle, had to satisfy his eyes the best he could.

It was a test, and Blake did not want to fail.

He never wanted to fail again. Never wanted to disappoint his Master. Never wanted to be punished again.

He knew, though. He knew it was only a matter of time.

It always was.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter 19

Marc had hoped that, once Blake had reached an orgasm on his own, he wouldn't require help anymore. But the scent of Blake's desire permeated the air again just a day later, thankfully after Daniel's second visit.

When Blake once more silently pleaded for Marc's hands to touch him, Marc could have screamed in frustration. After arguing with Daniel again about how much he fed, Marc was in no mood to battle with Blake about this, too. He gave in and brought Blake off, promising as he did that it was the last time, knowing, also, that it wouldn't be and that each time he caved in he only made things more difficult.

Blake's nightmares were just as upsetting. They seemed stronger than before and left Blake panting and drenched in cold sweat, his heart hammering in his chest. Marc didn't know what to do about them, since his presence and reassuring words didn't seem to make things any easier for Blake. If he only knew what monsters inhabited Blake's dreams...

The answer came from Kate, and it was so strikingly obvious that for a while Marc remained dumbstruck, amazed and a little ashamed that he hadn't thought of it himself.

She had accompanied Daniel on his third visit, although she waited in the living room while Marc once more coaxed his Childe into feeding in sufficient amounts. Marc supposed she had hoped to see Blake, but Blake was in his room,

hopefully sleeping and recuperating from the previous night's bad dreams.

After Daniel had left, for the first time muttering a quiet, "Thank you," when Marc demanded that he return the next night, Marc joined Kate in the living room. She was standing by the fireplace, warming her hands and staring at the flames absently. When Marc came to her, he opened his arms, and she didn't hesitate before stepping into his embrace.

"Is he still asleep?" she murmured, the words muffled against the fabric of his shirt.

Marc listened closely. He could hear Blake's heartbeat at the end of the hallway, echoed by Kate's in his arms.

"I think so," he said just as quietly and held her a little tighter. "I *hope* so. He has barely caught any sleep in the past couple of days."

Her fingers clenched on his back. "Since I arrived," she said in a broken voice. "It's my fault. I made him worse again."

"No, of course not." Marc rubbed a hand up and down her back soothingly. "He has nightmares. He's been having them since the beginning. This is just a bad phase."

"Maybe he has nightmares about me." She swallowed hard enough that he heard her throat tick. "Jen said... she said the demons can do magic. She said they made her believe it was people she knew that were hurting her. Maybe they made Blake believe it was me hurting him. Maybe that's what he dreams about. Maybe—"

Marc's hand slipped to the back of Kate's head, and he tilted it up toward him. Her eyes were full of the same tears

he had heard in her voice, though they hadn't spilled yet. He pressed his mouth to hers, wishing he could have swallowed her fears along with her words.

"Don't," he whispered when he pulled back. "Maybe it's the case and maybe it's not, but blaming yourself won't help him."

"But knowing for certain might. Did you ask—"

"Kate, he can't talk, remember?"

She looked around as though searching for inspiration. Her gaze stopped on the books lined up on the mantle of the fireplace. "How about writing?" she asked very fast, her voice louder now as excitement made her forget Blake was asleep. "If his hands are fixed, could he write? You could ask him a question, and he'd write an answer. Do you think it could work?"

Marc didn't answer, and instead turned toward the hallway that led to the bedrooms. "He's awake," he said softly. "I think he's getting up. Do you want to stay and see him?"

When he looked back at her, Kate seemed torn. "Want to see him, yes," she said with a light shrug. "Want to upset him so much he has more nightmares, really not. I think I'll go now. But I'll come back tomorrow if that's all right?"

Marc nodded and brushed a kiss to her forehead before accompanying her to the door. In truth, he wasn't too upset that she was leaving. If Blake truly had bad dreams about her, Marc wasn't sure he wanted her to know.

Keeping an ear on Blake, Marc went to the kitchen and warmed blood for him. He then rifled through the drawers, finding a pen and an old notebook marked 'Mom's recipes'

that had been abandoned by the house's previous owners. He flipped the notebook over and opened it on the last page, leaving it and the pen on the table next to the mug. Suddenly impatient, he went to stand by the kitchen door, arms crossed as he surveyed Blake's progress. He had just come out of the hallway, and was looking around the living room as though expecting to find someone there. He must have recognized Kate's voice. When his gaze fell on Marc, Blake gave a small start, and for an instant he looked ready to retreat.

"Your dinner is ready," Marc said. "Come eat before it gets cold."

With slow, hesitant steps, Blake came to the kitchen, shoulders hunched as he slipped past Marc. He sat at the table as he now did most nights and wrapped both hands around the hot porcelain as though to warm himself. After a few seconds, he raised the half-filled mug to his lips. Marc's throat always tightened at that gesture, which was so innocuous yet had been so hard to relearn.

He sat across from Blake and watched him feed, tapping his fingers on the table in an impatient rhythm. When Blake put down the mug, Marc pushed it aside at once and nudged the notebook in front of Blake instead.

"Here," he said triumphantly as he held the pen out to Blake. "Talk to me."

Blake took the pen Marc was offering him and even looked down at the paper in front of him, but he didn't make a mark on it. Marc's excitement deflated at a sudden thought.

"Do you remember how to write?" he asked cautiously. "Can you write your name?"

Blake's eyes returned to the paper, and he went as far as to put the tip of the pen to the paper, but he stopped there and looked back at Marc, uncertainty fluttering across his face.

"Your name," Marc repeated. "It's not a trick question. I just want to see if you can write."

Same look down, same hesitation. Marc let out a quiet frustrated growl.

"Come on, Blake. I'm not asking for an essay on how to heal fucked-up half vamps. One word. Just one. Hell, write my name if you don't want to write yours, write the first word that crosses your mind, just—"

The light scratch of pen on paper stopped Marc mid-rant, and he leaned a little over the table, reading upside down the letters Blake was scrawling. His hand trembled slightly, as though he didn't quite remember how to form the letters, and the handwriting in no way resembled the slanted but regular cursive script that had once been his, but it was a beginning, Marc thought happily. A beginning that started with his name, as Blake was just tracing the curve of the 'a,' slightly crooked next to the capital 'M.'

"That's it," he exclaimed. "That's my name. At least you..."

A knot formed in his throat as Blake continued to write, adding too many letters and looking up at him expectantly.

Master.

Marc couldn't manage to take his eyes off the word now inscribed on the first line of the notebook. Was that whom

Blake saw, when he looked at him? Not his Sire, but the monster who had tortured him?

Slowly, so as not to startle Blake, he reached over and took the pen from him. With a shaky hand, he drew a line through the word, pressing in so hard that he gouged the paper. He brought the pen lower on the page and, with a slow hand that shook almost as much as Blake's had, he wrote his name before giving the pen back to Blake.

"There. That's my name. Marc."

Blake's expression remained unreadable, and Marc chose not to linger on that first misstep.

"Here's the thing," he said calmly. "Every night, or just about every night, you have dreams. Very, very bad dreams, I believe. Do you think you can tell me what you dream about?"

A few seconds passed, and Marc wondered if Blake had understood his question, but at last, the pen touched the paper again, and letters started to appear. Marc could guess the word before Blake had finished, and he wasn't sure what to think as his suspicions were confirmed.

Kate.

Blake kept his eyes lowered this time, and somehow it made it easier for Marc to keep prodding.

"It's just a dream, not really her. You know that, right?"

There was no reply.

"What does she do? Does she hurt you? Is she..."

The pen started moving again, and Marc fell silent as he watched the new word appear, soon repeated all across the line; Blake wrote the letters faster now, but his hand shook

more and more and the words started bleeding into each other, almost to the point of illegibility.

hurt hurt hurt hurt hurthurthurthurthurthurthurthurt...

Then, under Marc's widening eyes, the words changed.

hurthurthurtdeaddeaddeaddead...

Blake was pressing the pen down to the paper so hard that it ripped in a couple of places. He was panting, Marc belatedly realized, his heartbeat and breathing so fast that he was close to hyperventilating. As gently and unthreateningly as he knew how, Marc reached over the table and covered Blake's hand with his own, preventing him from writing any more.

"You're safe," he said quietly. "No one is going to hurt you anymore. No one, Blake. You're safe, I promise, you..."

Marc wasn't sure whether Blake understood him, or even heard what he said, and became silent as Blake rested his forehead on the table, covered his head with both arms, and started shaking with silent sobs.

"You're safe," Marc repeated, mindlessly caressing his hair. "I swear, Blake. I won't let anything happen to you. Not anymore."

He couldn't remember having ever seen Blake cry before he had been in the demons' hands, but there had been instances where he had taken care of his Childe when attacks of claustrophobia had left him crippled and near catatonic. As he stroked Blake's hair, a tactile memory resurfaced. He had done this before. He could do it still, even if the circumstances were different. Standing, he walked to Blake and, with a hand on each arm, coaxed him to his feet. Step by step, he guided him to the windows in the living room, and

then to the enclosed patio beyond them. He sat down with his back to the low wall, drawing Blake to sit between his parted legs. At once, Blake leaned against him, the back of his head resting against Marc's shoulder as he looked up to the sky. He remembered, too, Marc realized with a spark of relief.

An hour passed before Blake's body stopped shaking. An hour more, and his frantic heartbeat finally calmed down. They remained in the patio until sunrise started lightening the horizon.

His Master had given the stars back to Blake.

Blake could hardly remember the last time he had seen the stars. His cell had been four stone walls, with only one metal door that opened on an endless, narrow corridor. Five strides from wall to wall. Seven and a half from corner to corner.

From the moment the door had closed on him, Blake had known it would happen. It hadn't been long before the familiar feeling had taken hold of him, like a fist tightening over his heart, squeezing until Blake had been ready to dig it out of his own chest. He had curled himself into a tight ball, blocking out the sight of those walls closing in as they pressed on him from all sides. When hours—days—millennia later the door had opened again, he had been too lost in his own fears to even bolt for it.

That was when his Master had first punished him, replacing a pain that was crippling though intangible with a very physical one that left him unable to move for days.

For so long, those four walls and unending punishments had been his world. For so long he had thought it'd never get any better—but not any worse, either.

But then, they had locked him in a coffin.

And then, all the rules had changed, without a warning or a word of explanation.

And now...

Now, his Master had given the stars back to him. And as Blake felt the strong body behind him, as he listened to the quiet, soothing, meaningless words that caressed the shell of his ear, he let himself be drawn back to a time before those stone walls and punishments, a time when he hadn't feared his Master, a time when he had trusted him. Loved him.

He wished he could trust him again.

He wished he didn't love him still.

After the fiasco of asking Blake to tell him about his nightmares, Marc gave up on asking any more questions, at least until Blake's mental state improved. He told Blake to keep the notebook and pen, however, thinking that maybe he would use them of his own accord to express wants or needs. When Kate came back with Daniel the next night, Marc sent his Childe to the kitchen while he talked to her outside. She guessed at once why he was reluctant to let her enter the house. Her expression broke his heart. He tried to reassure her and thanked her for thinking of asking Blake to write. They agreed that she wouldn't return for a few days, even if it pained them both.

Blake's nightmares seemed to decrease in frequency again, and at first Marc thought it was because Kate hadn't returned. He finally realized that it might have been something else, though. Preoccupied as he was about Kate, it

took him two days to notice how often Blake's eyes flicked to the locked windows, and the patio behind it.

He had a suspicion that Blake might want to go out again; he had to be bored to death, now that he was healed, rested, and not continuously too scared to do anything beyond sit on his sofa. But never did Blake go to the French doors; instead, he glanced in turn at them and at Marc, trying, it seemed, to be discreet, but failing miserably.

"Blake?"

With a slow blink, Blake looked toward Marc.

"Would you like to go out?" he offered. "Onto the patio, I mean. To get some fresh air."

Blake threw a fleeting glance to the window, then turned toward Marc again. The uncertainty was clear on his face; what was he hesitating about? Did he believe, maybe, that it was a trick question? Didn't he know by now that Marc wouldn't hurt him, and only wanted to see him healed?

"If you want to go, you can," he insisted. "It's all right. Really."

A few more seconds passed without a definite answer from Blake, and then, at long last, he nodded.

Immediately, Marc stood and walked over to the windows. "I can't go with you during the day," he said as he unlocked it, "but you can..."

Marc unlocked the windows, but he didn't open them. When he turned back to face Blake, he found him looking at him with the closest thing to anticipation Marc had seen on his face since his return.

"You know what?" he said, gauging Blake even as he made a decision. "I'm not going to do this for you. As a matter of fact, I'm not going to do anything for you anymore."

In truth, Marc had been thinking about how to proceed with this new step for a while now. He had tried to offer as many choices to Blake as he could, had restrained himself as much as possible from giving him any order, but it was more than time to put an end to Blake's complacency. More than time to let him take care of himself on every possible level.

"I know you're not as out of it as you seem to be," he continued when Blake replied with his usual blank stare. "Your scent doesn't lie. Neither do your eyes. So here's how it works from now on, Blake. You want something? You get it yourself. I'm not your servant, nor your nurse. If you're hungry, the blood's in the fridge, and you've watched me warm it often enough to know how to do it. If you want some air, the window is right here. Get off your ass and open it yourself. And if you're hard... well, we proved you could touch yourself without being struck by lightning. Got it?"

Blake didn't move, but there was suddenly an edge of panic to his scent that told Marc that he understood the new rules. Now all Marc could hope was that he wouldn't give in before Blake did.

Picking up a book from the fireplace mantle, Marc sat back in his armchair and pretended not to pay any attention to Blake, when in reality he was focused solely on him. His eyes remained on the book in his hands, but he wasn't reading a word, and instead used his peripheral vision to observe Blake.

All day long, he observed him. When night fell, Blake hadn't moved an inch. To see him so completely still felt extremely unnatural. Marc would have given anything to see Blake return to his usual hyperactivity. Or at the very least, to see him stand and simply open a door.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter 20

The car turned a corner and soon came to a stop in front of Marc's house. Kate opened the door and slipped out.

"I won't be long," she said before closing the door again and received twin nods in reply. As she walked to the door, her heart tightened a little in both hope and fear, and in response she tightened her hand on the scabbard she held. Taking a deep breath, she raised her hand to the door and knocked. The first time she had come to this house, she had been filled with hope and fear, too. Hope that Blake would be better, fear that he would still be unable to remember her and how much she loved him. Today, they were different hopes and fears, but they were still centered on Blake.

The door opened, and Marc appeared. The flash of a smile quickly turned into an apologetic expression.

"Kate, I thought we said—"

"I know," she cut in gently. "I know it's too soon, but I had an idea." She raised the sword in her hands, showing it to Marc. "He's afraid I'll hurt him, but what if I give him a weapon? Maybe it would make him feel safer. Maybe he'd realize I don't want to hurt him." Holding her breath, she asked, almost pleading, "What do you think?"

Marc's brow furrowed, and he started shaking his head, but after a moment's hesitation he reached out and brushed a strand of hair behind Kate's ear. "All right, we can try. Just don't get your hopes too high."

She smiled in thanks and followed him inside. He gestured for her to wait by the door, and she did so while he stepped to the living room and stood by Blake's sofa.

"Blake? Kate is here, and she has a gift for you."

Marc glanced at Kate, nodded, and she walked over to him, holding Seneca to her chest. She stood next to him and was grateful for his hand settling on her back and rubbing in a soothing circle. In front of them, Blake was sitting up on the sofa, his eyes going back and forth between them. She tried to smile, but it seemed very difficult to do so, or even speak.

"We found this," she finally managed to push the words out. "When you were taken from us, I mean." She glanced at Marc, wondering if it was all right to mention Blake's capture, but Marc's eyes were focused on Blake and he didn't notice her sudden hesitation. She held the sword out to Blake and continued. "I've used it while you were... gone. It was like having a bit of you with me. But I always hoped I could give it back to you some day. I hoped you'd finally tell me what the inscription means. So..."

Her throat tightened. Blake was still looking back and forth between Marc and her. He had glanced at the sword, too, and his hands had curled into fists on his thighs, but he didn't reach forward in any way. She wanted to ask Marc if he thought Blake understood what she had said, but before she could say a word, Marc wrapped his hand over hers on the scabbard and pushed it forward, closer to Blake, almost close enough to bump against his leg.

"Take it, Blake," he said. "It's yours. Take it."

There was an edge to his voice that Kate was surprised to hear there, a commanding tone that she wouldn't have wanted to use herself. After another moment's hesitation, Blake reached out, his fingers wiggling a little before they touched the hilt. He blinked very fast and drew his hand back again as though he'd been shocked by an electric charge.

"Take it," Marc said again, and this time when Blake touched the sword his fingers curled around the elaborate metalwork and he pulled it to him, cradling the scabbard to his chest, his eyes fleeting once more between Marc and Kate, finally stopping on where Marc still held on to her hand.

Kate squeezed Marc's fingers, and he squeezed back.

"Do you think it'll help?" she asked, looking up at him.

"Only time will tell." He leaned in to press a kiss to her cheek. "But thank you for—"

He stopped abruptly and turned back to Blake, who was trembling, eyes shut tight and hands clenched so hard on the scabbard that they were bone white.

"You should—"

"Go, yes," Kate finished for Marc, already stepping back. Marc followed her to the door. "I didn't just come for the sword. I'm here to tell you, we're leaving town for a few days. Simon had an idea, and he wants to talk to Jen again."

His eyes widened a little, and she could see his hope already. She rested a hand on his chest and shook her head lightly. "It's a long shot, so don't get too excited. I think Simon is just getting antsy about not being able to help, but we figured it was worth a try."

Marc nodded once. "Daniel is going with you, then?"

"Yeah. I'll keep an eye on him for you if you want. Make sure he feeds enough." Another nod, a smile, and another brush of Marc's hand over Kate's arm made her wish she could stay longer. "I'll miss you," she murmured. "Both of you."

It was her turn to press a quick kiss to Marc's cheek, and then she opened the door and stepped out. The car hadn't left the town yet, and already she was wishing she were back.

His Master had given him a weapon.

Not just any weapon, but his sword, Seneca, the blade that had saved his life countless times. The blade he had regretted so much having lost when he had been pushed through the breach. If he had had Seneca in his hand, certainly, things would have been different. He would have fought to the death. He would have given the demons no choice but to kill him. Not that he had let himself be captured that easily; after the first moment of confusion and disorientation, he had stolen an axe from a wounded demon at his feet. He wasn't as good with an axe as he was with a sword, however, and even though he had taken an opponent down, in the end they had disarmed him and then...

And then...

His hands clenched a little tighter on the scabbard of the sword. He hadn't dared bare the blade yet. He was afraid that it was yet another test. Afraid that, if he so much as attempted to wield the weapon, just to remind himself what it had been like to be a true warrior—a true man—he would be punished. More pain, maybe, or the loss of all the privileges

he had earned...he still didn't know how. Maybe they weren't privileges at all. Maybe, like the sword, it was all a giant trap.

