

KALLYSTEN

A romantic scene featuring three people. In the background, a young man with short dark hair and a serious expression looks directly at the camera. In the foreground, a young man and a young woman are shown in profile, leaning towards each other and kissing. The woman has long dark hair and is wearing a dark top. The man in the foreground is shirtless. The lighting is soft and warm, creating an intimate atmosphere.

Blurred
nights

Blurred Nights – Kallysten

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(excerpt)

Chapter 1

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

“Three.”

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

Blake looked back at him. With the moon's faint silvery smile piercing the fog at his Childe's right, Marc had no trouble seeing his expression. It matched the excited scent rising from him. Blake wore a faint, hungry smile—the smile of a hunter closing in on his prey. The years Blake had spent as a human had been wasted; he had been born for this, for the hunt and the fight, for ambushes on moonless nights and the thrill of killing.

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

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

Blake attacked the one on the left, both hands on the hilt of his sword to lend more strength to the blow. Marc didn't wait to see how the attack landed, and rushed at the demon on the right. Sparks rose when his sword, broader and shorter than Blake's, clashed with his opponent's axe; the sound, however, was drowned out by the alarm, as was the metal-on-metal ring of the blows that followed. He would be lucky to have any hearing left when the fight was over.

He thrust his sword at the demon's right forearm, hoping to disarm it. The demon deflected the hit by swinging its crescent-shaped axe widely. Marc scrambled back, just enough to avoid being hit, and immediately jumped forward again. He didn't have the protection of metal

plates over his chest or even a helmet, but what he lacked in cover, he more than made up for in speed and agility.

He slashed low, hitting the demon's thigh and pulling a roar from its throat that pierced even through the alarm, then high, landing blows on the shoulder and arm. Again and again he struck, trying to find the opening that would end the fight. The demon swung its weapon repeatedly with pure force and no aim. At a particularly vicious blow, ducking wasn't enough and Marc took three steps to the side. His sword found its way to the demon's exposed side. He pushed hard, and bones shattered.

The demon struggled enough that Marc had trouble pulling his sword free again, then it fell forward, blood gurgling at its lipless mouth, yellow eyes staring unseeingly. Marc watched it for a few seconds. He had slain hundreds of these beasts, and still he couldn't help being fascinated by their bodies that were never quite identical.

This one sported a line of bone-white spikes, each as long as Marc's hand, sprouting along its spine and up to the top of its head, so that what Marc had thought was a decorative point on his helmet was actually part of the demon body, appearing through a hole in the helmet. Marc had often wondered if scientists, somewhere, were cataloguing the apparently infinite variations of demon bodies.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I don't know why it sounded," Marc answered at last, letting go of him to survey their surroundings. "But what I want to know is why it stopped. If someone else broke into the town, the demons must have slaughtered them."

Blake snorted and bent down to wipe his sword on the crude pants of the second demon he had killed.

"Probably some human fighters," he muttered. "Too stupid to realize they're out of their league."

"Or maybe *they* found the breach," Marc said, "instead of wandering like fools. And if they did, the demons are going to guard it even more tightly. We'll have to come back."

After a last glance around them, he started back toward the road where the car waited. At least, he thought it was the right direction. Between the thick gray fog that covered everything and the ruins blocking entire streets, transforming the city into a labyrinth, he had to rely more on instincts than sight. Blake followed, but not without his usual whining.

"Come on, who cares if they reinforced their security? You've seen how easily we took those three! We could take a dozen more, you and me. And we'd make it a great fight!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Come on. Let’s see if they need our help getting out of here.”

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

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

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

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

Marc obeyed and stilled. He took a discreet look around. On his right, in the corner formed by two almost-intact

walls, a standing man held a ball of light in his hand. The light bathed a second man lying on the ground and a woman kneeling by his side, her hands busy over his leg. The smell of blood was stronger in that direction. A pile of debris hid the man who had spoken, with only his head peeking out. Smears of dark green and black camouflage paint covered his face, and the colors made his eyes seem brighter.

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

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

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

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

“My name is Marc,” he answered, looking back at the man who had first asked him. “This is Blake.” He tilted his head back briefly, indicating his immobile Childe, standing just behind him. “She’s right, we’re vampires.

But there's no need for stakes. We mean you no harm. We heard you, and we thought you might need help."

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

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

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

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

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

"What's—"

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

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

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

"And me," the mage squeaked.

