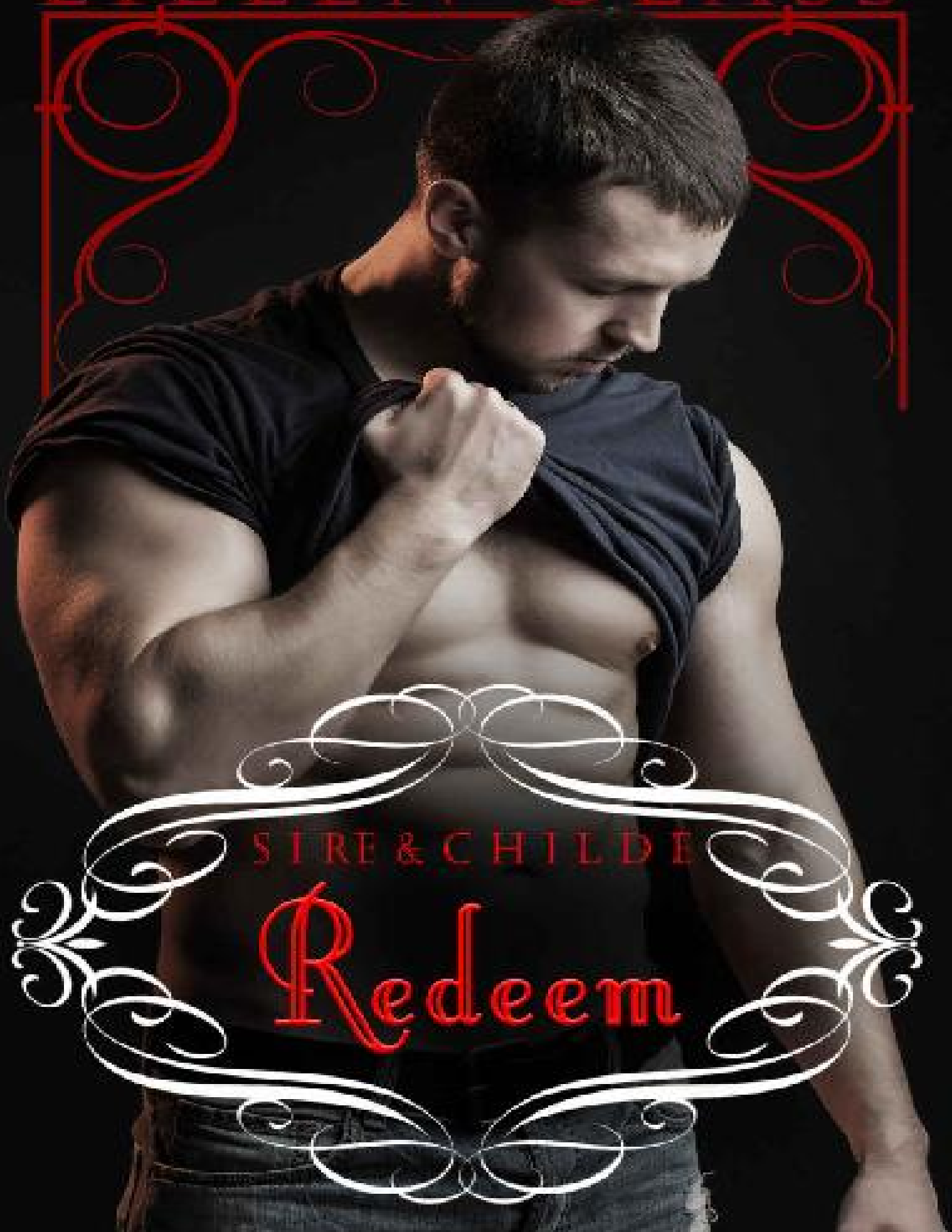


EILEEN GLASS



SIRE & CHILDE

Redeem

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About This Book

Drained, killed, and thrown away...