But if it was, he would have a sword in his hand when the punishment came. And maybe, this time, they would have no choice but to kill him at last.

As much as he would miss those short moments with Kate and worry about Daniel not feeding enough, Marc figured that a few days of just him and Blake with no interruptions to their routine might help Blake accept the new rules he had established.

His hopes were heightened when Blake fed by himself at midmorning the next day. Marc watched from afar, wincing when half a blood bag ended up on the counter rather than in a mug. However, he refrained from saying anything other than, "It's OK, don't worry about it," when Blake looked at him, eyes filled with pure dread. He was almost as messy the next time he fed; this time Marc struggled not to complain, but was glad he hadn't said anything when Blake started feeding more frequently after that. It was always in small quantities, but every few hours without fail, to the point that Marc wondered if he had unknowingly been starving Blake by offering him blood only twice a day. Could it be that he needed as much blood as a regular vampire, but broken down into smaller portions? Marc tried not to think too much about it; it was too late to change anything now, and there was no way he could have guessed. Still, he couldn't help the twinges of guilt every time he saw Blake feed.

Unfortunately, the progress ended there.

It didn't take long for what Marc had been anxiously expecting to happen; Blake's tented sweatpants, flushed skin, and unmistakable lust were anything but subtle. Marc waited for Blake to take care of it by himself, like he had fed on his own. He waited for three days, barely restraining himself, and in vain.

It was just past noon when Marc lowered his sword after going through a series of balance exercises. He couldn't do much more than those slow movements; there was hardly enough space even for these in the living room unless he pushed the sofa out of the way, and he didn't want to touch it. He didn't *dare* to touch it and risk losing Blake's trust again. He didn't need the training, but he would have done anything to take his mind of Blake. Anything to pretend he couldn't smell the thick scent of lust permeating the house.

Pretending only worked for so long, though. When he turned around to find Blake in the habitual position, kneeling naked on the floor, eyes pleading as he stared, he couldn't pretend anymore.

"Not going through this again," Marc growled. "You want to come; you do something about it. I told you, I'm not helping anymore, and this time I mean it."

In response, Blake bowed his head and started trembling, hands closed in tight fists on his thighs.

Had it been night, Marc would have stormed out and not returned for a few hours, for better or for worse. But the sun was high outside, and there was nowhere for him to go. Nowhere, except his room. If he couldn't go any farther, it would have to do.

Blake's scent followed him, and Marc soon realized that without anything to do, he couldn't take his mind off Blake. Marc tried to ignore the growing tightness in his pants, but his hand had a mind of its own when he closed his eyes to get some sleep.

The fantasy was the same one that always sprung forward whenever he helped Blake come and needed to find his own relief afterwards. Blake's hands rather than his, Blake's lustful words, no fear in his scent, no pain, only arousal. The tightness of his ass when Marc finally entered him, the way he drew his legs up to let Marc farther in, the color of his eyes shifting from brown to gold and back as he barely held on to the last shreds of his self-control. His voice when he came, crying out Marc's name, and taking Marc with him into bliss.

Marc didn't leave his room before nightfall, and when he did, it was only to rush straight out of the house, refusing to acknowledge Blake, kneeling where he had left him hours earlier. He still hadn't moved when Marc returned minutes before sunrise and fed quickly before retreating once more to the relative peace of his room.

Blake was again in the same position when Marc emerged mid-afternoon after having been unable to get any rest. The only thing that was different, Marc noticed, was that Blake's eyes were now tightly closed. He looked in pain, and that, more than anything else, made Marc want to give in one last time and offer Blake some relief. He managed to stop, barely, by reminding himself that Blake would never cease to need him like this if Marc continued to cave in first.

Walking away from Blake and back to his bedroom was one of the hardest things he had ever done. Unable to let go completely, he left the door ajar, so that he could keep an ear out for Blake.

That was how he heard him approach.

With slow, hesitant steps and brief pauses every few seconds, it took Blake several minutes to reach Marc's door. He stood there for a few moments, long enough for Marc to sit up on his bed and wonder what was going on, but Blake finally pushed the door open and entered before Marc could say a word.

Each of Blake's movements screamed his hesitation, as did the pounding beat of his heart, yet he continued to move forward until he had reached the edge of the bed. Marc gritted his teeth when Blake knelt on the floor.

"Here or there doesn't change a thing, Blake. I won't..."

He stopped, shocked, when a trembling hand came to rest on his leg. It was the first time Blake had initiated any kind of contact with him since Leawood. Unsure of what was going on, he stood still as Blake's hand gradually moved up his thigh, faltering more than once on the way. The contact was maddening, barely firm enough to feel through the fabric of his pants and yet much more than Marc had experienced from a hand that wasn't his own since the night Blake had disappeared.

When Blake's fingers finally brushed against his throbbing cock, Marc practically jumped into his touch; he hissed, wanting more, so much more, yet trying to convince himself he had to stop whatever it was that Blake was doing.

Then, with a sudden and blinding clarity, he remembered what he had told Blake days earlier.

You want something? You get it yourself.

The memory instantly swept away every single argument Marc had come up with in the past months to prevent himself from taking Blake to bed the way he craved. It didn't matter at that moment that Blake had been so scared of Marc for so long and still was, sometimes. It didn't matter that touching him when he was in this state was only heaping on more abuse. It didn't matter that he couldn't say no, because with that hand, that touch, he was saying yes. He was getting what he wanted, just as Marc had told him to. And Marc wanted it too much to worry about right or wrong anymore.

It took only a second to pull Blake onto the bed; barely any longer than that for Marc to get rid of his clothes. Finally, it was skin on skin, face to face, and if Blake's hands were still a bit hesitant, they soon found shoulders to grip tightly as Marc rocked his body against the smaller, frailer one under him. Their cocks rubbing together sent fire up Marc's spine, and he wanted, needed to do more, to flip Blake onto his hands and knees and bury himself into his tight heat, and...

And he wouldn't, because even though Blake had come to Marc, even though he had, in effect if not in words, begged for it, fear now laced Blake's scent.

Marc couldn't stop, though, not now, not when they were both so close; his body simply refused to stop and sever the delicious contact. Instead, he accentuated it, slipping a hand between him and Blake to hold and squeeze their cocks together. Blake arched up into the touch as much as his

position would allow, head thrown back and eyes closed. The sight was entrancing, but somehow Marc found himself asking, "Look at me, Blake. Open your eyes."

Blake's eyelids fluttered open even as his nails dug into Marc's shoulders. The prickling of pain, combined with eyes shining with lust, urged Marc on, and he covered Blake's lips with his own, the gesture as urgent, as needful as the fast dance of his hips. His tongue pressed in, encountering no resistance as he took possession of Blake's mouth. Long forgotten habits resurfaced, and his fangs descended, nicking Blake's lips and his own to flavor the kiss with blood. Blake went completely rigid under him, and Marc felt the warmth of Blake's release. It would have been enough to trigger his own, except for the fact that, having tasted a drop of Blake's blood, he couldn't think of anything other than his need for more. Again, what had once been habits took over, and his mouth drifted to the crook of Blake's neck.

Blake didn't flinch at the bite, still caught up in his pleasure, his blood more flavorful for it. One mouthful was all it took for Marc to come, his ecstasy almost painfully ripping through him as he held on to his Childe.

It was only after a few seconds of gentle suckling and slowly falling into a contented languor that he realized the blood coating his tongue was warm and remembered why. He stopped instantly, horrified by what he had done, ready to apologize and explain and—

Blake pulled him back down on top of him when Marc started moving away, effectively using him as a body-shaped

blanket. Marc didn't dare move any more, and watched, puzzled beyond words, as Blake slowly fell asleep under him.

Confusion didn't even begin to cover how Marc felt. Back in Kate's apartment, when seeing her had upset him so much, Blake had pulled Marc into the bed with him. Was this the same thing? Comfort? Or was it something else altogether? Blake had been afraid at some point; his scent had spelled his fear quite clearly. Yet he hadn't tried to leave the bed, hadn't tried to stop Marc from biting him, either. And he had come there willingly, Marc reminded himself as well as the increasingly loud nagging voice that said he was no better than Blake's tormentors. Blake had reached toward Marc as he had reached for the blood in the fridge, fulfilling a need for himself, by himself, without any ambiguity possible.

Yet Marc's guilt increased with each passing second. He was supposed to take care of Blake and help him get back to normal. Taking advantage of the situation didn't have any part in it. As long as he had kept Blake's pleasure and his own separate, it had been relatively easy to believe he was only acting for Blake's benefit. But this had been different. He had crossed a line by allowing Blake into his bed.

Even worse, he had bitten Blake, taken his blood, forgetting everything including that Blake was still recovering, and that there was no way to know what effect losing blood would have on him.

It couldn't happen again. And it wouldn't.

Or so Marc promised himself as he eased his body off Blake, ready to leave the bed and the room. A pair of shiny eyes looking at him with what resembled discontentment

stopped him. Faltering, he laid on his side, just far enough that he wasn't touching Blake, wondering what would happen.

Blake closed his eyes again and slid closer to Marc, falling asleep seconds after he had pulled Marc's arm over him.

There wasn't much left for Marc to do except get some sleep, too, and try not to think, at least for a little while.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter 21

As soon as they reached the town where Jen had been detained, Kate and Daniel looked at each other, their expressions darkening in the same way.

"What... what happened?" Simon stammered from the back seat.

"Demons," Kate replied darkly, although by now Simon shouldn't have needed to ask. Under the light of the early night moon, the signs were easy enough to recognize.

The worst of the rubble had been cleared away, but the damage was still fresh, the defense walls still torn down. Kate tried to remember how large the town's militia had been; she hadn't seen much of it, but somehow she doubted they could have pushed back a demon attack massive enough to breach the walls so thoroughly.

Daniel was waved on by dispirited guards at the town's entrance and drove through what seemed like a ghost city. If not for a few lights in the houses lining the streets, Kate would have thought the demons had won this battle for good. There were signs, though, that humans were not giving up or preparing to move on to a better-fortified city quite yet. They wouldn't have started cleaning and repairing if they were.

The three of them were silent until they reached the police station, which had been converted into headquarters for the militia where they had interrogated Jen before. Daniel parked in front of what was left of the building, and Kate had a flashback to the City. The level of devastation was the same:

fallen facade, broken windows, sunken roof. All that was missing was swirling fog to cloak the ruins.

Next to her, Daniel let out a string of foul curses. Taken aback, Kate blinked and turned to face him. She couldn't remember ever hearing him swear before. His eyes were glowing, his teeth almost bared. His entire body seemed tense, coiled like a spring ready to unfurl.

"When's the last time you fed?" she asked, already twisting in her seat to grab the cooler in the back.

"What? I'm not hungry," Daniel snapped, glaring at her.

Kate opened her mouth, ready to call him a liar, but a quiet shuffling sound in the back seat stopped her. She turned to Simon, who squirmed uncomfortably under her hard gaze.

"Why don't you go find out what happened?" she told him, and somehow the words sounded like an order.

"M—me?" Simon asked back, eyes wide and a little scared. "But there's no one out there, who am I going to ask? And there could be de—demons! Aren't you going to come with me?"

"That looks like some kind of official building," Kate said, pointing at the lit edifice across the street. "Start there. We'll join you in a minute."

Simon's mouth twisted unhappily. Before he could argue any more, Kate gave him a look that made him jump in his seat. He pushed the door open and slipped out of the car, hurrying across the street to the building Kate had pointed out. She kept an eye on him until he had disappeared inside,

then turned fully to Daniel. He was looking at her as though ready to ask if she had lost her mind.

"I know you're not feeding enough," she said, her tone calm but strong. "That's why you've been such a *pain* since we—"

"I'm still your superior," he cut in, his eyes pinning her down, "and you will *not* talk to me like this."

Kate snorted. She tried to project confidence, but of their own accord her hands clenched on the cooler. "I'm not part of the squad anymore. And neither are you."

"How dare you!"

Her eyes narrowed, and she shook her head. She remembered how strange she had found it that Daniel would leave the squad, and how easily he had agreed to accompany her and Simon. At the time, she had believed that seeing his Sire again was what had motivated Daniel, but now she had a feeling she might have been wrong. Daniel hadn't seemed all that happy to see Marc again, and he had jumped at the opportunity to leave Riverton and get away from him. It all added up to a conclusion that now seemed evident; she had noticed the changes, but she had been too distracted by the situation with Blake to realize the extent of what was going on with Daniel.

"You didn't decide to take a break, did you? They fired you."

Daniel didn't reply. He didn't need to. The way he gritted his teeth was answer enough.

"Don't you get it?" she asked, meeting his fiery gaze without flinching. "The soldiers of the squad started

complaining about your temper just weeks after you were turned. I was..." She swallowed and blinked away the memories of those dark months. "I was too hurt to take them seriously. They must have gone over both our heads and complained to your superiors."

Daniel's eyes glowed golden. "I do not have a temper!"

Kate winced. "You'd be a lot more convincing if you weren't shouting."

"I'm not—" He drew in a sharp breath and dropped his voice to a more reasonable level. "I'm not shouting."

"And you're not starving either. Right." She rolled her eyes at him. "How long have we known each other? Do you think I can't tell when there's something wrong with you? Marc can tell because he's your Sire. I can because I'm your friend."

She reached out and laid a hand on his shoulder. His body tensed even more, and for a moment, she was sure he would shake her off. He didn't, though, and turned his face away, facing the ruins rather than her. She rubbed his shoulder in what she hoped was a soothing manner.

"Why don't you feed?" she asked quietly.

He gave a tiny shake of his head. "I do feed."

Kate sighed. She squeezed his shoulder before dropping her hand. "Not enough, judging by how short-tempered you've become."

His head whipped to her again. The annoyance reflected in his eyes felt forced now, a last boisterous attack; he was losing this fight, and he knew it. "It has nothing to do—"

She interrupted him before he could finish the lie. "I've been friends with vampires. I'm in love with two of them. You think I don't know what effect hunger has on you guys?"

He wasn't ready for surrender yet. Rather than conceding she was right, he opened the door and stepped out of the car. He didn't go very far, and Kate stayed in her seat as she watched him lean against the hood, hands in his pockets and his gaze on the ruins in front of him. His entire demeanor spelled defeat, and while she was hopeful he finally might start seeing reason, she wished she hadn't known so well what defeat looked like. She had seen it too often in herself not to recognize it, though.

Almost two years earlier, she had let Blake's disappearance batter her down. She had let Marc push her away. She had started pretending that nothing was wrong with Daniel because she had already lost two lovers and couldn't bear the thought of alienating her closest friend, too. She was done, with all of it. She had lost some battles, she'd been hurt, but she intended to keep fighting for those she cared about—and those she loved.

Pulling a container of animal blood from the cooler, she stepped out of the car and joined Daniel. She said his name, drawing his attention to her as she held out the blood toward him. When he didn't take it, she considered her offering and faltered. "We can find a way to warm it if—"

Daniel shook his head. He sounded tired when he said, "You don't have to do this. Don't have to worry about this."

She frowned at him. "About what? Blood? It's you I worry about. I don't care what it is you eat. I don't care that you're

a vamp. You're still my friend. The big brother I never had. And if I need to kick your ass into seeing sense..." She was relieved when a corner of his mouth curled up into a faint smile, and returned the grin ruefully. "Well, you've done the same to me before. I owe you as much."

He sighed and finally reached for the container, inclining his head in thanks when he took it from her. "Fine, I'll drink it, just..." He gestured vaguely behind him with his free hand. "Go find Simon. I'll join you when I'm done."

Kate climbed onto the car hood, sitting down and resting her feet on the bumper. The metal was warm under her hands. "I'm not going anywhere until you're done. So go ahead and drink."

Daniel half turned to her. He still hadn't opened the container, and she was afraid he wouldn't feed if she left now.

"Kate, you don't have to watch this."

It was the hint of embarrassment in his voice that clued her in. "You think I care? It's food. Not the kind of food I put on my menu, but food just the same."

He turned to face her fully, brow furrowed in confusion. "You really mean that," he murmured, and continued to observe her as though he had never really seen her before. "After I was turned... so many soldiers looked at me like I had betrayed them somehow."

She shook her head and said gently, "Not me."

"No, not you," he agreed, but the edge of a blade hid in his words, ready to cut—himself or her, Kate wasn't sure. He finished with a quiet snort. "You barely even looked at me at all."

Kate drew her hands to her lap and clasped her knees. She dropped her gaze to the container in Daniel's hands. The plastic was clear, but with the lack of light, the blood seemed as black as ink. "You reminded me too much of Marc," she murmured. "And Blake. And thinking of them just *hurt*." She shrugged, wishing she could shake away the loneliness and pain of those months, wishing she hadn't been too blind to notice what was going on with Daniel. It was too late to change the past, but she could still take hold of her future. She looked up at him again and willed him to believe her words, for they were nothing but true. "It had nothing to do with your fangs."

Very slowly, Daniel nodded. He tore the lid off the container and brought it to his lips. Kate watched him feed without ever looking away. He probably needed more, she thought as he closed his eyes and tilted his head back to finish emptying the container to the last drop. She'd remind him to feed again later, after they saw Jen and got what they had come for.

Moments later, however, when she and Daniel walked to what turned out to be the improvised headquarters of what was left of the town's militia, she realized it might not be so easy.

"What do you mean she's gone?"

Simon shrugged and glanced at the men discussing a map of the town behind him. One was in uniform, the fabric stiffened by blood stains in several places, though only the stain on his sleeve, where a cut in the fabric revealed bandages underneath, seemed like it was his own blood. The

man arguing across the map wore a dress shirt, the long sleeves folded over his forearms. His head was bandaged, turban-like.

"From what they say," Simon muttered, "it sounds like the demons came into town just to get her."

The two men stopped talking and turned to Kate and Daniel. Now that she could see their faces, she recognized them. The man in the turban was the town's mayor; the other was an officer in the militia.

"Did you know they would come for her?" the officer asked, casting a hard look at Daniel and Kate. "When you came, you just said she worked with demons. You never said they'd come and tear us apart to get her back."

Daniel spoke in a placating tone that Kate doubted he could have managed before feeding. "We didn't know, I swear. If I had thought even for a second they'd attack you like this, I would have asked the squad to take custody of her and take her elsewhere."

The mayor scoffed, crossing his arms as he walked around the table to come stand in front of Daniel. "The squad? They don't care what happens to us. They say they don't have the manpower to come and help us close the breach here. They've been telling us for years to evacuate and send our people elsewhere. But we're not refugees. We can take care of our own."

"Not without walls, you can't," Kate said, meeting the man's gaze straight on. She didn't like to be so harsh, but she couldn't let him delude himself and put his people in harm's way. "All it would take is for the demons to return, and they'd

slaughter the rest of you in one night. You're lucky they didn't do that when they attacked."

"Luck has nothing to do with it," the officer said glumly. "They breached the walls and went straight for our headquarters. It was like they knew where it was. They retreated as soon as they had the prisoner. Whatever damage they did on the way was nothing more than a distraction."