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

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

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

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

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

“Quiet, Childe,” Marc replied, starting after Daniel and Kate. “Take his back, I’ll take hers.”

“If you insist we’ve got to help them, you could at least leave the cute one to me.”

For all his grousing, Blake went to stand by Daniel’s side even as Marc approached Kate. She threw him a cool glance, with the smallest hint of a smile. Marc nodded at her before turning his attention to the demons. They were no more than twenty yards away and already raising their weapons, snarling to intimidate their adversaries. The fog added a surreal element to their frightful appearance, giving the illusion that they were appearing out of thin air. Marc rolled his shoulders and prepared. This fight would be a little different from the one earlier, with humans to protect and more demons to fight, but in the end, killing was always the same.

Chapter 2

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

Daniel, the mage Simon and the medic Sasha had squeezed into the back seat, with their wounded comrade Sam curled up on their laps. Kate was taking advantage of her small frame to sit between Blake and Marc in the front. They had thrown all the weapons in the trunk, which added to Blake's discomfort. He was used to having a weapon within reach at all times. He would have said he felt naked without his sword, except that being naked hadn't made him uncomfortable since his siring.

The scent of blood was strong in the car, tantalizing, since Blake was famished after a night of fighting, but it was another scent that bothered him. Even after Blake and Marc had helped Daniel and his people, even after they had escorted them back to their truck only to find it had been torched by demons, even after Marc had offered to drive all of them back to their camp, the humans still smelled of wariness or fear. Blake doubted they'd have smelled any different if two demons had offered them a ride. Only Kate and Daniel seemed not to be so uncertain.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The way Daniel had talked of his home base, Blake had imagined something more elaborate than the three

warehouse-like buildings he discovered at the end of the trail. They were behind three successive barbed wire fences at least twelve feet tall. They wouldn't stop demons if they truly wanted to get in, but they might slow them down enough to give the humans a chance to run.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Why in hell—”

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

He pointed toward the closest building.

“Check us?” Marc repeated. “What does that mean?”

“It means that you’d better not have killed humans recently,” Kate answered.

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

Don’t do anything stupid now.

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

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

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

Blake didn’t care about apologies, not any more than he cared about threats. If it had been up to him, he’d have seized Daniel already, and used him as a hostage to get

out of this cursed camp. He was very aware, however, of Kate's presence behind him and Marc, and in his mind her weapon was pointed at Marc. He had no problem risking his own life if he thought the payoff was worth it, but putting his Sire in danger was entirely different.

As Daniel entered the building, he knew enough to turn back and utter an invitation for both Marc and Blake. He let them pass him, leaving Kate to lead them onward until they were standing a dozen yards inside.

"Elliot, get Simon," Daniel said to a short but hulking man behind them. "Tell him to grab his stuff. Kate, have them sit down. Wally, back her up."

Elliot threw a mistrustful glare at Blake and Mark. He slid the strap of his crossbow over his head and shoulder before walking out through the main door.

They had entered through a door on the long side of the building and into a large open room, maybe thirty yards by fifty with metal beams supporting the roof fifteen or twenty feet above the concrete floor. The building seemed to have been a warehouse in the past. A cursory glance revealed three doors on the right and left, but they didn't appear to lead outside. Blake grimaced. It was always a good idea to have several ways out when you dealt with demons. Straight ahead, behind a few tables, a stretch of wall was covered with various weapons. They were swords for the most part, but there were also a handful of axes and a few crossbows. Several round practice targets were piled up on the floor.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The meaning of his shrug was clear enough.

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

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

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

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

“Where?” Marc jumped in.

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

Simon, the mage who had made a ball of light in the ruins, the man Daniel had ordered to perform protective magic while they were under attack but, strangely enough, not before, had entered the building. He was accompanied by Elliot, the soldier Daniel had sent to get him. Simon still reeked of fear, but the scent was stale, a remnant of his time on demons’ grounds. He had to feel safe here. Clearly, he didn’t realize how vulnerable this camp was.

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

“On both of them,” Daniel confirmed.

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

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

“You can sneeze?” he said excitedly. “I didn’t know vamp —”

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

“Oh. Of course.”

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

“Hawthorne roots...thyme...golden pepper...”

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

“I...I need your blood. If you don’t mind.”

“They don’t,” Kate said.