Brian wasn't supposed to survive. As a hunter of the Clan, he's the vampires' sworn enemy. They never meant to turn him. Yet he wakes up in the woods several days later, aching and thirsty.

He turns himself in to be executed by his people. It's the right thing to do.

But the father says God has a plan for him—a last task, then redemption. He's to infiltrate the nest as one of the vampires' beloved children and create their demise. The father believes this will work, since the children are supposed to be precious and protected.

Brian doesn't believe that. He's seen the corpses left by their kind. They have no love.

59,235 words. This is the second book in the Sire & Childe series.

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Chapter 1



“**R**epent!” yelled the father. He stood before a large stained-glass window, his spectacles lit by the flames of many candles. He continued to intone the same passages he’d been repeating all night long, speaking of His love, His blessing, and His capacity for forgiveness.

The father had the Bible open on the podium, marked by worn sticky notes that must have been put there many years ago, when he was younger. I can’t recall a single time he’s flipped the pages, neither during a sermon nor during a ritual like this one.

Cleansing, it’s called. The sins pour out in the blood of the individual and lessen the demon's hold on them so they can be redeemed.

The beautiful, young people we bring to this ritual are not what they seem. They're demon possessed monsters who feed every night.

I’ve seen the bodies. I’ve visited the families of the victims. I thought I had enough rage to sustain a ritual like this, but the moment they brought them in, bound and scared, young and gorgeous...

My rage faltered. The hours of the night have worn on, and all I have is pity.

“It’s the sign of a good man,” Ray said when he caught me crying. I tried to hide my face, but it was too late. He made a heavy sigh and put a hand on my shoulder as we continued to watch.

I hate him. I hate the Father, I hate the blood, and I can't *stand* the screams.

* * *

"Stop," I croak, while in my mind it's a shriek. That night, I had yelled it with such force that my throat ached.

It felt a lot like this, but the cause isn't the same. Now it's because I'm parched. Scorched might be a better term, for when I swallow to get some moisture in my throat, there's simply nothing there. I'm dried up.

The world is bright, and I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to get some moisture on them, too. I feel like I've been baked in the sun, and it's no wonder. I'm looking at tree tops and sky, lying on pebbles and dirt. Not even the thin mattress of my room at the barracks is this hard.

Chirping birds are horrendously loud.

I roll to my side, groaning with the effort.

Where am I? What happened to me?

Heaving breaths give me strength and bring me slowly back into the world, which is real, I notice. I often have troubled dreams.

Something bad has happened. But in my line of work, waking up in the day means I'm safe. It's why the Clan hunters train to keep graveyard hours. We know better.

I'm not bleeding either. So I'm okay. I just have to remember what I'm doing out here. *What went wrong...?*

I hold my head and wait for it to come back to me.

* * *

She was fourteen years old. Appeared to be. She had dirty blond hair, full pink lips, and those large, expressive eyes that made you love her instantly. The vivid blue was exotic. They sucked you in, mesmerizing you.

Literally.

She was a killer with a slim waist and the round face of a child. Her hips and breasts, however, said otherwise. When she smiled, the innocent facade would break and a regular man couldn't help being drawn in.

I should know. I was her bait. They picked me because, well, they knew I wasn't likely to fall for it. Though I've lived without sins of the flesh for years now, I'm not cured of homosexuality.

I did fine on the hunt, so Ray wasn't watching me during the cleansing. He didn't know she had me.

"*Stop!*" I screamed, fueled to attack the father, the very man who's given me shelter all these years. The only one who offered me closure when my mother was slain.

She died for no particular reason much, except for stepping into the gaze of a predator on his nightly routine. That was the hardest part—grieving and contemplating the completeness with which the vampires don't care. Not anymore than I care about eggs in the morning or the meat in my sandwich.

Yet, I was ready to strike the man who had two such killers caught at last. Ray held me back, while the father paused. His smile to me then seemed cruel.