"It wasn't the headquarters they knew how to find," Kate said, her gaze fleeting between Daniel and Simon. "It was her."

Daniel frowned and scratched at his cheek absently. "You mean, they have a way to—"

"Track her!" Simon finished. He was practically bouncing on the balls of his feet and spoke so fast his words were hard to follow. "One of the symbols on Blake's tattoo, it's pretty close to a sign that's used in old magic for localization spells. I don't use it because I don't need symbols, but I thought that was what it might be." His expression fell, the excitement draining out of his face. "But now we won't know because she's gone and maybe her tattoo was completely different."

"Is that why you came back?" the mayor asked. "To see her tattoo?" At Simon's nod, he shrugged. "We took pictures of it. We thought it'd help identify her in case someone else was looking for her."

Simon's excitement returned in a flash. "Pictures! That's great! Can I see them?"

The officer laid a hand on the mayor's arm before he could do more than nod.

"You're a mage, right?" he asked Simon. "Do you know how to close a breach? We've heard reports that the squad can—"

"Of course I can do that," Simon said, puffing up his chest a little. "I've closed seven of them already, four of them all by myself."

The mayor's eyes widened to the size of teacups, and Kate sighed, knowing what he would say before he did. It was the right thing to do, of course, but she couldn't help but resent having to spend more time away from Blake and Marc.

"You can have the pictures," the mayor said. "But only after you help us close the breach."

Two weeks trickled away, and despite Marc's best intentions, it happened again. And again. Having once obtained what he wanted, Blake seemed to believe that he only needed to take the first step for Marc to be willing. Every time it happened, Marc was left to wonder how much worse he was making the whole situation. Blake was reaching out to him, but that fact didn't negate the fear that was always present in his scent when he did—the fear that wasn't lessening as far as Marc could tell. How much of this was Blake actually wanting to be with Marc, and how much was his inability to get some relief at his own hand?

Blake wasn't the only one who was afraid, though. Marc was scared that, every time, it was becoming harder to remember that Blake wasn't fully healed yet. Beneath his Childe's familiar touch, he had trouble clinging to the present and its imperfections. He found himself remembering the past instead, and Blake's always-present willingness and

eagerness to sleep with Marc. How long until a bit of frottage became insufficient and Marc forced Blake into something he wasn't ready for, without even realizing it?

The only redeeming part of this whole mess was that he hadn't bitten Blake again, although he had come very close.

On the twelfth evening, Marc went to open the door after a sharp knock that sounded like Kate. His smile at seeing her faded when he noticed that she wasn't alone. Daniel and Simon were there, too, and while Marc had worried about Daniel, seeing Simon only stirred the feelings of guilt he felt. Months earlier, he had come within an inch of killing Simon when he had realized that the mage was touching Blake. What Marc had done since was no different, and he wasn't blind enough not to see it.

"What is he doing here?" he asked, staring hard at Simon, who flinched and let out a quiet, little sound. "I told you I didn't want him here."

Kate raised both her hands palms out in a placating gesture. "He had an idea about how to help Blake," she said quickly and glanced at Simon as though to tell him to talk, but nothing coherent came out of his mouth. She shook her head and looked back at Marc. "The tattoo on Blake's thigh? Simon compared it to Jen's and he thinks he knows what the symbols mean."

"He *thinks*?" Marc repeated, unconvinced, and crossed his arms over his chest. "Her tattoo wasn't even the same. How does that help—"

It was the drumming sound of Blake's heartbeat that stopped Marc in his tracks. He slowly turned on his heel to

find that Blake was just a few feet back, standing next to the sofa, wavering a little on his feet. He was holding Seneca to his chest, the blade still sheathed in its scabbard. His eyes were going back and forth between Marc and the three people at the door.

"Everything's all right, Blake." Marc dropped his arms to his sides and lowered his voice, chasing away the irritation he had been projecting before it could upset Blake even more. "You're fine. No one is going to hurt you."

It was the first time Blake had taken the sword out of his bedroom since the night Kate had given it to him. Marc wasn't sure whether it was a step forward or back that Blake seemed closer to being able and willing to defend himself from a perceived threat.

A few seconds passed; Blake's heartbeat slowly calmed down, but he didn't move.

"Do you want them to go?" Marc asked, tilting his head toward the door. "Or is it all right if I invite them in?"

Yet again, it was about choices—Blake's choices. Marc would have liked to talk to Kate, he probably needed to check on Daniel, but he wanted nothing to do with Simon. Whatever Blake decided, however, would be fine with him, just as long as he did make a choice, somehow.

It took several more seconds before Blake slowly stepped to the side and climbed onto his sofa, still holding his sword. He peered over the back, his face peeking out no further than his eyes as he watched the door intently. Hoping that he wasn't misinterpreting Blake's response, Marc opened the door more widely and invited them inside.

"Let's go to the kitchen," he suggested as he closed the door behind them.

Daniel led the way. Kate followed him closely, but her eyes were on Blake as she walked to the kitchen, and a quick glance was enough for Marc to see that Blake was looking right back at her. Simon was slower; he actually waved at Blake and would probably have tried talking to him, too, if Marc had not pushed lightly at his back, urging him on.

To Marc's surprise, when he walked in, Kate was pulling a container of blood from the fridge. Under his bemused gaze, she filled a mug and set it to warm in the insta-oven.

"Daniel ran out of blood two nights ago," she said when she turned around and noticed Marc's puzzlement.

Marc's eyebrows only climbed higher, his surprise now directed toward Daniel, who shrugged. "She's worse than you," he said with no trace of humor in his voice to soften the words.

Kate didn't seem bothered by the accusation, if it was one. She pulled the warm mug from the oven and set it in front of Daniel before leaning back against the counter behind him. Arms crossed, she nodded at Simon. "Tell him about the tattoo."

Swallowing hard, Simon raised his eyes to Marc. He had taken a seat at the head of the table, and for the first time Marc noticed that he had brought in the leather satchel in which he carried his magic supplies. It rested on his lap, open; Simon had pulled two pieces of paper from it and smoothed them flat on the table with the palm of his hand.

"This one... this one's Jen's," he said, pointing at the paper on the right. "And this one's Blake."

Marc glanced at the drawings and nodded briefly. It had been a long time since he had seen Jen's tattoo—a long time since he had seen Jen—but he remembered it quite well. Or rather, he thought as he took a second, closer look, he had thought he remembered it well. In his memory, though, the lines weren't as crisp, the designs not as clear. It wasn't a copy of Blake's, but he could see the similarities.

"This," Simon said, tracing the spiral with his finger, "is an old symbol for finding things that are lost. Mages who need a focus element for their localization spells sometimes use it, or something that looks like it. I don't need—"

"Simon," Kate interrupted, a sigh barely concealed behind the word. "I'm sure the short version will be enough for Marc."

Marc glanced at her. Arms crossed and leaning back against the counter, she projected calm and relaxation, but her neck was stiff, her shoulders tense. Marc wanted to go to her, take her in his arms and soothe her. He wasn't sure how he would be received if he did, though. Things between them weren't fully mended yet, as much as he wished they could have turned the clock back to their relationship almost two years earlier.

"The short version," Simon said, sounding disgusted. He always liked talking about magic and what he could do with it too much for Marc's taste. "All right. Jen said the demons can track her. And they found her in her jail. I think this tattoo is how they did it. It's like..." He gestured vaguely with both

hands. "Like a beacon. Blake's tattoo has the same symbol so—"

"So they could find him," Marc cut in. His chest felt tight, and he unconsciously moved closer to Simon, both his hands closing on the back of the free chair pushed in close to the table. The wood creaked between his hands. "They could find him here. Anywhere."

Simon's gaze dropped to Marc's hands before returning to his face. He nodded jerkily. "I think so, yes. And I think I can block the beacon. I think I'd better do it before they decide they want him back."

Marc wasn't sure what bothered him most in Simon's explanation: his hesitation when he talked about blocking the beacon, or his certainty that it was the right thing to do. Marc would decide whether it was, and no one else. "You *think* so," he sneered. "When did you start thinking so much?"

A bright blush crept up Simon's face at the rebuke. He looked down at the drawings in front of him, shoulders hunched.

"Marc, he has a point," Daniel intervened. "We don't know why they released Blake, and we don't know that they won't try to get him back."

Apparently comforted by Daniel's support, Simon tapped his finger to the drawing of Blake's tattoo. "That's not all. This symbol." He pointed at the three wavy lines that were left of the spiral on the diamond shape. "This is used sometimes by seers to interpret dreams."

Confused, Marc shook his head. "Dreams? What do dreams have to do with anything?"

"Dreams as in, seeing something that isn't there." Simon was gesturing again, his confidence restored. "Illusions. Jen said they made her see things that weren't real. They must have used magic for that, and it's got to be focused on this symbol." His finger brushed against it again before moving to the second piece of paper. "And it was part of Jen's tattoo, also. But then they changed it. Probably when she agreed to work with them."

Marc could now see how the design on Jen's tattoo was similar, with two straight lines bisecting the wavy lines. Without thinking, he looked up at Kate, meeting her gaze across the room. He wondered if she suspected why Blake was so scared when she was around. If magic had tricked Blake into believing she was the one hurting him, would Blake's mind ever heal enough to remember he loved her?

"This one," Simon continued, "it took me a while to figure out because it's not one symbol. It's two different ones." His finger traced a line that resembled a figure eight. "This is sometimes a symbol for good, or pleasure. And this..." He traced the other part of the symbol, a broken line like a lightning bolt. "Sometimes it means something bad, or evil. And sometimes—"

"Pain," Marc finished very quietly. He remembered suddenly the games Jen had enjoyed in bed, and understood why it was that Blake never lost his erection once he became hard. His discomfort and pain only added to his arousal.

"Yes." Simon nodded, then cleared his throat. There was the beginning of a blush in his cheeks. "I guess you can figure out what that does. And then there's this."

Marc looked at the table and watched him trace the last symbol on the drawing of Blake's tattoo. "Jen didn't have this one."

"I suppose you have a theory?" Marc asked sharply.

"I do, yes. Jen is still a vampire." Simon looked up at Marc, eyebrows raised questioningly. "A full vampire, I mean. Isn't she?"

Marc gave a sharp nod in reply.

"I've never seen this design before," Simon continued, his gaze returning to the drawing. "I don't know for sure what it means. But if you look at it..." He traced the circle and the four lines that, without touching, had the vague shape of an X. "It kind of looks like a man that was cut in two. See, if you add a line here..."

He pulled a pen from his bag and drew a thick line to connect the circle to the lines until the design looked like the crude stick-figure representation of a man.

"So what do you think it means?" Marc asked, frowning at the design.

Simon took in a deep breath. "I think it focuses the magic that makes Blake half human and half vampire. I think if I break through the magic he'll be himself again. A full vampire, I mean."

Neither Daniel nor Kate said a word. They must have heard Simon's theory before, Marc realized. This was why Kate was so tense: not worry as Marc had thought, but anticipation. Hope that it would all get better. That Simon would snap his fingers and Blake would be healed, just like that, mind and body whole again. The same hope she had exuded back in

Lakeview, the day after Blake's disappearance, when she had dragged Marc to Simon's room to ask him to reopen the breach. Marc remembered how crushed she had been when Simon had said he couldn't help. He remembered how much he had been hurt, too.

"You think," he said slowly, his eyes detailing the drawing once more. It was a nice story, but almost too good to believe. "You use that word a lot. What do you actually know?"

Simon flinched when their eyes met again, but he didn't look away. "I know I will do anything in my power to help Blake get better."

Marc's mouth twisted at the bitter memory—and the even more bitter taste of guilt. "Yeah, I think you proved that before."

When Simon swallowed hard, it was clear he understood what Marc was referring to.

"Marc, come on!" Kate's outburst drew his gaze to her. She pushed away from the counter and stepped forward so that she was now across the table from Marc. "Can't you see that if this works—"

"What if it doesn't?" Marc cut in. He hated to crush her hopes, but she would be hurt even more if no one pointed this out. "It's all just speculation. Blake has been through enough already. I don't want him to be experimented on."

Their eyes clashed for a few tense seconds. Marc wished they were alone. He would have told her that he wanted Blake back as much as she did—the real Blake, not the scarred shell they had been given back. That didn't mean,

however, that he could forget his first duty, which was to make sure Blake didn't get hurt any more. Marc had enough trouble justifying to himself the way he touched Blake; experimental magic, especially from Simon, was beyond what Marc could tolerate.

Kate's gaze broke away first, and she glanced at the kitchen door. Tilting her head toward it, she asked, "Does *he* have a say in it?"

Marc turned to the door and was surprised to find Blake standing there, half hidden behind the wall. The glint of metal caught his attention, and he realized that Blake was still holding his sword, hands clenched over the scabbard and the hilt resting against his collarbone. Blake all but jumped and started drawing back when he saw he had been noticed.

"Blake?" Marc tried to speak more calmly than he had a moment ago; he didn't want Blake to think he had done anything wrong by coming closer. "Do you want to come in? Are you hungry?"

With a slow blink, Blake slinked past the entrance. He kept close to the wall and slid further in until he was tucked in the corner against the fridge, the sword still tight to his chest. His eyes flitted between Marc and the other three around the table, but they seemed to return to Kate more frequently. She half turned to him, and Marc was suddenly afraid she'd try to get closer, only to upset Blake enough that he would draw his sword. He moved from behind the table and ostensibly went to stand between Blake and Kate.

"You guys should leave," he said, resisting the urge to cross his arms so he wouldn't appear too defensive. "I don't want him to get agitated while he's holding the sword."

Kate all but bristled. "But what about—"

"Not now. We can talk about it another time."

He knew she didn't like his answer, but that was the best she would get from him now, and she seemed to understand that. She inclined her head as she stepped forward, pausing in front of him just long enough to say, "I need to talk to you. It's been a long night, so I'll come back tomorrow."

She threw a sad, little smile at Blake before leaving the kitchen. As soon as she was out of sight, Marc could hear Blake's heart slowing down from its staccato rhythm.

Holding his leather bag to his chest, Simon stood up and came to a stop just out of arm's reach in front of Marc. "I want you to know this," he said, all but whispering. His scent held the peppery smell of nervousness, but for once he wasn't tripping over every other word. "I never intended to hurt him. All I wanted was to help. I didn't know what else to do. But now I do." His voice wavered a little, but he pushed on. "And you should let me try."

Marc didn't reply, and after a second Simon hurried away. Almost at once, Blake slipped out from behind Marc and approached the table. He didn't seem to notice Daniel, not even when Daniel pushed away from the table, the feet of his chair scrapping the floor. Like the other two, he came to stand by Marc.

"Let me guess," Marc said, rolling his eyes. "You're going to tell me that I should let Simon do it, too?"

"No. I'm going to say let Blake decide. Because behind the blank looks and the fear, I think he understands more than he lets on."

He turned back toward the table and Marc followed his gaze. Blake had taken the seat Simon had just vacated. With one hand, he continued to hold Seneca close; with the other, he was tracing the representation of his tattoo, very much like Simon had. All of a sudden, he picked up the pen and started scratching at the drawing, covering it in angry black lines, pushing so hard that the paper ripped in several places.

"Ask him," Daniel said and briefly squeezed Marc's shoulder before heading out.

As abruptly as he had picked it up, Blake dropped the pen. He turned a frightened look to Marc.

"It's all right," Marc said soothingly. "Everything's all right."

Slowly, the fear faded from Blake's eyes, replaced by a pleading light that was all too familiar. This time, though, rather than physical comfort, it seemed to beg for things to be made right again. Marc wished he hadn't been so scared to make them even worse.

No one had been hurt.

There had been anger and fear and raised voices, but no one had been hurt. Blake had gone to them, holding the sword like a charm since he couldn't make himself draw the blade quite yet, and it had been enough. They had calmed down. And no one had been hurt.

He had heard every word they had shared, but it was only when he saw the drawings on table that he realized they had

been talking about him. The drawing was the same that his Master had carved into his flesh, one design after the other, the tip of a knife followed by a paste that had burned his body and chanted words that had weakened his mind. For so long, it had been just two symbols on his skin, branding him as his Master's property. And then, just weeks before he had been put in the box, days before he had been sent away, his Master had added the last symbol. That one had hurt more than the surface of his skin. It had ripped him apart until he had been sure his chest would explode, his heart and the rest of him crumble to dust, like vampires did when they were killed. It had taken him a long time before he started getting used to his own heartbeat, and even now, at times, it sounded too loud, too fast, like beating drums urging him onward when he knew only pain waited ahead.

He hated that mark engraved on his skin, a reminder of pain even now that his Master had changed all the rules. Often, he had tried to erase it with his nails, scratch the dark lines and wash them away with his own blood. It had never worked. Seeing the same lines on the paper awoke something dark inside him, an anger that he couldn't suppress. He tried to erase the marks on the paper the way he couldn't do it on his own body, remembering only too late that anger wasn't allowed; anger only brought punishment and pain.

Pushing back the feeling, he looked at his Master, waited for reprimand. Instead, he received soothing words.

He stared at his Master and tried to understand. It was all so confusing. At times, he almost thought he could understand why everything had changed, why the rules were

so different, but the answer always remained just out of his reach, beyond a wall of confusion he couldn't manage to breach. It had started with the first mark on his skin, he remembered. That was when his mind had grown misty, when simple thought had become a challenge. When his Master had become different.

The mage had changed the drawing on the paper. He had said he could make things better.

Would Blake's Master change again—would he become who he had once been—if the mage did as he wanted? Was that why his Master had been so angry?

His Master sat at the table next to him and flipped the second piece of paper over, hiding the drawing. He pushed it closer to Blake has he asked, "Did you hear what Simon said? About the tattoo?"

Blake blinked and tried to remain very still. His heart was beating so fast, he could feel it fluttering inside his chest like a caged bird. He'd been caged for so long...

"I want you to get better," his Master continued. "But I'm not sure he can do it. He wants to help so much that he could be too optimistic. I'm afraid he'll just make everything worse."

A whimper started rising from Blake's chest, but it never came out as actual sound. He couldn't bear it if things got worse, if his Master returned to the old rules and punishments. He thought he had finally begun to understand what his Master wanted from him. If he was taken back to his old cell now, if Seneca was taken from him, if all the privileges he had earned—

But that was it, wasn't it? He hadn't earned anything. He had been given gifts. And what his Master gave him, his Master could take away. This rule was so evident it had never even needed to be stated.

His eyes closed tight, as tight as his hands on the scabbard of his sword. Blood was thumping in his ears, drowning every other sound. The room felt so small, the walls so tight around him, that he could hardly breathe. It had happened so many times since he had fallen through the door of light. He had spent so many hours—so many days—in that small, dark place in his mind, pleading for his Master to help him, receiving only laughter in reply.

At the first touch on his shoulder, he shuddered, tried to curl his body tighter around the sword. He had been so sure it would be taken from him, and now he must have failed whatever test had been placed upon him.