She gave her crossbow to Daniel and crossed the few steps that separated her from Marc. Her right hand slid the dagger strapped to her thigh out of the scabbard. Blake’s body became rigid at seeing her approach Marc with a bared blade, and he would have jumped off the table if not for a sharp warning look from his Sire. Marc seemed unmoved by the turn of events, and calmly raised his hand toward her, palm out, so she could draw the blood she wanted. Kate hesitated at that, and after a frozen second, she extended her hand. Rather than slash through Marc’s palm, she flipped the dagger between her fingers, presenting it to him hilt first. A small, surprised smile played on Marc’s lips and he nodded before accepting the weapon.

She must have known, Blake reflected, that Marc could have killed her in less time than it would take her to realize what was happening. She had seen him fight earlier, and Blake had caught the look of respect she had given Marc when the four of them had been left standing amongst demon corpses. The fact that she was willing to offer him a weapon could only mean she trusted the spell would come back clean. It was an interesting development, if a surprising one.

Holding the dagger in his right hand, Marc sliced into his left palm. Blake couldn’t help but wince at the thought of his Sire being hurt—and also couldn’t help but take a deep breath through his nose to catch the scent of his blood hanging in the air. It only made him more aware that he hadn’t fed that night, and very little the night before that.

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

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

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

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

“He’s clean. No human blood.”

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

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

“Your turn,” Kate said, coming to him.

With an exaggerated sigh, Blake held out his hand the same way Marc had. There was the same flash of hesitation as earlier in her eyes, but instead of giving him the dagger, she cut his palm, acting so fast that even vampire reflexes were of no use to Blake.

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

“He saved my life,” she answered before he was even finished. “You didn’t.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 3

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

Despite being targeted by four crossbows, Blake's entire attention remained on Marc. A muscle in his jaw clenched repeatedly and pulled at the fresh scar on his cheek. His fists were clenched on his thighs. He answered Marc's angry question in a low, tightly controlled voice.

"I haven't killed anyone." He gestured in Simon's direction. "He messed up his little magic trick."

Next to Kate, Simon had jumped back at Blake's jerky motion, but the accusation had him standing straight again. He sputtered in outrage. "I didn't mess up anything!"

When Blake finally looked toward them, his eyes were blazing in anger. His tone, however, never changed. "And I didn't kill anyone."

"That's not..."

Simon's voice trailed off. Glancing sideways at him, Kate wondered why he was blushing suddenly. She wasn't the

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

“What is it?” he asked.

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

“Simon,” Kate interrupted, certain that he would start rambling now if she didn’t stop him.

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

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

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

“You really expect us to believe that?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I... yes, I guess I could adapt—"

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

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

"Why? So you can find him excuses?"

"No. So I can kill him myself."

A shiver ran through Kate at the coldness in Marc's voice. She didn't realize she had lowered her crossbow

until Elliot hissed a warning. She glared at him before returning her attention to Marc and, behind him, Blake. The first wore the serious and implacable expression of an executioner. The latter, still silent, reclined on the table, hands behind his head, looking superbly unconcerned. It was hard to believe they were discussing his life and death.

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

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

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

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

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

his mixing of ingredients as strange and foreign as fine cuisine. Growing tired of the spectacle, she drew a chair away from the table where Blake lay and sat astride it. She had angled the chair so as to be able to keep an eye on everyone, from Elliot's sullen stance to Marc's intent observation of Simon to Blake's blatant disinterest.

She still held the crossbow, but she kept it pointed at the floor. She couldn't wait for the spell to give them an answer, one way or the other. It would be easier if Blake hadn't killed anyone, she supposed. She had trouble believing Marc would really kill him if he had. He had called Blake 'Childe,' and from what Kate knew of vampires, the relationship between Sires and their Childer was very strong. Then again, from the moment the two vampires had found them in the ruins of the City, she hadn't known what to make of them. Why had they helped her group? Why had they been in the ruins to begin with? Why was Marc so adamant about finding out whether Blake had killed humans, and why did his distrust anger Blake so?

After a moment, Blake turned his head toward her. His piercing dark eyes quickly made her uncomfortable, giving her the impression he knew she was thinking about him and his Sire. Vampire couldn't read minds, could they?

"How often do you kill demons?" she asked, voicing the first question that passed through her mind.

"Whenever we find one." His lips curved on what could have been a smile, or maybe a grimace. "Same as you, I'd suppose."