"Brian..."

* * *

"Get it together man." I rub my eyes and try to bring up something useful in my memories. Not some horrible event that happened years ago.

She was gorgeous, that little bitch. And her brother was too.

I take a big breath and look around the woods. Why am I out here alone? I must have been... Chased? Pursuing?

I don't know, but I need water or I might die. I push myself up from my knees, bracing on a tree. It's slightly sticky with sap. And is that...?

Yes. A dark smear of blood.

Alarmed, I start looking around, checking myself for injuries and the ground for corpses. Vampires aren't messy eaters. People are known to disappear without a trace in our city.

But I'm not in the city for some reason. And that is a blood smear, unless I'm mistaken. It's dark brown and nothing much. Maybe I'm blowing this out of proportion.

I use my aching, weak joints to move forward, and I do alright in a short time. I'm fairly used to feeling like shit. And man, does my head hurt. I hear cars nearby, so I go that way.

I'm not prepared to see the van, its wheels in the air, the back doors hanging open, and all this smashed glass. It's been cleared of incriminating evidence. The huge chain and the strait jacket are missing, along with several pikes, stakes, and the guns. Our prisoner is also long gone.

“Shit.”

I'm looking at a bad hunt. For a time, I just stare at it.

* * *

I turned on Ray.

Get off me, asshole!

I didn't make use of the words though, yelling with my fists and actions instead. I'm a pretty good fighter, though they don't teach you that in your training. Nobody expects you to fist-fight a vampire.

Nah, I got my practice from my dad, who wasn't always nice to me after Mom died. The hunting gave him something to do, a place to put all that rage, but it didn't cure his alcoholism and he couldn't hunt every night.

Ray was expecting my strike, but he wasn't expecting how tough I am. He didn't think I'd hit for much. He didn't know I'd dodge his retaliation. I break away from him, then I'm after the father.

He wasn't smiling anymore, his mouth dropping in a surprise. I bared my teeth like one of the monsters, as I propelled past the pure circle and came crashing into his podium. Bible pages fluttered everywhere. The book was so old and used, it was held together by integrity only at this point.

He was a good man, that father. He studied every verse and had them all memorized.

I hit him so hard in the chest, he went down, his hands up in surrender, a plea I don't remember on his lips. I was on him, and I kept hitting him and hitting him. I wanted to feel the floor through his bones.

I heard a shrill scream from somewhere. Not from the cursed ones, but it served the same purpose of driving me on. I was sick of the screaming.

* * *

I can hear the screech of the brake tires in my head as I look at the vehicle and edge my way around the sides of it, reading the signs.

Both passenger doors are open. The windshield is smashed. There's blood on the driver's seat.

Is it hoping too much that the driver got away?

Probably.

It was Ray. He's mentored me since my incident. We've grown, well, let's say it's our version of close. He's sort of like a father to me, but not the kind of father you see on sitcoms. More like my own dad, who was mean but loved me enough in his way.

Ray is—was, perhaps—always there. I'll leave it at that.

I rub my neck where it aches, consciously aware that I haven't found any lumps yet. Nothing to indicate a torn wound. I'm also aware that this crash had some time to settle. The birds are unconcerned with the wreckage. Above, high up a steep cliff, I see the guard rail we busted over. The cars are passing one after another without slowing down.

Where the hell am I?

It's when I inspect behind the passenger seat that I find something. It's in the pocket, stuffed with some pamphlets about the Lord and our church.

Theresa's notebook.

* * *

My rage finally passed. *Well, at least he can't scream*, I thought. Blood frothed from his mouth and bubbled from his nose.

Though an eternity was spent in my mind, not much happened in the outer world around me. Ray was cussing, stumbling after me, but I knocked the wind out of him and he's an older man. He wouldn't recover in time. A shouting nun came near, wanting to help, but she was too afraid to get close.

This was all fine. I could relax. It was over. I looked at our two captives.