The hand didn't retreat. It didn't strike, either. Instead, it pulled and coaxed Blake to his feet, and even through the drumming of his own blood, Blake could hear soothing noises, senseless words that pushed him on, one step after the other, until suddenly there was enough air again for Blake's chest not to feel so tight anymore. Through slitted eyes, Blake looked upward toward the sky. He couldn't see the stars; heavy clouds hid them. They were there, though. They had to be. And if he just waited long enough, they would return.

When his Master let go, he sank down to the floor. Knees raised in front of himself as protection, he held the sword tight to his chest and kept his eyes up on the sky. He barely even felt his Master's hand sweeping through his hair, barely

heard the quiet words murmured in his hair. But he knew his Master was there, and despite everything, he was grateful.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter 22

Marc spent what was left of the night sitting next to Blake on the patio. Long after Blake's heart had calmed down, long after he had finally fallen asleep, Marc continued to run a hand through his Childe's hair. He missed touching Blake without the guilt that always followed more intimate caresses, missed the easy companionship they had once shared. He wanted it back more than anything, but he was also scared that Simon didn't know what he was doing. Marc didn't doubt Simon's intentions, but Simon had failed to think things through before, and Marc couldn't let that happen again.

Sunrise came too soon. Marc had to get back inside, but he was loath to awaken Blake when his sleep, for once, seemed free of nightmares. After hesitating for a while, he finally left Blake outside, curled on the hard cement, lips barely parted as he slept. He returned with a blanket and tucked it in around Blake's body before stepping inside again, and away from the rising sun

Remembering Kate's words, he pulled a chair from the kitchen and set it by the front door to wait for her. He hoped to let her in before she knocked and woke Blake. After his panic attack, Blake needed all the rest he could get. He also needed not to be confronted by anything that would upset him, and Kate definitely qualified.

His head resting against the wall, Marc kept his gaze on Blake. He could only see part of him, but it was enough to see the line drawn by the slowly rising sun illuminate his body.

Blake shifted when the sunlight reached his face, hiding beneath his arm, but he didn't wake up. As good as it was that Blake was finally getting some rest, Marc couldn't help but feel uneasy as he watched sunlight caress him the way no vampire could endure. He had rarely felt like he had lost his Childe as much as he did at that moment. Even when he had abandoned him to follow Jen, he had always held the thought that they would find each other again some day. Now though, Blake was truly beyond his reach. He never imagined it would hurt so much.

It was a little after midday when he heard the sound of steps just beyond the threshold. He quickly drew the door open, catching Kate by surprise, her hand raised to knock.

"Hey," he said very quietly as he stood, mindful of staying out of the sunlight pouring in through the door. "Blake's asleep."

She nodded, a look of understanding crossing her features. She walked in and closed the door behind her. The latch barely made a sound.

"Where is he?" she whispered, looking around the room.

Marc couldn't manage to answer. Every time she had come to this house, she had worn her squad clothes: black pants, top and jacket, heavy boots on her feet. Not this time, though. She was wearing flat shoes and a blue dress, the fabric a heavy knit in deference to the cool fall air. The fabric crossed over her chest in a shallow V that showed the necklace resting close to her throat: the same necklace she had worn, what felt like centuries earlier, when Blake had arranged for her and Marc to go out to dinner together.

Marc's throat tightened. He had forgotten what she looked like in a dress, forgotten how beautiful she was. How could he ever have forgotten this? How could he not have told her in almost two years?

"You're beautiful."

His quiet words drew her eyes to him and put a smile on her lips. She raised her hand toward him, and his own was there at once, their fingers easily entwining as though nothing had happened, as though it had all been a bad dream.

"I'm tired of missing you," she murmured as she stepped closer. "I want to live here. With you and Blake."

Marc's eyes widened, and he started shaking his head. "Kate, that's not a good idea. Blake—"

She raised her free hand and laid her fingers across his lips. "Blake is afraid of me. I know." Her voice trembled, but she pushed on. "Whatever illusions they made him see, I must have been in there. I must have... hurt him. I know."

Marc pressed a kiss to her fingers. "Not you," he murmured. "Just an image of you."

Nodding, she stepped a little closer still. Marc wrapped an arm around her waist, drawing her nearer, and she rested her cheek against his shoulder.

"And that's one reason why I think I should stay," she continued, still very quiet. "If I'm here all the time, he'll realize I'm not going to hurt him. So he'll stop being upset when I'm around. And then maybe..."

Her voice trailed off, and she didn't finish, but Marc knew what she meant. Maybe then the old Blake would resurface.

The one she had loved. The one who had loved her right back.

"Kate, I'm not sure—"

They both jumped, startled, at the sound of metal hitting the wooden floor. Kate pulled away and turned toward the noise. Blake had walked inside. He held his sword by the hilt, point down, and the scabbard sliding off and tumbling down had made that metallic noise. Blake's eyes were wide, and he was breathing fast as he took slow steps toward them. Alarmed, Marc stepped in front of Kate before Blake could reach her.

"Everything's fine," he said, raising both hands palm out toward Blake. "No one is going to hurt you. You *know* Kate loves you. She would never..."

Blake continued to advance, circling Marc, never taking his eyes off him. He held the sword with both hands now, raised in front of him defensively. It shook with each step he took. Marc looked at Kate and gestured for her to move back. When she did, Blake stepped between her and Marc. But rather than facing her, as Marc had expected and feared, Blake faced him. Feet planted solidly on the floor, he still looked and smelled scared, but the glint in his eyes was pure determination. Marc met Kate's eyes behind Blake and could see she was just as confused as he was. Why would Blake think he had to protect her from Marc?

Understanding dawned on Marc with an abruptness that was akin to a punch to the stomach. He had assumed, when Blake had written her name, that Kate had been the tormenter in Blake's dreams and captivity, and that was why

Blake couldn't be anywhere near her without fear taking hold of him again. But as he watched Blake stand there, afraid yet clearly ready to protect Kate, Marc realized he had been wrong. Kate hadn't hurt Blake. Rather, she was the one who had been hurt. And if it looked like Marc—Master, Blake had called him—had hurt her...

What role did that leave for Blake?

"I'm not going to hurt her, Blake," Marc said with as much calm as he could summon, "no more than I'm going to hurt you."

The declaration had no effect whatsoever on Blake.

"It's OK," Kate's voice rose from behind Blake, and Marc saw him flinch when she placed a careful hand on his shoulder. "It's all right, Blake. I trust Marc and so should you. He won't hurt us. Calm down, please."

She slid an arm around Blake's waist. The other followed his arm until her hand closed over his on the hilt of the sword. She slowly guided it back, then down, where it didn't threaten Marc anymore.

"That's it," she murmured, and Marc heard the quiet smack of her lips kissing the back of Blake's neck. "I'm not going to take Seneca, but I don't want you to hurt Marc. All right?"

Blake was trembling by now. He turned in her embrace to look at her, blinking very fast. Marc took the opportunity to pull back. He went to pick up the scabbard and brought it back to them. Blake was still staring at Kate as though not quite believing that he was in her arms. Marc could hardly believe it, either.

Blake was trembling against her, and Kate didn't know whether to cry or hold him closer. She wanted to do both. The last time she had touched him, he had completely broken down, and without Marc's arms holding him up, he would have fallen to his knees. This time, he was in her arms, and while he still looked a little frightened, he wasn't pulling away. On the contrary, he was the one who had stepped closer to her. And he had done so to protect her. That she had in no way needed protection didn't make the gesture any less touching.

"All right, Marc is going to slide the scabbard over Seneca now. Is that OK?"

Blake's only answer was a slow blink. She gave a small nod to Marc, who sheathed the sword. The whisper of metal rasping on metal caused Blake to turn back toward Marc. When the scabbard had slipped down to the hilt, Kate guided the sword closer to Blake. Her fingers entwined with those of his right hand, lifting it to close over the scabbard instead of the hilt. His left hand let go, and he brought the sword closer to his chest, the same way he had held it the previous night, as though cradling a shield.

"That's better," Kate crooned and slipped her hand into his. "We don't want to hurt Marc or anyone else. Come on, why don't we sit down?"

She used her hold on his hand to guide him to the sofa. He sat down with his back to the armrest, his eyes going back and forth between her and Marc. Remembering what Marc had said before about the sofa being Blake's, Kate tried to let go so she could sit in the armchair, but Blake held on to her.

"Can I sit with you, then?" she asked, and while Blake didn't answer, he kept her hand in his until she sat down next to him, almost—but not quite—close enough to touch. Kate looked up then, and her happiness faded when she saw Marc's expression. He had let himself fall in the armchair and was staring at them, his pain all too transparent.

"Marc?"

He gave a start when she said his name and blinked, meeting her eyes with something that looked like an apology. "I was wrong," he said with a small, tight smile. "I thought he was afraid of you, but he was only afraid of seeing you hurt."

She shrugged and smiled back. "I believed the same thing. And it's not like you could have known."

A shadow crossed his face and darkened his eyes enough that Kate's smile wavered. "What is it?"

Marc slowly shook his head. "I should have known. I should have guessed. He's been terrified of me since the first day. And when I asked him if he knew who I was..."

Another shake of his head caused Kate to frown. "What did he say?"

Rather than answering, Marc pushed himself to his feet. Kate could feel Blake shivering at her side, his entire body tensing as though preparing for an attack. Marc had to have noticed as well because he paused very briefly and winced before walking away. Kate watched him go to the end of the hallway that led, she supposed, to the bedrooms. He returned moments later with a slim notebook in his hand. He opened it on the last page and handed it to her.

"Remember when you suggested that I try to have him write out his answers?"

He leaned in to point at the first line, where a word had been crossed out. Blake shifted next to Kate, clearly uncomfortable that Marc was so close. Marc started drawing back, but Kate caught his hand, then his gaze.

"Stay close to us," she whispered, and after a beat Marc nodded.

Looking down at the notebook, Kate frowned and tried to decipher the crossed-out word. "What does it say?"

Marc's hand tightened on hers, and Kate had to hide a wince so as not to alarm Blake.

"Master," Marc said, and even though his voice was very quiet, Kate could hear the roughness behind the word. Blake must have heard it, too, because he shifted again, and this time there was no mistaking the movement; he was trying to pull away.

Looking up at Marc, Kate forced a smile to her lips despite the sadness she felt. She wanted Blake to see she wasn't afraid of Marc, and that he shouldn't be, either. She drew Marc's hand up to her mouth and kissed his knuckles.

"*Marc*," she said, louder than she might have at any other time when he was standing so close to her, "I'd like you to draw a chair and sit with me and Blake. Would that be OK?"

He glanced at Blake before answering. "That would be nice."

He sounded grateful and pulled her hand to his lips to reciprocate the soft kiss. After letting go, he went to pick up the armchair and set it just in front of the sofa, close enough

that when he sat down his leg brushed against Kate's. She slipped her shoe off and pressed her foot against his. As meager comfort as the touch was, the look he gave her was pure gratitude.

She returned her eyes to the notebook, and the next word made her smile. She held out the notebook so that it was between the three of them and pointed at the page.

"He remembered your name!"

Marc's half-smile was heartbreaking. "He didn't write that. I did."

"Oh." Kate's shoulders slumped. She continued to read, hoping to find more reasons to hope. What she found instead were words of pain repeated over and over, the paper ripped beneath them. Her throat tightened.

"I thought," Marc said slowly, as though each word cost him, "that he meant you had hurt him. I should have figured it out. He meant that I—"

"Not you," she cut in. "You didn't hurt him."

"I know that." His eyes turned to Blake, who was looking at his hands, clutched on the sword. "I'm not sure *he* does."

She turned the notebook page, revealing line after line of two words repeated over an entire page. *Marc* and *Master*. She wondered what Blake had been trying to do by writing these words over and over. Was he trying to figure out who Marc was? Or to convince himself that Marc wasn't the master who had hurt him, maybe?

Pulling free the pen that was clipped to the notebook cover, she handed it to Blake and opened the notebook to a fresh page. He hesitated for a moment, apparently unwilling

to let go of the sword, but finally tucked it between the back of the sofa and his body. He took the notebook and pen with cautious hands, throwing Marc a wary look as though he expected a reprimand. Marc didn't say a word, but he gritted his teeth, clearly unhappy. Kate reached out and rubbed her hand over his shoulder before looking back at Blake.

"Blake? Do you know who he is?" she asked, her head tilted toward Marc.

A small frown pulled at Blake's brow, and Kate wondered if he understood what she was asking.

"What is my name?" Marc asked, his voice blank of any emotion. "Write my name."

Kate held her breath as Blake looked down at the notebook and the slow letters he was tracing. She started smiling when he wrote Marc's name, but her smile faded when he added a question mark after it, like he still wasn't sure and was afraid to make a mistake.

"Yes," Marc sighed. "Yes, Marc. I'm your Sire. Not your... not your master. You do understand the difference, right?"

Blake's gaze returned to the notebook. Kate thought for a moment that he would answer in writing, but instead he traced over the letters of Marc's name.

"Do you understand why you're confused about that?" Marc pushed on. "Why you think I'm... someone else?"

Kate would have given anything for Blake to respond in any way

"It's the tattoo," Marc explained, voice tight and mouth twisted unhappily. "I know you must have heard what Simon said. The tattoo makes you believe things that are not true."

His hand rose from where it rested on his knee, twitched toward Blake's thigh, but returned to his knee without making contact. Kate rested her hand over his and squeezed it lightly.

"Marc never hurt me," she said when she noticed that Blake was watching their hands, his frown yet again giving away his confusion. "And he never hurt you, either. Someone else did. Someone who looked like him hurt someone who looked like me. Do you understand?" Her throat felt raw, as though she had been talking for hours. "Please Blake, tell me you understand."

Blake blinked, then lowered his eyes to the notebook in his lap. The pen was pressing hard enough on the paper to leave an imprint, but Blake didn't write anything.

"It wasn't me," Marc said, his voice stronger now. "You know it wasn't, right? They wanted you to believe—"

Marc fell silent when the pen started moving on the paper, words forming very fast, the script even less tidy than it had been so far.

looked like you sounded like you felt like you tasted like you acted

"No!"

Marc's angry exclamation startled Blake so much that the pen drew a wild line on the page. Wide, frightened eyes looked up at Marc. Kate squeezed Marc's hand and said his name quietly, hoping he would calm down before he could upset Blake, but while the volume of his voice dropped, the words were still close to a growl when he said, "Don't you dare say that... that thing acted like me! You're my Childe. I take care of you, I don't hurt—"

He stopped abruptly again, but this time Blake wasn't writing anything. All he did was flex the fingers of his left hand as he peered at it, frowning. Kate wasn't sure why Marc suddenly looked like he'd just been punched.

"I had to," Marc said quietly, and now he sounded as though he were pleading. "I had to fix your hands so you could feed and write and touch yourself."

The last words startled Kate, and she turned a questioning glance to Marc, but he didn't notice. His entire attention remained focused on Blake. The tip of the pen danced on the page, leaving faint marks behind but no legible words. Blake's look of concentration turned into one of intense frustration, and he shook his head, looking past Marc and toward the fireplace behind him. The fire was long dead, leaving only ashes behind. Kate was afraid, all of a sudden, that Blake's mind was the same, that only traces of him remained, trapped in the body that had once been a man she loved but crumbling to nothing whenever prodded. She blinked very fast, trying to chase away the tears that were rising to her eyes. Marc whispered her name in a heartbroken voice, but it did nothing to help her regain her composure. She stood, intending to go to the kitchen and pour herself a glass of water, but Marc caught her hand and held it tight, pulling her close to him. Sitting up, he wrapped both arms around her and hugged her, his cheek pressed to her stomach. Kate closed her eyes tight and stroked his shoulder, offering both thanks and comfort.

They remained like that for a few seconds. Marc pulled away first, although he didn't let go, and Kate knew why at

once. Behind her, the quiet scratching of the pen on paper was unmistakable. She slowly turned toward Blake and held her breath as she read upside-down the words he had scribbled in furious, uneven lines.

FIX ME

Kate's throat tightened. She couldn't have said a word to save her own life, but it was Marc that Blake was staring at, eyes dark and wild.

Marc shook his head. "I'm trying," he said quietly. "That's all I've been trying to do for months."

Blake looked at the notebook again, but as before he seemed unable to write anything, and the pen only made stray marks on the page. His every gesture betraying his frustration, he closed the notebook and dropped it beside him, keeping the pen in his hand. Before either Marc or Kate could say anything or try to calm him down, he scrambled off the sofa and all but ran out of the room.

"Should we..." Kate started, but already Marc was standing. His hand slipped into hers, and they followed Blake to the kitchen. At first Kate couldn't see him, but when Marc muttered a quiet curse and let go of her hand to rush to the back of the room, she realized Blake was on the floor, sitting with his back to the wall, his legs stretched out in front of him. In the few seconds it had taken them to follow him, he had shoved his sweatpants and boxers down, exposing the tattoo on his thigh, and had tried to write over the dark lines. The pen didn't work so well on skin, though, and under Kate's horrified gaze he pressed harder into his own flesh, drawing lines of blood over the tattoo.

"Blake, don't!" she cried out, even as Marc reached him and dropped to one knee by his side. He closed his fingers over Blake's wrist, stopping his hand before he could hurt himself any further.

Her eyes filling with tears, Kate pressed a hand to her mouth to stop the whimper she could feel rising from deep in her chest. Her knees were threatening to cave in, and she let herself fall into the closest chair. Marc pulled the pen from Blake's clenched fingers and threw it across the room.

"Why..." She swallowed hard and dropped her hand before she started over. "Why would he do this?"

Blake shut his eyes and banged his head lightly against the wall behind him. His entire body was shaking.

"Because I told him to," Marc murmured. He laid a hand at the back of Blake's head and pulled him close. "I told him that if he wanted something, he had to get it for himself."

He pried a piece of crumpled paper from Blake's left hand and handed it out to Kate without even looking at it. Her hand trembling a little, she took the paper and smoothed it out with her fingers, revealing the drawing of Blake's tattoo that Simon had showed Marc the night before.

"Is this what you want?" Marc asked, whispering the words against Blake's temple. "You want Simon to try his magic trick on the tattoo?"

Blake's nod was so tiny that, for a moment, Kate was sure she had imagined it. But then he nodded again, the gesture a little larger this time.

"I'll go get Simon," Kate said, and somehow the words sounded like a question.

Marc closed his eyes and pressed his lips to Blake's hair. "All right," he whispered. "Get him. Get him now."

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter 23

As the front door closed with a soft metallic clank, Marc felt Blake shudder against him.

"She'll be back," he murmured, purposefully keeping his voice low so he wouldn't start growling in anger. "She's going to get Simon, and they'll come back to try and help you."

Blake slowly calmed down, the scent of despair that had been wrapped so tightly around him ever since he had written down "Fix me" in the notebook fading enough that the smell of blood camouflaged it. Marc clenched his teeth to stop the few choice words that were ready to roll off his tongue. As scared, as angry as he had been and still was, he realized that blaming Blake for hurting himself wouldn't help anything now. He didn't want to do more damage with mere words than Blake had done with that pen.