At the foot of the table, Marc straightened and turned to observe her, then Blake. His nostrils flared, and he

started frowning at Blake, who faced away from Marc, oblivious.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I have,” Marc replied. “Rips are real.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Childe!"

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

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

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

Before Marc could answer however, Simon exulted.

"Got it! This should do just fine!"

"Should?" Daniel and Marc said at once.

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

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

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

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

The smoke lifting from the bowl in sinuous volutes thickened as it surrounded Blake. It turned an almost blinding white. Blake batted at it ineffectually, and Kate

had to bite the inside of her cheek so she wouldn't snicker at him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She didn't wait to see if they followed her; the sound of their steps behind her was enough. She thought quickly as she walked toward the back of the building. Even if Marc and Blake weren't killers, few soldiers would be comfortable sleeping with vampires nearby, so she wouldn't lead them to the sleeping barracks. Moreover, Daniel would want to talk to them before night fell again; having them stay in this building would be best, if not the most comfortable for them.

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

"Thank you."

"No problem." She shrugged, looking back at the beds and feeling a little apologetic. The three beds filled the room almost completely, with barely any space around them. "You'll have to share a room, I'm afraid."

"We're used to it," Blake said, sounding a little amused. "Usually, the bed is larger, though."

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

Shaking away the stray thought, she crossed the building again to go to Daniel's office. As she expected, he was in there, though judging by the smell of disinfectant permeating the small room, he had finally had someone look at his leg. She sat down across from him, letting out a grateful sigh as she sunk into the cushioned armchair. It had been a very long night, and it still wasn't over. On the other side of the metal desk covered in maps and reconnaissance sketches, Daniel was leaning back in his chair, fingers woven in front of him. His eyes remained closed when he asked:

"What did you think of Simon tonight?"

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

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

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

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

He finally straightened up and looked at her over his linked fingers. He had washed away the camouflage paint, but his face remained dark. The circles beneath

his eyes were deeper than usual, almost purple, and the graying facial hair he hadn't shaved for two days made his cheeks appear sunken, almost hollow.

"So? What do you think of them?"

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

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

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

"The information they have—"

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

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

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

As soon as he said it, Kate was sure she knew whom they were talking about. She grimaced. They had lost a good ally before—a friend—because of irrational fears. Maybe it could be different, this time.

“Want me to talk to them?”

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

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

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

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

Chapter 4

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

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

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

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

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

“I’m not whining.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Blake kept very still for most of the tirade, but those last growled words seemed to set him off. With both hands flat on Marc's chest, he pushed hard. Marc could have held on, but he chose to let go and took a step back. As angry as he was with his unruly Childe, this was not the

time or place to fight with him and teach him manners—again.

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

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

“Childe...”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh. Hey.” Kate looked up from where she was setting up a camp bed not even four feet from the door. She had washed off the camouflage paint from her face, revealing delicate features. “Need something?”

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

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

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

He raised an eyebrow at her.

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

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

“Huh, right.” He looked away, feeling more than a little foolish. He didn’t usually care what others thought of him, but after seeing Kate on the battlefield and in her camp, he had the respect for her that only a fighter

could have for another fighter. If he was going to stay with this group for a little while, he didn't want her to think badly of him, for any reason. "Thanks for the warning. I'll be sure to tell Blake. He can be... rambunctious, at times."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Are you sure?"

"Only one way to find out."

He gripped the handle and flung the door open, ignoring her urgent, "Wait!" Had he been wrong, the early

morning sun might have burned him—if the fog had lifted, that was. He had taken a good look at the surroundings of the camp when they had arrived, however, and there had been no doubt in his mind that he would be safe.

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

He shook his head as he opened the trunk. “Thanks, but I don’t.”

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

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

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

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

He opened the door for her, and she preceded him inside. “Not only does he have a name,” he said, glad that she shared his amusement, “he has his very own character, if you listen to Blake.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Did she? My mistake."

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

"Hogger," Blake protested.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Blake,” Marc said warningly.

“What? You think she wouldn’t be interested?”

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

“I think she’s not a game for you to play,” he started, but Blake interrupted him.

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

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

“Maybe I was,” he said, his voice void of expression. “Maybe someone who doesn’t feel the need to argue with me about every little thing will be nice, for a change.”

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

“May the best man win, then, Sire.”

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