She had blood and tears streaming down her face. She was huddled over her brother like she was trying to protect him. This made me think she's the older one. They were both in straitjackets, chained to the floor in the middle of the purification circle, which is inscribed with the verses of God's forgiveness and love.

That's so more demons can't get in and twist their minds. They have only the demon inhabiting them to expel, then be pure of evil and ascend into the Lord's arms.

The backs of their jackets were torn. Their throats were slashed. The circle and verses had long given up being visible underneath the blood.

Yet, they were alive and wailing, proving their demon host. The image of them is one I've contemplated many times since my sin. It is so plain to me now that they are unnatural and wrong. But in that moment, I saw only her pleading eyes and her love for her brother.

I dug for the key in the father's pockets while he was trying to roll over. To breathe. My weight kept him there while I searched. And searched and searched.

The father went still, gazing at me with horrified, open eyes by the time I eventually found the key far away. It was sent across the floor when I knocked over the podium. I crawled to it, then stood and stepped over his body as I approached the beauties.

"I'm sorry," I said brokenly. I was relieved to finally be doing the right thing.

* * *

I run my fingers over Theresa's scrawled notes.

The newborn has no recollection of the attack. (To make bond?)

Two lines later, she switched from 'newborn' to a first name.

Sam is worried about his sister. Retains human emotion. (Corruption imposed later?)

On the same page, written in the margins: *Weaker than a man.*

When I turn the sheet, it is blank with a headline at the top. *They want him badly.*

Theresa would often do this and come back later to fill in notes of her experiences. She was brave, but she was no hunter, an observer only. Ray was always so pissed when she got assigned with us. He hated watching out for her.

Her final note on the backside of the sheet is vague. I run my fingers over her writing, picturing her poised with the pen, scrawling fast, pressing into the paper for her final written words.

I'm not sure about corr—then an ink blot where the pen paused. She went back and scratched the words out twice. *They cannot be allowed*

children. Then she must have shut the book and put away the pen. The rest of it is blank.

She's gone. There's no way she'd leave the book here if she made it out. Even if Ray was dragging her by the arm, I know she'd make a convincing argument for her notes.

One of the side view mirrors is hanging by wires. I pick it up and tilt it my way.

* * *

Their wide eyes and trembling features made them like scared, hurt children to me. I was sick with what I'd done to them, though I myself hadn't inflicted the whipping. That was the woman who now cried over the father's body, her weapon forgotten where she once stood.

It never occurred to her to use the whip on me. She compartmentalized. Ask her if she'd ever hurt anybody as she did the boy and the girl, and her answer would be an empathetic no. She is known as a gentle woman, only firm in her love of the Lord.

She looked up from where she crouched by the father, horror in her eyes for what I'd done. I was satisfied, thinking how she had hurt these children without mercy.

I fell to my knees in the blood with them, my hands shaking so hard it made it difficult to hold onto the key. Ray was recovering and making his way toward me. I didn't want these children—these *babies*—to be stranded here a second longer. I got the girl out of her binds first, then the boy.

She wailed wretchedly. Hissed, too. But I was too far gone in their spell to notice that. With the chains undone, she shook her body until the wrappings came loose. Since the whip had already cut into their backs, the chain held them more than the cloth anyway. In no time, she was free. I remember I hadn't finished turning the key on the boy's lock, when I felt her hands on me.

See, looking like a soft little doll is one of their weapons. Their bodies are small and perfect so they resemble our children. I remember, for that split second, being shocked at how hard and cold her touch was. Like picking up a rock when you expected a living, warm thing.

She tore into me. My neck and shoulder.

Before getting out of his binds, her brother latched onto my chest, through my shirt. Then twice more, looking for a stable bite. I screamed and fell to the floor, in the blood of their victims before me.

My fresh blood seeped out of their torn throats as they swallowed what they could. I thought the girl was choking the other, killing him for the right to feed, but I understood later that she was helping him cover his gash until he could get his arms free.