Pulling away from Blake, Marc sat back on his heels and took a closer look at Blake's thigh. The blood had dried already, leaving dark trails that would flake away at the smallest touch. The scratches didn't look as bad as he had first feared.

"Stay here," he said, pressing his hand on Blake's shoulder for a second or two. "Don't move."

Getting to his feet, he looked down at Blake just long enough to assure himself that Blake wasn't about to hurt himself further. When Blake's hands remained on the floor on either side of him, Marc walked over to the kitchen counter and pulled a clean hand towel from the drawer. He wet a

corner of it at the sink and returned to Blake, kneeling next to him once more. Keeping his movements controlled and as gentle as possible, he dabbed at the scratches, cleaning away the blood. Blake started shifting under his touch. At first, Marc thought he was reacting to pain and trying to pull away. Soon, however, Marc realized that Blake's cock, left bare when he had shoved down his sweatpants and boxers, was filling up with blood and hardening.

Was it his touch, he wondered, that was such a turn on for Blake? He tried not to touch Blake unless Blake came to him for sexual release; he didn't *dare* touch him, afraid he wouldn't be able to stop if he did, afraid he would forget that Blake didn't know how to refuse advances anymore. He didn't even appear to know he could refuse them.

Maybe it wasn't his touch, though. If Simon was right, the magic imbued in the tattoo blurred the lines between what felt good and what didn't. Could it be that it was transforming the pain of the scratches and their cleaning into pleasure? Was magic transforming any pain into a welcome experience for Blake? It would explain why spending so much time kneeling never did anything other than increase Blake's arousal. If it was the case, Marc had only made matters worse whenever he had ignored Blake's need. It felt like every decision he had made to help Blake had been the wrong one. He only hoped that he wasn't wrong again in letting Simon try his magic on Blake.

Blake's eyes opened again, and they were now focused on Marc, who pointedly refused to meet his gaze. Blake shifted again, and as he did so, his cock brushed against Marc's

wrist. Marc drew back his hand. The scratches were as clean as they would get.

"Up you go," he said as he got to his feet. He held his hand out to Blake, who took it gingerly and allowed Marc to pull him up. His cock bobbed in front of him as though seeking fingers that would caress it. Marc clenched his hands, then forced them open again so he could tug Blake's underwear and pants up, carefully sliding them over Blake's cock. "Sit down at the table. I'll warm up some blood for you so those scratches will heal faster."

He turned to the fridge and pulled a blood container out. He filled two mugs and warmed them in the insta-oven, keeping his back to Blake the entire time and trying to will his erection away. After all that had happened, the mixed scents of Blake's blood and lust were still an aphrodisiac to his senses, but now was not the time to indulge. He had recovered some control over his own body by the time he turned back to the table—or so he thought until he saw that Blake was seated, as Marc had requested, but he had pushed the sweatpants and boxers down his legs again, leaving his cock proudly exposed as he sat sideways on the chair.

Marc ignored the pleading in his eyes as he approached Blake, one mug in each hand, and set one on the table in front of Blake. He was rather proud of himself for not showing any reaction, and even prouder for not spilling any blood.

"Drink," he said, his voice wavering a little, and demonstrated by bringing the mug to his lips. By the time he had finished emptying it, Blake still hadn't touched his own

mug. His eyes were set on Marc, unblinking, the pupils so dilated that they left only a thin rim of brown.

"Come on," Marc sighed, setting his mug down on the table and reaching for Blake's. "You haven't had any blood since..."

Before he could grab the second mug, Blake's fingers curled around his hand, the touch tentative and fleeting. Marc tried to pull free, but surprisingly enough, Blake held on, his hesitation disappearing as he pulled Marc's hand toward his face. Marc was shocked when Blake led his fingers to rest against his lips. He held very still as Blake kissed his fingers, then his palm, before pulling Marc's hand closer so that it cupped his cheek.

The gesture caused Marc's throat to tighten painfully. Before all this had started, he had sometimes caught sight of Blake touching Kate like this, with a gentleness that betrayed just how much he loved her. He and Blake had never had much use for these kinds of gestures, though, or the tender words that always seemed to accompany them. At that moment, however, words seemed necessary. There were things that Marc couldn't, wouldn't say, but he could still try to comfort Blake.

"It's OK," he murmured, his thumb idly stroking Blake's cheek. "Everything will be OK, Childe."

He wasn't too sure how he ended up kneeling on the floor between Blake's parted legs. Both his hands now framed Blake's face, fingers threaded in his hair as Marc drew him down. The time for soft gestures and words had passed, and it was with his full force that Marc pressed his mouth to

Blake's and coaxed his lips open. He pushed his tongue in without finesse and drew it back as Blake's tongue tentatively touched it, repeating the motions, using his tongue to fuck Blake's mouth the same way he craved to fuck his body. He couldn't, though, or so he tried to remember even as he willingly forgot everything else. Not until Blake was free of the invisible bonds that still held him, not until he could say, in no uncertain terms, that he wanted it, wanted Marc, truly and without reserve.

With the confidence that came from familiarity, one of his hands slid down Blake's torso and over his cock, wrapping around the base just tight enough to make Blake gasp against Marc's mouth. There was no teasing, no taking it slow; it was difficult enough for Marc not to join in and receive his own pleasure from the act. Making it last too long would have broken his resolve to do this for Blake, and only Blake.

Ignorant of this, Blake started reaching down for the fastenings of Marc's pants, but Marc broke off the kiss and stopped him.

"None of that, now," he said in a quiet rumble.

Blake complied immediately, his hands resting on his thighs. His breathing was already faster, his heart reaching the now-familiar rhythm that told Marc exactly how close he was to pleasure. Marc's tempo only accelerated as he leaned forward to place small, gentle bites over Blake's chest. Blood pulsed just below the slightly salted skin, so close and tantalizing that it was driving him half mad with want. It was all Marc could do to stop himself from plunging into Blake, fangs, cock, or both.

It was over with the sudden snap of Blake's hips, his back arching away from the chair as he let out a noise, half gasp, half moan, that made Marc's cock throb even more painfully within the confines of his pants.

As he watched Blake slowly regain control of his breathing, Marc mindlessly brought his fingers to his lips and licked them clean. It wasn't the same as tasting Blake's blood, but it would have to do.

The action seemed to captivate Blake, and his eyes had such hunger in them that Marc offered him one finger tipped in pearly-white. Blake blinked and leaned forward very slowly. He flicked his tongue out at Marc's finger, cleaning it with tiny licks that caused Marc to shiver. He bit down on the inside of his cheek to hold back the moan that wanted to escape his lips. After a few seconds, it was just too much to endure, and Marc pulled his hand away.

"All right," he said after clearing his throat. "Kate and Simon will be here soon. I know you always liked showing off, but let's clean you up. OK?"

Without waiting for an answer he knew wouldn't come, he picked up the towel he had used to clean the blood, and this time used it to wipe away Blake's semen. Then he tugged Blake's clothes up his legs again, coaxing Blake up to slide them over his hips.

"Good," he murmured as he stood. "Very good. Now drink your blood."

To Marc's surprise, Blake did as he was told, draining the entire mug rather than stopping halfway through as he usually did. Praising him again, Marc led him back to the

living room, a hand barely resting at the small of his back. Blake easily climbed on the sofa, his hands immediately seeking the sword he had left there. Marc winced, and his fingers twitched toward the weapon. He didn't take it from Blake, though, balancing his fear that Blake might hurt himself again with the need not to break his trust. Pulling the armchair back in its usual place, he sat down, hands clenched on the armrests, and tried to will his cock down before Kate returned with Simon.

His Master had licked Blake's come off his fingers.

The sheer improbability of it was only one more proof that something had changed. Blake only wished he could have figured it out.

At times, Blake's head felt clearer, and he thought he could understand what was happening and why it all seemed so different. Somehow, the drawing on his thigh felt like it was linked to all of it; it tingled sometimes, almost itched, like something just beneath his skin wanted to crawl out. At other moments, Blake could only wonder why his Master was acting so strangely. Also, why Kate was touching his Master as though they were friends or lovers, as though he had never hurt her to hurt Blake.

Sometimes, it all felt like that old, faded, forgotten dream Blake had once had, that dream where Master had another name, and he touched Blake and Kate whenever he wanted to—and allowed Blake and Kate to touch him back however they pleased. A dream in which sometimes his Master kissed him for hours, touched Blake's cock to give him pleasure, and

smiled at him when he came. A dream in which Blake did the same to him because he *wanted* to.

Was he dreaming now?

He had to be. Nowhere but in a dream would his Master lick Blake's come off his fingers.

Blake didn't have nice dreams very often, and this one was so nice that Blake wanted to push it further. He wanted to taste come, too. He wanted to touch his dream-Master however he pleased. With tentative fingers first, then his lips, then his tongue and mouth. He wanted his dream-Master to let him do anything he wanted.

But he hadn't been good enough yet. His Master didn't punish him for reaching for him, but he didn't let Blake touch him either. Maybe he would another time, if Blake continued to be good.

Regardless, it truly was the nicest dream Blake had had in a very long time.

Simon wasn't at the hotel when Kate returned, and she was cursing under her breath as she went back out and started looking for him through the town. She finally found him in the central square, seated on the edge of a fountain that had long ago run dry. A small semi-circle of children stood in front of him, and they clapped and laughed as he conjured colored sparks out of thin air for them. He stood abruptly when she approached, his grin transforming into a slightly guilty expression.

"I was just—"

Kate didn't let him finish. If he wanted to show off what he could do with magic to amuse a few children, she really didn't care, not as long as he was ready to come with her now.

"Marc gave his OK," she said quickly. "He wants you to do the spell now."

His eyes widened, although Kate couldn't have said if it was in surprise or excitement. "I need—"

"Your supplies?" She slipped the strap of his leather satchel off her shoulder and handed the bag to him. "Got them. Anything else?"

His Adam's apple bobbed up and down as he clutched the bag to his chest. The children were looking at them curiously, and Kate grabbed his arm, pulling him forward.

"No—nothing else, no," he mumbled. "But I thought I'd have more time to prepare. Marc didn't look like he wanted me to do it yesterday."

Kate stopped abruptly, her hand on Simon's arm forcing him to do the same. She gave him a concerned look. "Do you *need* more time to prepare?" she asked, trying to hide her worry. "Yesterday you said you knew what to do."

"I said I *think* I know what to do." He looked down at his feet and kicked a small rock. "Maybe I should—"

"Oh, no," Kate cut in, shaking her head. "No 'maybe' and no 'should.' You always say you can do anything with magic; now's the time to prove it."

His eyes found hers again. They were filled with anguish. "What if I mess up?" he murmured. "What if I make things worse? I don't want to hurt Blake."

"Just last night you were clamoring for Marc to let you do it!" Kate's exasperation was ringing fully through her words, and she tried to calm down. "What changed your mind?"

"I didn't change my mind," he said with a small shrug. "I'm just... scared."

In the past, Simon's fear had often been an issue and stopped him from helping the squad. Kate had lost count of how many times she had needed to talk to Simon and encourage him to be braver, stronger. Not this time, though.

"We're all scared," she said gently. "You, me, Marc, and most of all Blake. But you're the only one who can help him, and I know you'll do everything you can."

Simon frowned at her words. "Of course I will."

She nodded. "Then let's go. They're waiting for us."

All the way back to Marc's house, Simon muttered under his breath. At first, Kate tried to understand what he was saying, but she soon realized he was going through a list of spell ingredients, and she stopped listening. He was good at what he did—he was much better than good—but she had no talent for magic, and little interest in it.

Her mind drifted back to everything that had happened earlier. All she had wanted was to talk to Marc, make him see how much she missed him and Blake, convince him, maybe, to let her live with them, or at least let her visit more often. She had never expected that so much would come to light, that she would get to hold Blake in her arms, that she would comfort him and Marc alike. She also had not expected, after the way he had reacted the previous night, that Marc would agree to let Simon try his magic on Blake's tattoo.

She took a deep breath before knocking on the door just once. Marc opened immediately and ushered her and Simon inside with a tense smile.

"How is he?" she whispered, glancing at the sofa. Blake was peeking from behind the cushions.

"Calmer," Marc replied after a beat. He didn't quite meet her eyes and looked at Simon instead. "Can you do this?" he asked. "And don't tell me that you *think* you can."

Simon gulped. "I'll do my best."

The words that came out of Marc's mouth were practically a growl. "That's not enough, Simon. Tell me—"

"You want me to lie?" Simon cut in, a bead of sweat beading on his forehead. "I'm not *sure* it will work. If I was, I wouldn't have asked for your opinion, I'd have just done it. But I don't see why it wouldn't work. And I'll do my best. I can't tell you anything better than this."

Kate rested a hand on Marc's arm and rubbed it gently. She could feel the tension draining out of him.

"I know you'll do your best," he muttered. "I'm just... worried."

"I know. I'm worried, too. But we'll know right away if it works or not." Simon hoisted his bag a little higher in front of him. "I need to mix a few things before I do the actual spell. Kitchen?"

"Yes, go ahead. Do you need anything?"

Simon started shaking his head, but seemed to change his mind. "I'll need to see the tattoo when I start so..." He winced and finished very quietly. "Have him undress?"

Marc nodded shallowly, his face betraying nothing of what he thought. "All right. Can he stay on the sofa? He feels safe there."

"Sure. That works." Simon tilted his head toward the kitchen. "I'll just need a few minutes."

It was only when Marc covered her hand on his arm that Kate realized she was still holding on to him.

"You're all right?" he asked with a small frown.

She tried to smile. "Just nervous. We might get our Blake back in just a little while. That'd be—"

Marc placed two fingers across her lips. "We already have our Blake back," he whispered. "He just doesn't remember we're his as much as he's ours."

Smiling was difficult, but Kate managed to pull it off. Stepping closer to him, she gave him a brief hug. When she pulled back, she realized that Blake was still watching them, and wondered what he had understood of their exchange. Marc pressed a kiss to her temple before walking over to the sofa. Kate watched from a few feet away as he helped Blake out of his sweatpants, and fumbled for a moment as Blake tried to slide off his boxers as well.

"No, you're keeping these on," Marc said very fast.

Something passed between him and Blake, a look that Kate wasn't too sure how to interpret. Seconds later, Marc had rolled up the edge of the boxers, exposing the tattoo while preserving Blake's modesty. Blake looked down at his thigh and traced the tattoo with his fingertip before seeking Marc's eyes again.

"I hope you remember," Marc murmured. "I hope you remember everything."

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter 24

Blake opened his eyes and blinked several times, trying to focus his blurry vision. When the world finally cleared around him, he hissed when he saw his Master inches from him. Without a second thought, he struck, kicking and slamming his right foot in the middle of his Master's chest. The gesture proved startlingly painful as the discomfort in his thigh became outright pain; it was also strangely ineffective. The bastard barely let out a quiet gasp when he was pushed back. Louder was the exclamation next to him.

"Blake!"

The voice—known, cherished—drew Blake's eyes to Kate. She was standing next to their Master. The bastard was holding on to her hand to stop her from running away. He always liked to have her there whenever he invented some kind of new torture for Blake, as a reminder that, if Blake made too much of a nuisance of himself, she would be the one paying the price.

Blake sat up on the sofa—sofa? When had they put a sofa in his cell?—pushing himself up with his hands. The left one met metal, and even after all this time he recognized the feel of Seneca as his fingers curled over the hilt. He drew the sword up as he scrambled to his feet, passing it to his right hand without thinking, tearing off the scabbard just as mindlessly. His Master pulled back, drawing Kate along, pushing her behind him. At the same moment, Blake noticed for the first time the man standing at the foot of the sofa,

eyes full of surprise and fear. He looked vaguely familiar, but Blake didn't have time to wonder where he might have seen him before. Only one thing mattered: for the first time in more years than he could remember, Blake had a weapon. For the first time, he had a chance to fight for his freedom.

His freedom, and Kate's.

Adjusting his stance to his center of balance, he took a step forward and opened his mouth to tell his Master the games were over, and to let Kate go.

No sound came out of his throat.

Startled, he frowned and raised a hand to his neck. Taking advantage of Blake's distraction, his Master lashed out, kicking his foot high, hitting Blake's hand full on and causing him to drop the sword. It clattered on the wooden floor—wooden? The floor in his cell was stone, with sharp ridges that cut the soles of his feet, knees, and hands when he was made to crawl. Where was he? Once more, his Master used Blake's confusion against him. Finally letting go of Kate, he rushed to the sword and pushed it farther away, his bare foot hitting the hilt—bare foot? His Master always wore heavy boots tipped in metal, the better to kick Blake into submission.

Questions just rolled over Blake's mind, threatening to overwhelm him. He pushed them back and focused on Kate, just steps away from him, finally free of their Master's clutches. Free, but for how long? He had to get her out of there. Blake rushed to her, his eyes already searching for an escape. He didn't know where he was; it didn't look like the fortress where he had been brought, so long ago. The French windows at Kate's back seemed familiar, though, and

somehow Blake knew they led to freedom. He grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the doors. Her fingers closed over his, tight and warm, and for a second Blake let himself hope that this was the end of the nightmare.

His hope crumbled to nothing when Kate pulled back, stopping him before he could open the doors. He turned to look at her, feeling confused and betrayed. Their Master was coming back for them. Couldn't she see that this was their chance?

"You can't go out, you'll burn!"

He frowned and shook his head. Why would he burn? The sun was harmless to him in this dimension. Didn't she know?

Their Master's hand rested on her shoulder. Instead of pulling away from him, she leaned back into him, as though seeking his comfort. Blinking wildly, Blake pulled his hand free of hers. He'd taken too long. She had yielded. She was theirs now, too, like his Master. She was lost to him. He wanted to wail in anger and grief, but still no sound came out of his throat.

"You need to calm down," His Master said, voice as calm as the hand he slowly raised toward Blake. "Everything's going to be all right."

Refusing to listen to yet more lies, Blake lunged to the side, startling the other man who scurried back. There was a passageway there, and maybe Blake would find a way out.

He rushed into the room, and was quickly disappointed to realize it was a kitchen, with no exit but boarded-up windows and the doorless entry he had just crossed. He could hear his Master closing in, Kate right alongside him. The anger boiled

inside of Blake, bubbling over. He picked up one of the wooden chairs and threw it as hard as he could against the wall. It broke into pieces. Blake nearly stumbled in his haste to go and pick up the sharpest bit he could find. When he turned around, his hand clenched over the improvised stake hard enough to hurt, his Master was just feet away, both hands raised in front of him as though to calm Blake down.

With a scream that came out no louder than a whisper and left his throat raw and aching, Blake lunged at him, the stake raised high and aiming for his heart. His Master started back, eyes satisfyingly wide in fear. His raised hands warded off the blow. Caught in his momentum, Blake crashed into him. They tumbled to the floor and struggled for possession of the stake. Once again, Blake was stunned at finding himself weak, too weak, but he didn't give up and kept trying to stake his Master after dreaming of it so many times.

