

Blurred Bloodlines

(excerpt)

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Previously, in Blurred Nights:

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, half-human and half-vampire, incapable of speech and scared of both of them – help them grow closer once more, or will it end their relationship for good?

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 his. Blake looked again to the front of the room. Daniel was glaring at him. Blake couldn't have cared less.

Waiting for the end of the meeting was sheer torture. As much as he could distract her, Blake knew he could not convince Kate to leave early, so he didn't even try. Instead, he continued to trail long lines and curves on her hand and wrist, wishing he could touch more of her—knowing he would, soon. By the time Daniel finally dismissed them, Blake was hard and aching.

Grabbing Kate's hand, he immediately pulled her toward the doors on the far left side of the room before Daniel could demand her presence at some meeting or other. Their fingers entwined in what had become a familiar gesture over the past few months. She followed with a quiet laugh, and he had no doubt that she knew why he was in such a hurry.

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The sparring session lasted all of ten minutes—not that Kate had expected anything different. For some things, Blake was all too predictable. For others, he had a knack for surprising her. The combination was only one of the reasons why she had grown so attached to him.

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.

She stood over him, a foot on each side of his torso, the weighted plastic sword resting over her shoulder. He ran his right hand over her calf and grinned up at her. "You win," he said, an edge of laughter brightening his words.

She didn't call him on the way he had let himself be beaten and instead asked, tongue in cheek, "What's my prize?"

His fingers sneaked beneath the hem of her pants and slid up her leg until he was touching her skin. She shivered at the small touch.

"I'll let you have your wicked way with my body?" he said, waggling his eyebrows.

She laughed. Somehow, his body—or hers—ended up as a prize all too often in their sparring matches. "I'll take your hands. I could use a nice massage to loosen up."

His mouth curled up in an impish grin. “That works, too.”

Already, he had undone her shoelaces. She stepped off him at once. “Not here!” she said quickly, swallowing another laugh.

He sat up, leaning back on his arms, head turned up towards her. He looked genuinely surprised. “Why not?” he 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 still-covered 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, so completely. He stayed still for a moment, just long enough for Kate to adjust to the feel of him, then pulled back. His 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, bringing 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.

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 find the perfumed soap that was the one indulgence she allowed herself.

Careful to keep her braided hair away from the spray of hot water, she picked up the thin lavender-scented soap from the small plastic basket in which she kept her toiletries; the fresh scent filled the stall as soon as she wet it. She had noticed Blake enjoyed this scent a lot, and she always used it for special occasions. She hummed softly as she washed, and tried to keep her mind off what was to come. If she thought about it, she would start getting nervous again, and she might even change her mind.

"It's going to be fine," she murmured to herself.
"Nothing needs to happen. It's just a dinner."

Even to her own ears she sounded less than convincing.

She closed her eyes and turned her face up to the spray of water. She stayed like this for a few seconds, then shut off the water and stepped out of the shower and onto the cold 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 décor 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 clasp the doorknob and twisting it open. Blake was standing there, hands in his jeans' pockets. When she saw him dressed so casually, she became even more aware of her attire, and his eyes, detailing her from head to toe, only added to her discomfort.

"You look scrumptious," he said as he walked in. Taking her hand, he made her twirl in front of him. The dress fanned over her legs. Blake hummed his approval. "You're just missing..."

He looked around and found the jewelry box on the bed. He let go of her hand and picked it up. She made herself keep still as he threaded the stems of the earrings through her ears, then laid the necklace at her throat and did the clasp, but when he stepped back again to admire his work, she shook her head. The earrings swung lightly, the strands brushing her jaw. The necklace seemed almost tight enough to choke her.

"I don't think I can do this."

Blake's smile did not waver even for an instant. "Not only can you do it, but you want to. Don't lie and say you don't, now."

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.

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.

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 unable to endure any more and fucked his mouth until coming.

This time, though, Blake seemed in no mood to play, and was all business: suction, pressure, licks, and caresses only built into a crescendo, leaving Marc no escape and pushing him inexorably toward pleasure.

When Blake slid back up the bed, still licking his lips like the famed canary-eating cat, Marc greeted him with a deep kiss and a hand fisted over his hard cock. Maybe Blake could draw an orgasm from Marc in moments, but Marc was quite capable of doing the same. In seconds, he had Blake writhing against him, fingers digging into his shoulders, hips pumping into his hand. In minutes, he was licking come off his fingers, Blake still breathing heavily next to him.

As they lay side by side on the bed, shoulders, hips and legs pressed together more by the sheer happenstance of familiarity than concerted design, Marc tried to imagine what it would be like to have Kate there with them. Would she lie between them or pick a side? Either option would have been nice, although as he closed his eyes Marc couldn't find fault with his current sleeping arrangements.

“So tell me,” Blake said, sounding much too awake when Marc was falling asleep. “How does the idea of having a new Childe sound?”

Without opening his eyes, Marc scoffed. “She’d never—”

“Not her,” Blake cut in with a yawn. There was laughter in his voice when he added, “Daniel.”

It took a few seconds before the pronouncement fully hit Marc. When it did, his eyes snapped open, and he frowned up at the darkened ceiling. “What?”

Blake shifted next to him, rolling onto his side and leaning up on his elbow. He grinned down at Marc, apparently having a lot of fun. “He’s going to ask you to sire him.”

Marc’s frown only deepened. What on earth was Blake up to now? “What?” he said again, feeling foolish but unable to form a coherent thought.

“Did she fuck your brains out?” Blake asked, raising an amused eyebrow at him. “You seem to lack your usual coherence.”

“Why would Daniel...” Blinking wildly, Marc sat up to see Blake better. His expression was one of pure enjoyment, the one Blake usually reserved for the times he played tricks on Marc. “Are you making fun... How would you even...” Shaking his head, he frowned. “What the hell?”

Blake laughed. “The little minx. She did fuck your brain to mush.” He patted Marc’s chest as though to soothe him. “Sleep. It’ll make more sense when you wake up.”

Taking his own advice, he laid down again, turning away from Marc and pushing back against him until Marc took his usual position against his back, an arm curled around Blake. He closed his eyes, hoping things would indeed be clearer by morning.

But when Marc did wake up, he was still as confused. To make matters worse, Blake was gone, leaving Marc no opportunity to find answers. He could imagine all too well where Blake had gone, though, so he couldn't be too annoyed about having been abandoned. It was good that one of them would be there when Kate woke up.

Still caught between sweet memories of his evening with Kate and more perplexing ones from his conversation with Blake, Marc showered and got dressed before wandering down to the lobby for some coffee. As he walked by Daniel's office, he noticed that the door was open. He might as well, he figured, and walked on over. He knocked on the doorjamb before entering, and Daniel looked up from the crossbow he had disassembled to clean. Three thick metallic arrows lay on the desk, waiting to be reloaded. Weapons like this had once been used with wooden arrows against vampires, but metal worked much better against demons, as long as you managed to hit them in the head.

"Morning," Marc said, stepping over the tangled electric cord next to the desk to sit down in the chair facing Daniel. "Anything new?"

Daniel groaned and set the crossbow down, looking disgusted. "I knew I shouldn't have talked to him."

Surprised, Marc let out a bark of laughter. "You mean you really want me to turn you?"

“Not like that, no. Just...” Daniel sighed and leaned back in his chair. “If I’m hurt? You know, if it looks like I’m not going to make it... I’ve heard some vamps make pacts with humans like that.”

Marc had heard about it, too. It wasn’t like the Pacts of old, when human had offered their blood in exchange for security, but the arrangement was still valid—if the human 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.

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.

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