I was dying. I was screaming.

She yanked my hair to hold my head back and expose my neck. Like peeling a fruit... I wasn't a person to them, I was a thing to be consumed.

* * *

Ray saved my ass. The Church insisted that the Clan take pity on me. They had the same mindset as Ray. I was a good man. The monsters know our weakness. We would be more careful with training in the future.

I found all this out when I awoke from a coma six weeks later.

There's a lot we don't know about the vampires. Theresa insisted we had to change that. She wanted to save them too, but she's a lot smarter than me.

Tears come over me as I cover my face, wishing I didn't see the startling blue outline around my irises in the mirror, streaking into my original color like gneiss. I'm not beautiful like they tend to be. That takes time, I think. But I'm turning.

"God, oh god," I moan and start to rock where I kneel in the dirt.

They must have attacked me. Ray must have run for his life. Maybe he took Theresa with him. Maybe they're both dead.

Why not me?

This doesn't seem right. They wouldn't keep me. I've made up for my sin of killing the father by saving another soul. I've been working hard to atone for the two I sentenced to continue their misery in their demon-inhabited flesh.

And now? Me?

I check the mirror again. The eyes don't lie. The demon has me.

For a while I go silent, watching my thoughts, certain I'll hear a voice of madness and evil. Laughter, maybe. By the stories I've heard, I expect a demon to take over control of my body and shut me away. From inside my head, I'll watch and feel the crimes I commit, screaming while no one can hear.

That's one of my nightmares.

Or perhaps, I prefer to think when I'm optimistic, it's only a sleep. And like waking from a bad dream, there is great relief when the soul calls out to the Lord and rises from the burning flesh.

I wait a long time to see what will happen to me.

Then I'm confused.

I am clearly turning, but there is no demon.

It is only me.

Chapter 2



I head away from the wreckage, away from the road. How can I not? I'm dangerous now. Plagued. Contagious.

As I stumble through the trees, reaching for them the way my father used to pull himself along walls and counters, I head for the river I can hear faintly. I'm still dry to the bone, I need something wet to cure this thirst. I'm also apprehensive to find out if the water will quench me at all.

I need blood to complete the transformation, I think. My memory is fuzzy, but Theresa wouldn't shut up about vampires and their 'children' in the days when I cased the possible nest. It was the first case of this type, and Theresa babbled constantly about the journal we recovered from the site of a female.

Ray usually had more patience for Theresa. In fact, I think he liked her, but not while she was going on about family bonds, nursing, and those kinds of concepts. She made the monsters sound human, and I was always grateful when he started mouthing off because I wasn't far from doing the same.

I get out of the trees and it's a long, obstacle-ridden stumble to the water's edge, which isn't drinkable unless I get my feet wet. The land is flat and the water doesn't have a definitive bank. It seeps through the rocks and the mud.

I stumble several times. Water is my prize for making it through, and I don't let myself fall. I step in, shoes and everything, to get to the point where I won't be sucking on mud. I bend over at first, but my head becomes dizzy and gravity pulls me off center.

Giving up on that, I fall to my knees in the frigid water. I've got bigger problems. My reflection is dark in the water's surface, but there's a tinge of blue visible in the ripples. It's alive, the demon in me.

First, I drink. To my surprise, it does feel good. I'm not left wanting like I would have thought. The sensation of cold clears my head, too. I sit quietly, my knees in the mud, and listen.

For the faintest whisper or illness, the hint of a parasite...

It must be too soon. There's nothing.

I feel like shit, and my head pounds. As far as waking up injured goes, though, this isn't half bad. I'd rank this as alright if not for my eyes and the upturned van. Not to mention the deaths of my friends. I know there must be at least one. Ray or Theresa. I'll get the names for sure when I get back.

If I go back.

I lift my face to the sky. Surely this won't take long. After all I've done for Him...