"Don't hurt him!" Kate cried out somewhere behind them, and Blake couldn't have said whom she was talking to.

"Blake! Stop it!"

It was his name on his Master's lips, more than anything else, that made him hesitate. Ever since this nightmare had begun, his Master had never called him anything other than 'boy' or 'slave,' depending on his mood and Blake's attitude.

In two seconds, it was over. The stake was clattering on the other side of the room, Blake's hands and legs were pinned under his Master' own, and all he could do was stare at the face inches from his and wait for the punishment that was bound to start any time now.

Yet, his Master didn't move.

"Blake, you've got to think hard and try to remember where you are and who I am," his Master said at last. His voice didn't hold the contempt or gloating that usually followed Blake's failed attempts at rebellion. Rather, it was pleading. It sounded *wrong* to hear this voice plead. Unnatural. And Blake could only wonder what the trap was, this time.

It didn't matter, though, because the last thing Blake wanted to do was remember. All that mattered as far as he was concerned was that one day he would be free; either he would escape or he would die. He wouldn't yield, not truly, not any more than he already had. Nothing that happened before that was worth remembering.

He didn't want to remember how he had been pushed through the breach at the last battle near Lakeview.

He didn't want to remember standing on the edge of that strange world where everything had seemed a little blurry, as though not quite corporeal, with nothing but his hands and wits to save his own skin.

He didn't want to remember waking on the floor of a cell, naked, a glowering Marc standing over him.

He didn't want to remember realizing that it wasn't Marc—or rather, not the Marc he knew.

He didn't want to remember the many ways his Master had tried to break him.

He didn't want to remember Kate, and what had been done to her so that he would finally bend just to see it stop.

He didn't want to remember all these things, but he did, the memories bursting through his mind like pricked soap

bubbles, each leaving marks behind, layers upon layers of residue that stained and made him want to scrub himself clean, inside and out.

He struggled to push both his Master and the memories back, but his Master didn't move one inch, and the memories continued to crash through the barriers he had erected, filling his mind with image after image, shout after shout, blood and come and tears and pain and—

And his Master, promising that everything would be all right. Kissing Blake as though both their lives depended on it. Touching him with no other purpose than to make Blake feel good, demanding nothing in return. Fixing Blake's hands. Giving him his sword back. Telling him to stand, not kneel.

Kate. Alive and well. Telling him that Marc had never hurt her. Never hurt Blake either. That she trusted Marc. That Blake should trust him, too.

Marc. Not their Master, but Marc.

Gradually, Blake stopped struggling, stopped trying to fight the memories, and realized that his Master—Marc?—had moved off him and was now sitting cross-legged at his side, looking wary and tired but otherwise calm. Kate was kneeling beside him, a hand on his shoulder, and it still felt strange to see her touch Marc willingly. Just like it still hurt to see her kneel.

Confused beyond words, Blake sat up and eyed both of them guardedly. He tried to speak again, and remembered when no sound came out what had happened. He touched his throat and could almost feel the burning again. It had been just before his Master had locked him in the box that Blake

had been so sure would be his final coffin. His heart had been beating so hard, he was pretty sure he had passed out a couple of times, only to wake again and find himself still trapped. Hours later—it had seemed like centuries—Kate's face had emerged above him, and Blake had had nowhere to hide from the shame and agony of letting her be hurt and killed so many times in front of him because he was too stupid, too proud to follow simple orders. It had only been days later that this Marc had appeared and taken him away. Why had he been set free? Why...

With a blink, Blake came back to the present. Marc was now standing in front of him, holding sweatpants out to him.

"Get dressed."

For the first time Blake realized he was half naked, wearing only a white t-shirt and blue boxers that had been rolled up to expose his right thigh. Frowning, he looked down at his leg, and poked at the red paste covering his skin with his fingertip. He could still make out the black lines of the symbols tattooed beneath it. He remembered the day the first one had been inked in. Two demons had held him down, and when he wouldn't stop struggling, they had knocked him out. When he had woken up, his Master had been there, and everything had been different.

"Blake?"

He started when Kate's hand brushed his arm. Looking up at her, he was taken aback by how much concern he could see in her eyes. He was the one who worried for her; the reverse felt... strange.

His Master—no, Marc was still handing sweatpants out to him. With a shaky hand, Blake reached for the piece of clothing. He stood to slide the pants on. Marc waited until he was done to ask, "Are you hungry?"

Without thinking, Blake started to nod. He wasn't just hungry. He was starving.

He stopped mid-movement and cast a wary glance at Marc. Admitting to any weakness usually equaled requesting to be tormented or punished. Marc didn't say anything, though. He didn't sneer, or comment on how weak Blake was, how disappointing a Childe he had always been. Instead, he pulled a container of blood from the fridge and filled two mugs that he placed in the insta-oven.

Blake's mouth watered. He barely remembered what warm blood tasted like.

"Here," Kate said softly, and once again her hand brushed Blake's arm. Blake wished he could have let her touch him without immediately flinching back. "Let's sit down."

She guided him to the table and even drew a chair for him. He sat down with a grateful nod and watched her as she sat next to him. She noticed and smiled at him, prompting Blake to look away. How could she smile at him after all that had happened?

Or had it?

His gaze fell on the man standing by the kitchen door and wringing his hands in front of him. He smiled, too, hesitantly, and let out a quiet little, "Hey."

Blake nodded once. He knew this man. He had a feeling he'd remember his name if he just tried hard enough, if he

sifted through his memories and only found the right one. It might have been easier to do if his mind hadn't been such a chaotic jumble of sensations and feelings.

Still, better to focus on this man and try to figure out who he was rather than think of the other man in the room, and decide whether to think of him as his Sire or his Master.

Kate couldn't stop staring at Blake. She had a dozen questions to ask him, and those were only the start, but she couldn't manage a word. All she could do was watch him as he sat next to her, gaze fleeting around the room. His eyes stayed on Simon for a little while, but every so often they'd flicker toward Marc. Kate had once been able to read his emotions on his face and in his eyes as easily as though they had been written, ink as dark as his eyes on paper as pale as his skin. Not anymore, though: she couldn't figure out what it was he felt or thought. She wanted to ask, but she was afraid to upset Blake again. She had been so frightened the past few minutes, in equal parts that Blake would hurt himself or Marc. She didn't want to risk breaking the tense calm that had finally fallen over him, and so she took her cue from Marc and kept quiet.

The insta-oven dinged. Without a word, Marc pulled out two mugs filled with blood and set them both on the table in front of Blake. Blake's nostrils flared and he reached out, fingers wiggling in their eagerness. He stilled before touching the closest mug and looked up at Marc.

"You don't need my go ahead to feed," Marc said softly. "If you're hungry, the blood's in the fridge. Take what you want, remember? That's the only rule."

Kate wanted to ask what that meant; she pinched her lips tight not to say a word. Blake's hands curled around the first mug, drawing it closer to him so fast that some blood spilled over the rim. Once again, Blake's eyes rose to Marc, this time sparkling with fear. When Marc didn't react at all, Blake brought the mug to his lips and, eyes narrowed to slits in obvious pleasure, he drank in long, noisy gulps. The second mug took him no longer to empty. It made a soft, clanking sound when he set it back on the table next to the first one.

"More?" Marc asked, and after a beat Blake pushed one of the empty mugs toward him. Seconds later, Marc was setting another warmed mug of blood in front of him. This time, Blake took it without seeking permission. He fed more slowly, and when Marc asked again if he wanted more, shook his head no.

"Are you feeling better?" Kate asked after a few long moments had passed, unable to bear the silence any longer.

Blake continued playing with the drops of blood he had spilled, his index finger drawing shapes and loops, and Kate wondered if he had heard the question.

"Blake?" She said his name quietly, almost in a whisper. "Are you..."

He blinked and looked toward her, giving a shallow nod.

"Are you tired?" Marc asked. "Do you want to rest? You can go if you want. Do you remember where your bedroom is?"

Another few seconds' delay, and Blake nodded again. Kate couldn't have said which question he was answering until he slowly stood and retreated to the door without turning his

back on them. She, Marc, and Simon watched him go. From where she sat, Kate could just see him disappear into the bedroom corridor. The air seemed to lighten with his departure, and when Simon let out a sigh, Kate realized she had been holding her breath like he had.

"Is he... is he better?" Simon asked in a shaky voice. "I mean... did the spell work? He doesn't seem to act much like the Blake I remember."

"Because he *isn't* the Blake you remember," Marc said, a slight frown pulling at his brow. "Decades have passed for him. Centuries. Your spell made him a full vampire again, and I think it broke the illusions, but he still has memories of being abused for more time than you've been alive." He snorted quietly and shook his head. "Did you just expect him to wake up like nothing had happened?"

The words could have been mocking; instead, they were filled with pain, and Kate realized that Marc *had* believed everything would get better in just the blink of an eye. Just like her.

Marc cleared his throat and picked up the empty mugs from the table. He brought them to the sink and filled them with water as he said, "One thing is back to normal." He came back to the table with a wet washing cloth. "He's still a slob."

He was clearly trying to lighten the mood with a joke, but neither Kate nor Simon reacted. He started reaching over to wipe the blood stains on the table, but Kate caught his wrist and stopped him.

"Wait. Come here." Holding on to him, she tugged gently until he had walked around the table to stand next to her.

She pointed at the blood stains with a trembling finger. She hadn't noticed until now, more focused on Blake than on his finger painting, but the stains formed words.

"He *is* better," she whispered.

Marc leaned against her and pressed a kiss to her temple. His lips were trembling.

On the table, the blood stains spelled 'thank you.'

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter 25

If anything, Blake's confusion only grew as time passed and all his memories returned. After feeding, he left the kitchen, thinking that a few hours of sleep would help to return strength to his body and clarity to his mind. Sleep, however, remained elusive; instead, two very distinct pasts warred in his mind, both of them featuring the same people, yet completely different from each other.

In one past, the recent past, Marc had knocked him out before breaking his fingers and resetting the bones; in a more distant one, his Master had broken them over the course of four days, laughing as he made sure they wouldn't heal properly, chiding Blake for having dared touch what wasn't his one time too many. He wasn't sure anymore what it was that had set off the madman that particular time. It might have been a punishment for Blake touching himself; that had always been the fastest way to get a beating. Then again, the penalty for not being hard whenever his Master entered the cell had been even worse, and it had been worth every blow to avoid seeing Kate dragged into the cell yet again. Or maybe it had been one of these times when he had reached for her *after*, when he had tried to soothe her sobs with quiet words and a brush of his fingers. He had learned the hard way that it wasn't allowed, but sometimes he couldn't help it, he had to tell her how sorry he was for causing her to suffer yet again, had to ask for her forgiveness, had to promise it would end some day. Really end.

How many times had he seen her hurt because of him, sometimes screaming, sometimes biting through her bottom lip as she refused to let out a single sound? How many times had he seen her die in front of him, either drained or so beaten that her body had given up after hours of agony? He could now remember too many of these instances. He realized that no human—and she had always been human, had always died a human death—could have endured it all. But he remembered also, with too much clarity to ignore it, his Master explaining, after the first time it had happened, that it wasn't over, that they could bring her back easily, and that they would, each time Blake didn't follow a simple order, each time he so much as looked defiant. And that each time she was brought back to hurt and bleed, it would be no one's fault but Blake's.

But she had been there, standing by Marc's side, hadn't she? She had been there that day, and a few days earlier, and every time she had talked to him, to Marc, as though nothing had ever happened. Was it because nothing had *really* happened?

He vaguely remembered them talking about illusions and reality intertwining, but only now did he start wondering if it had been her, all those times, or an illusion, a body bewitched to look like her, or maybe even a simple suggestion to his weakened mind that it was Kate whimpering at his feet.

His wounds though had been no illusion. His hands, of course, but also his slashed skin; he remembered his Master' farewell gift, a whipping that had lasted longer than ever before, Blake's last shouts before they had made him drink,

and his throat had burned so badly. He also remembered Marc's gentle hands, cleaning the cuts, cleaning him, for the first time in a very long time touching him without pain immediately coursing through his body. That man—it was hours before Blake finally remembered his name: Simon—had been the first to touch him with anything other than cruelty in mind, Blake remembered as much, but it hadn't mattered, had meant nothing, whereas Marc taking care of him...

It had been so confusing to be touched so. It still was. Blake knew now, and thought he understood, that it hadn't been Marc, for all those years. That it couldn't have been, just like it couldn't have been Kate. But it was the same face, the same hands, the same voice he experienced every day, and even now it was hard to separate his Master from Marc.

There had been nothing in common between them, he knew that on a very abstract level, but it remained impossible to crush that little voice at the back of his mind that would sometimes wake up and ask questions that never failed to fill Blake with as much fear as annoyance. It had been a long time since the last beating and the next one would be awful, it would say; and Blake would, without success, try to convince himself that there would not be a next beating. His Master hadn't come for his pleasure in too long, it would whimper; and Blake would grit his teeth and conjure images of getting himself off on his own, with no other hand to help or hinder. Images that he couldn't manage to transform into reality, not even now.

And Blake hated it. He hated that his mind was still muddy, his memories perfectly clear but so conflicting that

they lost all meaning. He hated the hold that his captivity still had on every one of his actions, however hard he tried to be himself. He hated that he still felt so weak, barely stronger than a human. And he had been almost human, hadn't he? It had been hard to get used to the heartbeat. Harder still to suffer through pangs of hunger when he didn't feed and sickening nausea when he did. He had learned, in time, to keep the blood down, but it had never been pleasant, never been satisfying, not until the three mugs Marc had warmed for him hours earlier. Three full mugs of warm blood, drunk while sitting at a table, when for who knew how long feeding had meant kneeling on the ground and coaxing with nothing more than his lips and tongue what little blood he could from a cut in his Master' wrist, a cut that always closed too fast.

It wasn't long before Blake started hating more and more things. He hated that, simply by closing his eyes, he could be back without warning in the cell he had been caged in for so long. He hated not being able to talk. He hated his clothes, soft cotton sweatpants, boxers, white t-shirt, none of it suitable clothing for the warrior he was—wanted to be again.

Above all, though, he hated being stuck inside. It was late that night when his discomfort reached the point when the familiar fist closed over his heart and squeezed tight. Remembering the patio, remembering Marc's admonition to take what he wanted, Blake stumbled out of his room and to the living room. He froze just out of the hallway, startled enough by what he found that he had to blink to make sure he wasn't imagining things.

His Master—no, *Marc*, damn it!—was in his armchair by the fire. Kate was curled up on his lap, asleep, her head tucked against the crook of his neck. His arms were wrapped around her, holding her close.

Part of Blake wanted to scream for her to wake up before Marc hurt her. Another part envied how peaceful she looked, and wanted to feel as safe as she obviously did. With a small shudder, he pushed himself back into motion and crossed the room to the French windows. He almost expected Marc to stop him before he opened the doors, but all Marc did was follow him with his eyes and whisper, "Blake? Are you OK? Do you want me to come out with you?"

Before he could remember he still didn't have a voice, Blake opened his mouth and tried to say "Yes." When no sound came out, he turned back to Marc. Kate shifted a little in his arms, and Marc rubbed a hand against her arm, probably not even aware of what he was doing.

Blake shook his head and stepped outside. He sat down on the ground, head thrown back against the banister, eyes up to the open sky. His heart ached, and it had nothing to do with his claustrophobia anymore.

Marc's first duty was to his Childe.

He knew why Blake was on the patio. He had smelled the sourness in his scent as soon as he had walked into the living room. If Kate hadn't been there, Marc wanted to believe he wouldn't even have asked if Blake wanted him there, he wouldn't have hesitated for one second before joining him. Even now, after close to an hour had passed, he still wanted

to go. He still *needed* to. His Childe needed him, and Marc should have been out there.

Instead, he was inside, cradling an emotionally exhausted young woman to his chest when he knew he should have sent her home hours ago.

Months earlier, when he had followed the call of the bloodline back to Blake, the pull had felt odd. Old. Older than Marc was. After that, with Blake's heartbeat making it so obvious that he wasn't fully a vampire, Marc hadn't paid much mind to the lingering feeling. But now it was back in full force.

Intellectually, he knew that Blake was his Childe, would always be his Childe. Nothing could change this simple fact: it had been his blood that had changed Blake, that had made him what and who he was today. But it didn't *feel* that way anymore. When two vampires were close to each other, they could get a basic sense of how old the other was. Once, long ago, younger vampires had owed the elders respect and obedience, although not to the degree reserved for their Sire. These days, it didn't mean anything anymore, and Marc rarely paid the familiar feeling any mind. It was impossible to ignore when it was linked to Blake, though.

It didn't help that, for weeks now, he had encouraged Blake to get what he wanted for himself, to be independent from Marc as much as possible. At the time, he had thought he was only trying to help Blake find his confidence again. Now, he wondered if he had felt the oddness even then and if it had affected his actions on a subconscious level.

He also wondered if he was holding on to Kate because he had missed her as much as she seemed to have missed them,

or because having her there meant that he had an excuse not to go to Blake, an excuse not to figure out quite yet how he was supposed to act toward Blake—how Blake would act toward him.

And the fact that Marc was using Kate as an excuse felt like a betrayal toward both of them. He owed it to them and to himself to do better than that.

He woke Kate up a little while before sunrise with a gentle kiss to her temple and a whisper of her name. She stirred, a quiet, kittenish sound rising from her throat.

"Is it morning yet?" she mumbled, rubbing her cheek against his chest.

"It's almost sunrise," he whispered. "You should go back to your hotel."

She stiffened at once in his arms. Raising her head, she frowned at him. "What?"

He brushed the hair out of her face and tried to smile at her. "I think Blake needs time to readjust to... everything. Maybe it'll be easier if—"

"If I'm not here?" she finished for him, her voice rising even as she stood from his lap. She crossed her arms over her chest, but she looked more cold than angry. "No. Not this time."

Marc raised a hand toward her, but she stepped back out of his reach. "Kate..."

"Not again, Marc." She shook her head. "I let you convince me it'd be better for him if you took him away from Leawood. Even when I got here, I visited when he was asleep like you said so I wouldn't upset him. Maybe it'd all have been

different if I'd stayed and he had seen we weren't the people from his nightmares. I'm not leaving now. Not unless he tells me he wants me gone."

Before Marc could say another word and show her that it was better that way, movement at the edge of the room caught his attention. Blake was by the French windows, clinging to the edge of one, as though it were the only thing holding him upright. The scent rising from him slammed into Marc like a punishing fist: fear. Blake was afraid. There was no doubt in Marc's mind that Kate's agitation had awakened unpleasant memories.

Noticing that Marc's attention had shifted, Kate turned to Blake and even took a couple steps toward him. "You want me to stay, don't you?" she said softly, a smile brightening her words. "Marc wants me to go, but if you want me here, I'll stay."

The hope in her voice, in contrast to Blake's fear, was heartbreaking, especially since she couldn't know how scared he was. When Blake reached out with a trembling hand, she reached back at once, taking his hand in hers. Marc's chest tightened. He wanted to reassure Blake, remind him that he wouldn't hurt Kate, that he never had, but the words refused to come out. He could only watch as Blake pulled Kate to him, leading her around the sofa and, to her dismay, to the door.

"Blake, you don't..." Wide, wet eyes turned to Marc, pleading. "He can't mean it like that," she said. "He's just confused still and..."

Marc forced a small smile to his lips even though he hurt just as much as she did. "Just a few days, Kate. Give him time."

She left without another word.

Blake remained in front of the door for a long time, his fingers twitching as though he wanted to open the door again.

"I wouldn't hurt her," Marc said at last. "You know that."

Blake turned to him and considered him for a long moment. In the end, he shook his head just once, and Marc could only wonder what he would need to do to convince Blake that Marc wasn't this Master—this monster—that lived in Blake's head.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter 26

The first day after Blake had sent Kate away—to safety, even if he knew she was safe here; he just hadn't been able to stop himself—Blake tried to keep away from Marc, remaining in his room except for an incursion into the kitchen to feed and into the living room to retrieve Seneca. The small room soon became oppressive, however, reminding him too much of his cell, and he had to escape it. To himself, he pretended that he was alone when he lounged on the sofa, refusing to hear Marc's infrequent words.

Something changed that evening.

While Blake was alone in the living room, he heard Marc's quiet grumbling in the kitchen about the mess he had left there once again, the empty container abandoned on the countertop, traces of dried blood inside the microwave oven and on the table, dirty mug left by the sink. Blake shuddered, part of him expecting punishment, but despite his complaining, Marc didn't even say a word about it directly to Blake.

When he fed again later that night, his first instinct was to be neat about it, but he changed his mind and made a mess on purpose. He waited in the living room for Marc to notice, waited for the punishment that, surely, wouldn't fail to fall this time. All he received was a glare.

In the next couple of days, it became a game, and the goal was for Blake to prove to himself that whatever he did, he was safe, that Marc wasn't going to raise a hand against him,

wasn't going to beat him, torture him, wasn't even going to shout at him.

He scattered Marc's books around the house, leaving them on the dirty kitchen counter or on the table, even leaving one on the patio overnight where the morning dew warped the pages and cover. He left his clothes, wet towels, and dirty mugs on the floor. He even tore pages from the notebook he had used to communicate and left confetti-sizes bits of paper like trails behind him from room to room. But as good as Blake was at this game, there were only so many things he could do around the small house. And after Blake had flooded the bathroom four times, Marc barely even rolled his eyes about it anymore. It was time to up the ante.

Finding out how to get a real rise out of Marc didn't take long when Blake set his mind to it, and once he started thinking about it, his body responded right away. The one thing that had made Marc angrier than anything else, during the past months, had been Blake's refusal—his inability, really—to do anything about dealing with his own arousal.

Marc was in the kitchen when Blake stepped out of his clothes. As he knelt on the living room floor, his hand inched toward his half-hard cock—a few strokes, nothing more, only to be completely erect when Marc noticed him—but he couldn't manage to complete the gesture. Without any further thought, he curled both fists on his thighs, spread his legs a little more, bowed his head just enough that he could still look up through his eyelashes. And he waited. He knew it wouldn't be long before Marc picked up his scent; it wouldn't be long before—

Blake had been on the ground for hours, and his legs hurt, the slight pinpricks of needles having long since been replaced by outright pain. He didn't dare move, though. Not a toe, not a finger. Especially not a finger. The last time he had dared do that, his Master had come into the cell with that nasty grin that never announced anything good and two minions on his heels. They were fledglings, weaklings, and Blake in his normal state would have been able to tear their heads off with one hand, yet he hadn't been able to do a thing when they had shackled him to the harness. Then his Master had snapped the cock ring on him, and it had been days—weeks?—before he had been allowed to come. So no, Blake wasn't going to move a finger. Not even if—

Blake blinked, and for a second he wasn't sure who was in front of him. His Master? Marc? It had to be Marc. They were in his house. Safe. Completely safe. Safe as long as Blake didn't move, as long as he didn't do anything against the rules. It might have been easier if the rules hadn't changed so often. And he had a feeling that he might have broken one right then, because his Master was looking at him through eyes that burned like fire.

"Is that your new attempt at pissing me off?" he snarled. "You can't be that stupid. Oh, wait, it's you. Of course you *are* that stupid. Anything to rile me up. As always."

"Stupid, stupid boy," his Master sighed, and Blake felt a shudder run through him as he lowered his head even more. "It's not that complicated, is it? I give you an order, and you follow it."

Blake didn't move, except for the tremors that had started to shake his body. He couldn't do it. Anything but that. He preferred to die rather than to follow **that** *order, although he doubted that it would end so easily.*

"Still not obeying, slave?"

His Master's voice was ice now, contempt filling it to the brim. Blake didn't look up, but he dared a word, knowing already that it wouldn't help, but wishing so very hard that maybe, just this once, it would.

"Please."

His Master laughed; the next thing Blake knew, a booted foot kicked him in the ribs and sent him forward, down on all fours, inches from the immobile form on the floor. Kate wasn't dead, not yet; he knew it because tears were rolling from her eyes as she blinked. But she would be soon, the gash on her neck would make sure of that, and she, at least for a while, would escape their Master.

"If you won't follow an order, here's a choice," came the amused voice behind him. Blake couldn't tear his eyes off her, couldn't think of anything else than to tell her he was sorry for causing this to happen again, but he heard his Master's words loud and clear. "Either you feed from her now, or you don't feed for the next year."

"Guess what, Blake. You got your wish. You've reached my limits, good and proper. Congratulations."

Something inside Blake shouted that this was wrong, so very wrong, this wasn't what was supposed to happen. Marc should be flustered, he should be annoyed, he should be ranting at Blake for playing games.

He shouldn't be unbuttoning his shirt. Shouldn't be ordering Blake to get up, walk to his bedroom, and get on the bed on his hands and knees.

And Blake definitely shouldn't be obeying.

Before Simon's spell, when Kate had believed that Blake thought she was his tormentor, staying away from him and Marc had been difficult, but she had managed to convince herself, at least for a time, that it was for the best. Now, though, she didn't have that excuse to cling to anymore. All she had was the knowledge that Blake was better, that he wanted to keep her safe—and that he had asked her to leave.

She thought about it for two days, turned the scene over in her head like she sometimes had with fights, searching for the flaw in her actions, for the one point that could have given her a different outcome. A *better* outcome. She just couldn't find it.

She was lying on her bed the second day, arms crossed behind her head and her eyes staring unseeingly at the ceiling, when a knock on her door gave her hope. She was already standing when she realized it couldn't be either of them: the sun was still up.

Instead, it was Daniel that she found on her doorstep and invited in. She hadn't even closed the door yet that he was blurting out, "The squad wants us back."

Kate sat on the edge of her bed, her legs folded beneath her, and looked up at him. He was practically beaming. She had rarely seen him so happy; the last time must have been when the realization that they had closed their first breach had finally sunk in.

"They called you?" she asked.

Shaking his head, Daniel started pacing through the small room. "I did, actually. I wanted to know if there's a known breach anywhere close. They don't know of one, but they said they'd been trying to find us. They want us back. If we leave tonight we can rendezvous with a group by tomorrow night."

Kate followed him with her eyes for a moment, watching him rub his hands together. She understood the eagerness in his voice quite well. She also missed the fight, missed knowing she was helping make the world more secure. But she missed the men she loved more.

"Simon is OK with that, then?"

Daniel nodded. "Yes. I convinced him he's already done all he can here, but there's a lot he can do still for the squad. We've got other mages, but he was always the best."

Kate couldn't help but wonder just how much convincing Daniel had needed to do. Simon had seemed fine with their stay in Riverton. The quiet town certainly suited him better than the excitement—and fear—of the fight.

"And you think you'll be all right?" she asked, and Daniel slowly came to a stop and turned a blank look toward her. "I mean, are you going to be feeding right?"

Daniel's mouth was a tight, thin line. "I guess you'll have to keep badgering me."

Kate blinked and sat up straighter. "Wait. I'm not coming."

"Why not?" Daniel crossed his arms and tilted his head to one side as he observed her. "Blake has been better for almost three days, and here you are, locked up in your room, just waiting. But waiting for what?"

Her brow pulled in a tight frown, Kate shook her head. "He just needs a few more days," she murmured, looking down at the floor. "And then..."

Crouching in front of her, Daniel rested a hand on her knee. "And then what?" he asked gently. "We've been here for how long, and how much time have you spent with them? How much time has Marc *allowed* you to spend with them? How much time are you going to need to realize it's over?"

Kate's heart tightened painfully. She wished she could tell Daniel he was wrong, but the truth was, she wasn't sure that he was.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Chapter 27

"I've controlled myself the best I could for months," Marc grunted as he entered Blake's room, talking more to himself than to the other vampire while he shrugged out of his shirt. "And God knows you didn't make things easy, offering yourself as you did. But it wasn't you, not all of you in that thick skull, so I kept it nice even when it killed me. But you, taunting me like this? It's beyond cruelty, Blake. And you'll only get what you deserve. You can pretend to be afraid all you want now, you're not fooling—"

Marc froze, one step away from the bed, when it dawned on him that Blake wasn't pretending anymore.

He was on his hands and knees, as he had been told, head bowed and eyes scrunched tight. His cock was still hard, flush against his stomach. He was shaking, which Marc first thought was nothing more than an addition to an already elaborate act. But one thing had been missing earlier: the pure terror in his scent that Marc had become so familiar with. It now permeated the room, and that could not be faked.

"Damn it, Blake," Marc sighed. "It's not just my limits you found, is it?"

Blake shuddered violently when Marc rested a hand on his shoulder, but he allowed himself to be pushed to the side as Marc said soothingly: "Lie down now. I'm not going to hurt you. You know I'm not, even if you're an idiot. Don't you?"

In answer, Blake opened his eyes and slowly curled his body into a fetal position. He was still trembling, and Marc mindlessly tugged at the blanket to cover him.

"I'm not him, Blake. I don't know what I have to do to prove that to you. But you can't expect me to let you play with me as you've been doing. When you've calmed down, we'll talk. Get some sleep. It'll be better when you wake up."

Blake didn't move, except for an almost imperceptible flinch when Marc reached to push a strand of hair out of his eyes. Barely containing his anger at seeing Blake back to the quivering form he had been months earlier, Marc picked up his shirt and walked out of the room. He made sure to leave the door open; the last thing he wanted now was to add an attack of claustrophobia to Blake's already-shaken mind. He wished he could have closed it, though, and left behind the realization that they were not one step closer to seeing Blake healed than they had been when he had first walked into that small room and Blake had thrown himself at his feet.

A knock on the front door barely permeated Marc's mind. He slipped on his shirt but didn't button it, nor did he go to open. Moments later, a second, sharper knock held a hint of impatience. Marc knew who had to be behind the door, and he told himself he wouldn't open it. He didn't want to see Kate now. His failure hurt too much, and he couldn't bear the thought of looking her in the eyes and—

Before he was even aware of moving, he was doing just that.

Arms wrapped around herself, she didn't look up at him, staring instead at his chest.

"Simon and Daniel are leaving town," she said, her voice all but expressionless. "I need to know if—" She finally looked up at him. Whatever she had been about to say, she seemed to forget it. Her eyes widened slightly and she reached out to him, resting her hand on his cheek. "What happened?" she breathed.

Marc shook his head. His throat was too tight to let out a single word.

"Oh, Marc, I'm sorry..."

She wove her arms around his neck and pulled him to her. His first impulse was to resist; he should be the one comforting her, not the other way around. That impulse died when she brushed her lips to his cheek.

"It's all right," she murmured. "He'll get better. I know he will."

Marc closed his arms around her and buried his face against her neck. He could feel the scars from Blake's bite against his lips. It only made him hold her tighter.

For a long time after *he* had left, Blake remained curled up on his bed, shaking and unable to catch his breath no matter how unnecessary it now was. He had heard *his* words, had understood them, but it was hard to believe them, as hard as it had been to accept the gentle, innocent touch that had come in the place of the blows Blake had thought would fall.

With time, he managed to begin putting some order in his head, separating what had happened in the past, in another place, and what had happened in this house. What had been common practice with *him,* and what was normal with Marc. Again, Blake struggled with the difference that should have

been so simple and yet was so difficult to keep clear in his mind. More difficult, in fact, than he had believed.

This was Marc, he repeated to himself. Not *him*. Not the creature he refused to call his Master anymore, even in his own mind. Why that realization had come in the middle of this crisis, Blake had no idea.

Marc. Not *him*.

Blake chanted the words in his mind, mouthing them silently, trying to make them truer through repetition. But even as he did, something in him screamed that this wouldn't work any better than writing the words in his notebook until his fingers cramped. He needed tangible proof rather than what, in the end, was nothing more than scant hope. He needed to see for himself, know in his flesh that he wasn't still living with his tormentor. Once he did, he would finally be able to move on. Or at least, he hoped so.

With some difficulty he stood, still hard, still shaking, but he didn't let that stop him as he went after Marc, following his scent to his bedroom, barely aware of the other scent twinned with his.

He stood in front of the closed door for a little while, listening to the quiet sounds behind it without really paying attention to them or trying to figure out what they meant. The white paint was flaking, revealing a dark wood beneath it. Was his mind the same way, the illusions that had so long masked reality falling away at last and revealing who he had once been, and who he hoped to be again? All he had to do was summon enough courage to enter this room and go to his

Sire. Go to him willingly, and prove to himself once and for all that the nightmare was over.

He finally rested a shaky hand on the door handle and turned it, like he was trying to push away his fears, and everything that he knew was a lie. He stepped inside, walked to the bed, and had to blink several times to finally make sense of what he was seeing. What he had heard. What he had smelled before even entering. He should have known, he realized as he watched Kate and Marc, frozen in the most intimate of embraces. He should have known she was there. But at the same time, how could he? He was still trying to convince himself that this was Marc, not some sadistic, twisted version of his Sire invented by demons to break him. The idea that Kate would be in their tormentor's arms—in his bed—willingly hardly even seemed conceivable.

Rocking back and forth on his heels, Blake tried to decide whether to keep moving forward or flee.

Kneeling on top of Marc and poised on the edge of pleasure, Kate couldn't begin to fathom if she had made a mistake in offering Marc physical comfort. He had seemed so broken when he had opened the door to her, and she had just missed him so much... His hands remained tight on her hips, his body trembling beneath her, inside her, still seeking the release it was being denied.

Just two feet away from the bed, Blake seemed as frozen as they were. The emotions crossing his face were too complex, too jumbled for Kate to begin to make sense of them. The one positive thing was that Blake didn't appear

afraid anymore, and Kate was truly thankful for that. She never wanted to see Blake afraid again.

She wished she knew what he felt or thought. She would never know if they all just stayed frozen, though. Taking a deep breath, she made up her mind. All three of them had been miserable the entire time they had been apart. Maybe it was simply time to be together.

She broke the standstill with just a gesture. Her hand slipped from Marc's chest and reached out toward Blake. He reacted instantly, as though without thinking, and reached back. She took hold of his hand and pulled, slowly and gently. Uncertainty flashed over Blake's face. His eyes flickered toward Marc, then back to Kate as he let her draw him closer. He paused when his knees touched the side of the mattress, but Kate encouraged him with quiet but slightly ragged words.

"It's all right."

Blake climbed onto the bed, kneeling next to them, his semi-hard cock resting fat and heavy on his thigh. Marc shifted beneath her as though uncomfortable; Kate soothed him by stroking his chest with one hand, the other never letting go of Blake's. She pulled Blake even closer, and slid her hand up his arm to his neck. She drew his face closer to hers and kissed him lightly.

"See?" she whispered against his lips. "Everything's all right. No one's hurting anyone."

What now seemed like an eternity ago, she knew that this was what Blake had hoped would happen: all three of them in

the same bed. If he could only remember that, remember that they both loved him and each other...

Hoping to show him just that, she bent down over Marc and pressed her mouth to his. Her tongue pushed past his lips and caressed his palate and tongue. At the gentle touch, Marc's hips jerked upward, pushing his still-hard dick deeper into her. She moaned into his mouth, then sat up again, grinding her hips down, her desire reawakened.

Blake watched her with wide eyes, blinking down every so often to look at Marc. Blake seemed to be trying to puzzle something out, though Kate had no idea what it could be.

"Do you want to touch?" she asked, gasping a little but never stopping her slow rocking onto Marc's cock. "You can if you want to."

She wanted to touch Blake, wanted to reach for his cock and curl her hand around it, but somehow she didn't dare take her own advice, not when Blake was so still next to her. A full minute passed before Blake's right hand finally rose from where it rested on his thigh. It came up and hovered near Kate's shoulder, her arm, finally settling on her hip, just above where Marc's hand still clutched her and reinforced her rhythm.

As innocent as the touch was, Kate closed her eyes and shivered at feeling Blake's hand on her—both his hand and Marc's. Sparks coursed through her, a promise for more yet to come. She was so close, she just needed—

"Oh please, yes."

She couldn't tell, not without looking down, whose hand was now cupping her breast, holding her nipple between two

fingers that were just gentle, just tight enough. Tendrils of pleasure coiling around her, she opened her eyes and looked. A deep moan passed her lips. It was Blake's hand against her flesh, but Marc's fingers were pressed over his, holding him in place as though he had guided him there and was trying to remind him: this was what love felt like.

As she pushed down one last time onto Marc's cock, as her orgasm flashed through her, filling her with warmth and making the cool hands on her heated flesh that much more welcome, as she felt Marc pulse within her and heard him groan, Kate only regretted that Blake hadn't found his pleasure with them.

Maybe next time.

In that other place, Blake had spent hours, days, forever it had sometimes seemed on his knees, waiting for a word, a touch, punishment.

He was on his knees again that night, but everything was different. The soft mattress beneath him, replacing cold stone, didn't even register in his mind, not when there were two people now kneeling in front of him, touching him.

There were lips first, warm on his shoulder, cooler against his neck. Hands next, running smoothly up and down his back, massaging and relaxing when other hands were caressing his chest, his thighs, and finally, when he thought he would die if they didn't touch him where he wanted it the most, his cock.

He needed a little while before he managed to convince himself he could touch back. Hesitating as though he had been reaching for sunlight and the promise of punishment it

held, Blake reached out to simply rest one hand on Marc's thigh, the other on Kate's. Neither pushed him away, neither offered a warning or threat. Instead, they smiled at him, kissed him, caressed him, and Blake slowly started relaxing enough to start caressing them in return.

Marc's cock was still sticky and spent from his time with Kate, but it slowly reawakened under Blake's touch, a single finger running from tip to root and back again. Kate's skin seemed to burn Blake's fingertips everywhere they danced on her. Blake didn't know which of them to look at anymore, which touch to focus on, too caught in the moment to even realize this was the first time he had shared a bed with both of them at once.