I think back to my last confession. I go before every mission. I'm pretty sure I'm all caught up on my sins, but they're all blending together at the moment. Regardless, I begin to pray.

"Lord and Father, forgive me of my sins. Welcome me into your heart—"

I shake my head. The words are coming jumbled. They shouldn't be. I've gone to every purification since that terrible event, and I've heard every prayer.

"I welcome you into my heart. Forgive me. I am a sinner. I am wretched. I open myself to you, oh Lord, your loving and grace..."

And on and on. In the purification ritual, it'd be the Father laying orders on the soul of the victim. *You are a sinner. You are wretched.* I just change the words a little.

I welcome every breath into my lungs, feeling the pure forest air, the water all around me, and I surrender myself to His love.

"Lord, take me. I am your son. I am tired. I am done."

I wait.

I start over.

And I wait again.

The Lord works in mysterious ways they say, so I heave a sigh, realizing this will be harder than I thought. But nothing with the Lord is easy. He is not merciful.

I shake my head. No, *He is merciful.* Of course, He is. Perhaps He's not easy, but He is loving. He is kind. He is our Lord.

I start a more personal prayer.

"I know I have sinned deeply. I know that might even be why I was changed in the first place, because the demon found weakness in me. I haven't been able to fully repent and accept your grace..."

My lust for men hasn't gotten better though I've tried to suppress it.

"I'm sorry. Truly. Forgive me Lord! I am your son! I have tried—God, I have tried. I've said the prayers. Every night, as the father told me too. Yet, I have lusted, I have fantasied. I'm sorry! Forgive me! You've seen me Lord, you know I'm trying. I confessed each time. I... I have tried to repent."

Gazing at the sky, feeling a sense of quiet in the forest, I ask again.

"The door to my heart is open. Cure me of this affliction in death and take me into your arms." Louder, I shout to the trees, "I am your hunter, I

am your son! I seek your forgiveness so I may rest, oh Father.”

Nothing. I wait a very long time. Not even the birds take notice of me, chattering over my speech.

Of course, the purification ritual takes hours. All night. But it could happen instantly, the old Father told me, if they would only repent sooner. This pain ends when you accept his love. Then there is so much peace and bliss, as they return to Him. The Lord forgives all.

I have accepted my sins and prayed for His forgiveness. I’ve devoted my life to Him, even when I was angry about Mom, when I could not understand why vampires are allowed to exist at all.

But I do know that God is a harsh God.

Er, loving and kind, I mean, but not to be fooled. He is a father and I am his son, and that’s a hard kind of love I understand. He loves me, but He wants to punish me. He wants me to prove myself worthy.

I roll my neck from side to side. I bow my head and start again.

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Chapter 3



It's August, so thankfully the water isn't cold enough to be painful, but it's not warm either. The sun is overhead and bright, and the forest has been quiet as ever. This is far from the road, so besides the occasional loud truck, I'm alone in the world, chanting at the trees like a crazy man.

Here, in the serenity of God's creation, I should feel closest to Him. I should sense his presence.

But I don't feel shit. I don't sense shit either, and I've had an inner ear checking every thought for the presence of a demon within me.

It's been hours. I'm hungry. The proof of my turning still glints at me from the waters, but I'm not craving blood, I want a big cheeseburger. Ugh, the thought makes the emptiness grow.

I rub my temple and try to remember some of the things Theresa said. She didn't mention much about the turning process itself, I don't think. She was mostly interested in their concept of family and love.

I told her, *The creatures don't have love.*

The evidence suggests otherwise, she responded in her lecture voice. They have no empathy for their prey, but they go through a lot of trouble to raise their young when they turn. Parenting is a group effort, and the whole nest will provide. Food is given freely among the family, even if there isn't a childe turning.

Humans still haven't mastered this, you know, she'd said.

I've never come close to hitting a woman, but the notion has crossed my mind with Theresa. Her ideas about the vampires being lovely creatures set me on edge.

So they have survival instincts. That's all it is. Strength in numbers and all that. They don't have families.

They do! They have children, and spouses, and stepchildren, and all the things we have. The labels are different because the way they procreate is different. Did you know their children are fully dependent for decades, just like ours? And they're a huge cost to the nest. A single child being raised means hunting every night instead of every few days.

Hunting? They don't hunt—they murder.

Like I said, the woman needs a good smack from somebody. I walked off, wondering what Ray could like in her.

Objectively, I understand Theresa's function and why the Church lets her piggyback with us. She's there so we can learn more about our enemy.

It's just, when she runs her mouth like that, starts talking about them with fondness for hell's sake, that deep dwelling rage comes over me again. I know better than to trust it. I have to leave or tune her out before I lose my shit.

I only need to know how to kill them, I must have said to her a hundred times.

But now, I don't know.

I have no idea what phase I'm in or how much time I have. Will I be myself in the next passing moment? Why don't my prayers work? Why doesn't God, whom I've served devotedly, seem to hear me?

"God, I..."

I should pray. I should try again, relentlessly. That's how I prove my faith.

One more time, I do it.

Then again.

Then again.

Another time, which I swear is my last, and now my body is aching from having knelt so long. My knees might be ruined, but the water is cold enough to soothe them.

“God... do you hear me?”

I search the skies.

I try again, but I only make it halfway through when my mouth just stops. I start thinking about my morning and nightly prayers for a cure, my confessions of lust, my atonements and new prayers. I've been doing that for three years. And no change. No cure.

I stand, shaky and confused. I've always considered myself a man of God. Wretched, yes, as we all are. Thoughts of sin often find me.

But I refuse them. I have always been a good man, for Him.

Praying by itself has never worked for me though. Perhaps the demon is too strong. He needs to be bled.

I know exactly what it is I'm seeking as I march back through the woods the way I came. Like I said, I've been to every purification. I've seen the blood. I've heard the agony.

My devotion hasn't lessened, but I think I've earned a few choice words.

“Lord, it's your fault I have to deal with this shit,” I say as I start climbing the hill to get back to the road. “You're the one who lets them exist in the first place.”

But fuels our fight. Guides us.

“You’re the one who...”

The hill is steep.

“Lets the devil exist, for fuck’s sake, letting him make all this evil.”

To test us. Free will, the garden of Eden...

“I know you’ve got your reasons that I, being only a man, can’t comprehend, but...”

I have to grab a small tree and bend it toward me as I pull my weight up. Dirt and rocks cascade down.

“Well, you sure are a fucking bitch to serve, you know that? And you always have been. Telling me to...” I nearly lose it and roll downhill. “... respect my fucking father, all because he had the capacity to shoot his load?”

I’m well aware that I’m being overly crude and indirectly insulting my beloved mother. I’m just pissed.

“Forgive me, Father.”

I finish the climb and get myself over the guard rail. Just in time, too, as weak as I am. For me, my will has always seemed to be separate from my body, and stronger. It’s what they teach you in the Clan. It’s the only way we do our job, bringing the monsters in alive for their chance at salvation.

Killing them would be so much easier. Ray has said that a thousand times.

I nearly did once. After the incident. That one was fairly weak, a young boy (seemingly), who begged me not to take him to the Church. I almost staked him right there. I could have left him in the alley and let the sun take care of the corpse.

But of course a demon doesn’t want to give up an innocent soul for the fires.

Well, you won't have mine.

I'll subject myself to purification and seek His forgiveness. Even if I know what's coming.

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Chapter 4



A car passes the blind corner, shooting past me, its tires straying over the white line.

I look at the mangled guard rail and wonder what we must have been doing. We hit it and flipped over, so we had to be speeding like hell, but why? We were obviously on our way to the church for the purification ritual. I know this highway well, though Ray never lets me drive.