When Marc pulled back, Blake turned toward him, afraid he had done something wrong. He quickly returned, though, and the small bottle of lotion in his hand made a small 'snick' when he flicked the cap open.

"Is this OK?" Marc asked quietly, fingers shiny and slick but not rising toward Blake yet.

Blake gave a jerky nod of his head, and soon Marc's hand was on him again, cupping Blake's ass, sliding between his cheeks. A slick finger caressed him—a tentative, fumbling finger, and somewhere at the back of Blake's mind the question rose as to whether Marc was too nervous or too impatient he couldn't control his own hands. The finger found its way, eventually, and pressed in. Blake's chest constricted as he struggled for breath, but he fought his body's first reaction, which was to move away, far away, before the pain started again.

"Shhh..." Kate's voice slid through his mind, like her hand slid on his cock, in his hair, her lips on his mouth and cheeks, soothing and strangely alien. Long seconds later, after a litany of 'Marc, not *him*, Marc, not *him*,' Blake finally regained control of his breathing, enough to stop it.

Then a second finger joined the first, wet and smooth, unlike anything Blake had felt in longer than he could remember, and he froze all over again. It was stupid, he told himself even as he squeezed his eyes shut. Stupid to let his mind bring him back to that cell, to his jailer. Things had never been slow, or careful with *him*. Stupid yet he couldn't help it, every additional touch felt like it was about to transform into something far less pleasant, and everything he was, everything he knew told him to run while he still could.

"Marc?"

Kate's quiet, questioning word seemed much too loud in the silence that surrounded them, and Blake flinched, squeezing his eyes more tightly shut.

The worry in her voice took Blake's mind as much time to process as the fact that Marc wasn't touching him anymore. Not at all. Kate continued to stroke his arm and back soothingly, but Marc had pulled back. And while a part of him felt relief, Blake also knew, deep down, that if they stopped now it would take even longer to shrug off the hold his memories had on him. He forced his eyes open, ready to demand that they continue, remembering too late that he had no voice to express himself. Shaking his head, he reached for Marc, clutching at his arm and shoulder, drawing him in for a

kiss in which he poured all of his fear that he'd never find his Sire again.

It was a small, whining little noise that made him pull away, breathless and lightheaded. Kate had shifted closer to them, close enough to touch them both, and the look on her face was pure desire. Tentatively, Blake turned toward her, seeking her mouth. It pressed to his at once, and she kissed him with the same urgency he had kissed Marc.

When she broke away and Blake looked for Marc, rather than the concerned look he expected to find, he was confronted with a most improbable sight. Marc had turned around on the bed, facing away from Blake, and he was now on his hands and knees.

"Don't make him wait," Kate whispered against the shell of his ear, and now the worry was gone, replaced by a shy embarrassment that somehow sounded familiar. Her voice dropped even lower when she added, "Show me how beautiful you two are together."

Her words were like a blazing trail coursing through Blake's mind. Unable to form a coherent thought, he walked on his knees to Marc, close enough that his cock pressed snugly against the crack of Marc's ass, close enough that he could reach around and take hold of Marc's dick. It was hard and slick in his hand, as though Marc had prepared himself before changing his mind; the same slickness against Blake's cock when he rocked back and forth against Marc's ass told of another kind of preparation.

Once more instinct took over, but rather than demanding that Blake flee or submit, it now left him no choice but to

enter Marc. This time, when Blake froze, it had nothing to do with memories, for he had never been in such a position with Marc before. Not with Marc, and definitely not with *him*. It wasn't a new territory, per se, but he could barely wrap his mind around the simple idea that Marc—that his *Sire*—was offering himself to Blake like this.

At last he started moving. And with each thrust of his hips, each flash of pleasure, the past shattered in front of the naked present.

As kisses went, this one wasn't the most refined Marc and Blake had ever shared, teeth clashing and noses bumping, breaking the rhythm until they found a better angle. It wasn't the most sensual, either; the sting of their setback earlier that night was still too fresh in Marc's mind for him to completely allow himself to enjoy the moment. But it was, on Blake's part, the most desperate kiss he had ever offered Marc, and that was enough of a warning. Blake was never desperate, not the Blake he knew, which meant this still wasn't the Blake he used to know.

But instead of pulling away, Marc felt himself falling into the kiss, straight into Blake's despair and need, wishing he could vanquish the first and fulfill the second.

There was still time to stop everything and try to understand what was going on in Blake's head—the sensible thing to do, a nagging little voice insisted—but Marc ignored the voice and clung to the fact that there was still no fear in Blake's scent.

The kiss, the desperation, the need, all summed up months of living with a Blake that wasn't really Blake, months

of touching him and unknowingly perpetuating his abuse, of remembering, with each passing day, what had once been, what would maybe be again some day.

Given enough time to think about it, Marc might not have chosen this particular road to try to pull Blake out of the maze of illusions and truths he was still trapped in, even without magic. But desperation called for desperate measures, and Blake's desperation had become Marc's own.

It was clear that, despite appearances, Blake wasn't ready and needed to fight his instincts to allow Marc's touch. And while Marc wanted nothing more than to drive his cock into his Childe, he wasn't lost enough not to realize that it might be a mistake. The simple fact that it was Blake's idea—the same kind of idea that had made Blake a trembling mess not even an hour earlier—dictated that caution was needed.

Caution, however, wasn't going to take care of Marc's need. Or Blake's, for that matter.

Two years earlier, he would never have considered it. Bloodlines ran from Sires down, not the other way around, and Marc had never let Blake top him. It only made things more complicated that Kate was there, watching, caressing both of them in turn. Part of Marc knew it was the least of his worries at that moment, but the thought of letting her see him in a submissive role was disquieting.

It wasn't about his ego, though, nor was it about old customs. It also wasn't about that strange feeling inside him that claimed Blake was too old to be his Childe. The whole point was to prove to Blake that Marc wasn't his tormentor, wasn't the 'master' that Blake had once identified on paper.

The decision was made in an instant, the cursory preparation he offered himself took barely a second longer, and then all he had to do was wait for Blake to get a clue, which took a surprisingly long time.

An excruciatingly long time.

As excruciating as the first slow push of Blake's cock inside him.

Marc's body resisted the intrusion at first, and he had to force himself to relax, remind himself that this was all right. More than that: it was, he hoped, the key to finding Blake again.

Blake stilled when his balls came to rest against Marc's flesh, and he leaned against Marc's back, one arm curled around Marc's chest, the other hand wrapped around Marc's cock. Blake didn't move for a long moment; the ragged breathing against the base of Marc's neck told him quite clearly it would all be over pretty fast if Blake moved. Marc forced himself to remain still, focusing on Kate's hands as they caressed his arm and shoulder, or as they slipped along Blake's arm to stroke his chest. She was kneeling next to them, and whenever her fingers left him, Marc knew she was caressing Blake instead. Marc turned his head on the pillow to see her. Immediately, she leaned closer and laid a kiss on his lips.

As though he had only been waiting for her signal, Blake finally started moving. He slowly pulled back before snapping his hips back in place. At the same time, his hand slid with the same effortlessness over Marc's cock. As Blake found his rhythm, sensations flooded Marc's system. Some of them

were familiar, and Blake's hands on him would never cease to cause Marc's body to shiver and crave more of his touch. On the other hand, the feel of Blake's cock pushing inside him, seemingly deeper with every stroke, the way it stretched him or brushed against his prostate until Marc couldn't tell if it was pain or pleasure shaking his body anymore... All of it was new and even stranger than Marc had expected.

Strong, slow thrusts alternated with faster, shallow ones, hard tugs and almost tender caresses, so that with each passing second Marc didn't know whether to shift back toward Blake and push him farther inside, or arch into Blake's hand and come that much closer to release. The result was a messy, ungraceful rutting, but Marc didn't care, not anymore, not when all it would take now was Blake nudging that spot just one more time, or squeezing the head of his cock just so, or anything else, really. So soon after he had made love to Kate, every added sensation was just too much to allow him to last long.

At a sharper thrust from Blake, the overflow of sensations caused Marc to groan. Kate's mouth was against his again almost at once. She lay down on her side next to him, held his gaze and smiled as her hand joined Blake's on his cock, her nails pressing in beneath the crown the way she had long ago figured out he enjoyed.

Surprise made Marc cry out. The next instant, his orgasm tore through him, and he struggled to keep up despite his buckling knees, even more so when he could feel Blake shaking as he thrust in twice more, hard and deep, and finally

coming with what Marc could have sworn was a breathless sigh of his name. He knew better than that, though.

Marc let himself slide down. He couldn't have cared less if his stomach was pressed into the come that stained the sheets, not when Blake's scent, as he slipped out of Marc and let Kate's hands draw him between them, was pure contentment.

Marc didn't delude himself into thinking that when morning came, Blake would be his old self again and everything would be back to normal. But he thought that, maybe, the three of them, together, had just taken the first step toward a semblance of normality.

The world was soft lines and cotton fuzziness. Blake wasn't used to softness anymore. It felt strange, like a taste on the back of his tongue he didn't quite remember but hadn't completely forgotten, either.

He kept drifting in and out of consciousness, never completely asleep, but never fully awake. Every few minutes, a jolt would stop him from fully letting go of wakefulness and make him aware again of the warm body pressed against his, all soft curves and silky flesh. And every time he marveled at finding Kate in his arms, he would realize that her hands weren't the only ones slowly stroking his arm and side. Marc lay behind him, his chest to Blake's back, and Blake kept expecting the fear to surface again. It never did, and that was as startling to him as Kate's presence.

His mind was bursting with images and feelings, some real, some manufactured, and he wished he could speak to let them out. He still didn't have his voice back, though, and he

almost wished he could trade his healed hands to recover his voice, to be able to tell them...

He wasn't sure where he would start. Words of love seemed less than adequate after what they had shared, and so did thank-yous.

When Kate's hand glided over Blake's arm and shoulder and came to rest on his cheek, her thumb brushing against his mouth, Blake pursed his lips and kissed it lightly. She smiled and said his name before leaning in and pressing a chaste kiss to his lips. Blake mouthed her name. Only when her eyes widened in surprise did he realize a raspy whisper had come out of his throat, barely recognizable as a word at all, let alone her name.

Frowning slightly as he focused on what he wanted the whisper to sound like, he tried again. It was better this time, even if his throat hurt a little, but not good enough yet. The third time, it actually sounded like her name, and a mix of pride and giddiness surged through Blake. She kissed him again, her lips curved into a wide smile now, the salty smell of tears just hanging on the air. At the same time, a second pair of lips pressed to the back of his neck, a gentle kiss that was barely there at all.

Blake shifted between the two bodies pressed so tightly against him and rolled onto his back. Dark eyes peered down at him, and Blake opened his mouth to say—

Say what, he wondered, suddenly hesitating. The first thing that had come to his mind was 'Master,' but another part of him claimed that 'Marc' was the right word. Unable to

pick between them, Blake compromised, and pushed a third choice through a throat that now felt like it was burning.

"Sire."

Marc—yes, Marc, that would have been the correct name, like Sire was the correct title—kissed him like Kate had, just as gently, with just an edge of gratefulness clinging to his lips.

Cradled between the two of them, Blake closed his eyes at last, and finally allowed himself to drift toward sleep. Somehow, he already knew that there would be no nightmares this time; they would be kept at bay by the two sets of arms holding him tight. His last thought was that, as long as the three of them remained together, everything would soon get better.

[Back to Table of Contents]

Coming Soon in Blurred Memories

Marc was gone.

Marc, or his Master?

It didn't matter. He was gone. He had abandoned Blake. And as Blake tried to understand why, more and more reasons kept being added to the list. He had done everything wrong. He had broken more rules than he would ever have thought possible. It was a wonder Marc hadn't left earlier. A wonder that he hadn't disciplined Blake long before now. Had it been a test, maybe? Had he let Blake do as he pleased to see exactly how badly he would behave? If it had been a test, Blake had undoubtedly failed. And that was why Marc was gone.

Why he wouldn't be back.

Would he?

"Come on, Blake. You're hurting yourself again. Stop it."

A hand curled around his wrist and pulled his fingers away from his thigh. He looked down, and blinked when he saw the blood that covered the tingling skin that obscured his tattoo. The same blood stained his fingers. Kate's hand was clean, though. Clean and tight over his wrist, holding him safe. His Master was gone, but she was there. Was she part of the test? Was their Master watching, somehow? He always seemed to know whatever happened in Blake's cell. Would the punishment be even worse if Blake listened to her or let her touch him?

Instinctively, he scrambled away from where she was sitting on the floor next to him. She looked pained, but she had to understand that he was only moving back to protect her. Surely, she could understand as much. She had been hurt often enough for being kind to him to remember...

He blinked, and for a brief moment, he could see the flaws in his own thinking, could see he wasn't making much sense at all, not about Kate, and certainly not about Marc. Every time the tattoo tingled, his mind lost its clarity, and illusions and nightmares tried to take him over again. He opened his mouth, but already his awareness was fading in light of the overwhelming certitude that things were wrong, completely and utterly wrong, and there would be blood and tears and pain to pay for the wrongness of it all. There always was.

He rose to his feet and started moving away from her again, but a noise behind him drew his attention, and he turned at once, eyes open wide and lips ready to beg for his Master's forgiveness, for Marc's return. But the man he expected to see wasn't there, and instead, it was another man standing by the door. Another vampire. Another of Marc's Childer. If Blake breathed in deeply, he could smell just a hint of their Sire on him.

"Where's Marc?" Kate said, coming to Daniel even as Blake wondered whether to get closer to him or retreat farther into a corner. "Was Jen there?"

"She was. And I tried to talk him out of it, but..." Daniel sighed, and something deep inside Blake howled in despair. "He left with her."

Kate made some kind of protest at that, but Blake barely heard her, focused as he was on what Daniel had just said. Marc... his Master was betraying them to join the demons. He was going to join the same people who had tortured Blake for centuries.

And then what? What would happen next? Would he be back for Blake? Would it be worse than before? Would the past seem like a walk in a park compared to what his Master was planning?

The answer to that was simple and illuminating. Blake needed help. He needed protection. He needed someone who would intervene for him before Marc. And who better for that than Marc's Childe? A man who had soldiers and mages under his command?

Making an effort to concentrate on what Daniel and Kate were saying again, Blake caught the end of a sentence.

"—mind staying with him for a minute?" she was saying. "I want to get some blood and see if feeding will help him."

Good. Very good. She was stepping out. That meant he would be alone with Daniel. Better if they were alone. Better if she didn't see. She always cried when she saw Blake—

Pushing the memory away, Blake clutched at his shirt, and when his hands trembled too much to allow him to undo the buttons, he simply tore it off before getting rid of his t-shirt, too.

"What are you doing?" Daniel asked immediately. His voice held a thread of disapproval, and by pure instinct Blake dropped to his knees. He couldn't have disapproval. He needed protection. He needed to be good. He needed to show

Daniel just how good he was, so that Daniel would tell their Sire, and Marc wouldn't hurt Blake too much when he returned.

If he returned.

Panic tried to sink in again, but Blake held it at bay as he advanced toward Daniel, head bowed, until his forehead was touching the floor in front of Daniel's feet.

"I will be good," he said as quietly as he could, knowing that by simply speaking he was breaking the rules but needing to say something. "Will you tell him I will be good? I will do everything he says. Be a good boy. I promise."

Without daring to look up at his face, Blake reached toward the fastenings of Daniel's pants. Family. They were both Marc's Childer, surely it was alright to show him—

"Blake! Stop it! What on earth do you think you're doing?"

Hands dropping instantly at the shout so that he could cover his head with his arms, Blake waited for the blows to start falling. There would be even more of them for his attempt at protecting himself, but he couldn't help the defensive response.

"What's going on here?"

If anything, Kate's return made Blake want to hide even more. Daniel didn't want him; would he punish her for Blake's mistake? Would he take her away, and leave Blake all alone once more? As alone as he had been after they had shut him in that box, left in there for days, and only let out to confront his guilt and pain every time he laid eyes on Kate.

Until Marc had come for him. Until he had taken Blake away.

And Marc had come when Blake had called him. It was easy to call. The thread was like a shining beacon in Blake's mind, all he needed was to take hold of it and pull, tug, cry out for help, and his Sire would hear.

He would hear, but would he come? He had gone to Jen before. He had abandoned Blake and only returned after years had passed, after he had figured out that she was a traitor. This time, Marc had known when he had gone to her. This time, he was a traitor, too. Would he ever return?

The first tentative touch of a hand on his bare back made him start shaking, and once again he expected the pain to start. But the warm hand remained gentle, and stroked him calmly, gently, in the same rhythm as the quiet words that fell on him like feathers and snowflakes.

They were words Marc had repeated to him too many times to count, and maybe because they were so familiar, they were easy to listen to, easy to accept, even if it was Kate voicing them. Even if she was in just as much danger as Blake.

"You're safe," she repeated, over and over. "I promise, Blake, nothing will happen to you. You're safe."

[Back to Table of Contents]

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: original.kallysten.net

Other stories available from Alinar Publishing:

Aria & Will

In an indistinct future, humans and vampires are allied against the savage demons that relentlessly attack their cities. In the fortified town of Newhaven, a centuries-old vampire, Wilhelm, is slowly losing track of why he fights. Meeting the human child Ariadne and watching her grow up to become a fierce fighter reminds him of his purpose and gives a face to the humans he tries to protect. As years pass, however, and Aria becomes a young woman, then a vampire, his protectiveness slowly turns into love...

The Vampire's Concubine

Meriel has no desire to attend Master Aidan's party. She doesn't want to play the game of seduction for which her sire groomed her. She can't imagine binding herself for ten years as his concubine. Despite her lack of efforts and to her dismayed surprise, Aidan chooses her. She is just as

surprised to realize he knows what other mission her sire gave her—to kill him.

Her first day with Aidan, however, reveals a reality much different from the servitude she expected. Free to say no to him, she finds that she just might not want to. Nonetheless, saying no to her sire could be more difficult...

CheckMate

Lilia is a vampire; Vincent hunts vampires. They've each sworn to kill the other, and have battled many times without either of them winning. But when a spell gone wrong links them through bonds of shared blood and sex, the game stops abruptly and with no clear winner.

Trying to stay alive, they learn to guard each other's back against old and new enemies alike. The game takes a new turn as the memories of what they shared under the spell become too hard to ignore and they succumb to lust—or could it be more than that?

Carte Blanche

When a lobbyist opposed to vampires' rights is found drained of her blood, Special Enforcer Grace Alkins investigates the woman's connection to a local BDSM club and its vampire customers. It has been a long time since Grace played on this particular scene, but old habits return easily when she puts on the attire of Mistress Red.

On her first undercover visit at the club, however, she finds herself tricked into playing a scene with Ray, a submissive whose Master left town abruptly. The Dominant in her enjoys the opportunity—while the Special Enforcer is

shocked to realize Ray is a vampire, and possibly a suspect for the murder she investigates.

Will Grace manage to keep a cool head and find the killer when every new meeting with Ray cranks up the heat a little more?

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