The events are almost accessible in my mind. The hunt was a big deal. Something about staking out a nest...

Yeah. We attacked it. We had a successful hunt, thus the necessity of the van. But why do I have the feeling that's wrong? I think... we failed.

I recall the image of a young kid with his eyes closed. He doesn't have the baby smooth cheeks of one of them, so he can't be a vampire, but he's important somehow to what happened to me.

I look up the road. I'll have to walk the entire way.

Once I'm out of the bend, a car passes slowly, but only to take the next switchback. This will be a long, exhausting walk. The marker up ahead informs me that I'm five miles out.

We almost made it when we were... '*Overrun*' is the word my mind wants to use.

I contemplate this as I continue on. Five miles shouldn't be far for me. I've done worse, in worse condition too.

But I haven't even reached the next marker when my legs start shaking. I stagger off, drifting into the guard rail that's meant to catch cars, but now it catches me. Sitting on it, I feel the world spin and my vision goes fuzzy.

It takes a while to clear. Then I'm off walking again. This stretch of guard rail doesn't end before another spell incapacitates me. I try to think.

I'm not that injured as far as I can tell. But—and this is based on nothing but instinctive feeling—I think I've been out here a long time. Maybe days. Maybe weeks.

Perhaps...

I'm trying not to think it, the words come anyway.

I've come back from the dead.

That could be why the turning took me now and not when I was bitten years ago.

I look at my hands. They're shaking, but they're warm. My heart's pounding. I feel alive.

I go on. Only to collapse. Getting to the church is going to take weeks at this point.

With a heavy breath, I resign myself to my last option. Though, I think He's got a deaf ear when it comes to me.

Lowering my knees painfully to the gravel, I start again. I'm so sick of praying.

“Lord in Heaven, it's me again. Your son. Your soldier.” I stare at the gravel awhile. “I'm not going to make it this time, am I?”

Nothing but silence and a car coming distantly.

“Yeah, I know it. But, God, why’d you do it this way? And why won’t you take me?”

I don’t expect anything different, but the silence ticks me off anyway. I’ve been listening to it all morning.

“Why this? Huh? I could’ve taken death. Even a painful one. Either way, I wouldn’t have complained. I’ve already accepted it as possibility. And I know I haven’t been great. I know I’ve got demons of my own to slay, I just...”

The dirt in my hair makes my head itchy.

“I did my best, alright? I pushed myself hard for You. So why’d You let this happen, huh?”

I can hear the father always yelling, *Submit!*

“Well, I’m trying, you know!”

I stop my rambling for a car coming around the corner. They see me on my knees, hands folded in prayer, and when they’ve passed, the brake lights are showing. I don’t get my hopes up, staying where I’m at. But they pull off as soon as they can and the backup lights turn on for me.

Oh thank God...

Inwardly, I correct myself. He’s been a no-show this morning. I’m not going let him have this credit.

“Are you okay?” calls a woman, older with long hair. She seems nice, and she gets out of her vehicle. “Can I help you? You need to get somewhere?”

She approaches without caution—nice and foolish are often the same—and I hold a hand up to stop her. I don’t know how contagious I am. I don’t know if the devil is going to overtake me when she’s close.

“Don’t come near me, ma’am, I’m... sick. I’m not right. Please, go back to your car.”

She pauses, uncertain. “Is there something I can do for you?”

“Do you have a cell phone?” I ask. “Could you dial a number for me?”

She nods, and I give her Ray’s number. Not the church’s number because I want to find out right away if he’s alive or not. And whether Theresa is. I didn’t forget Ray and Theresa in my prayers, I just didn’t make a long speech of it because I’ve lost so many already.

God as I know Him does not care if you are safe. Or alive. I’ve always reasoned it’s because an eternal being doesn’t see much difference in it. He’s got the larger picture. But I am only His weak servant, and I want to know if my mentor is alive.

“It’s ringing!” she tells me.

“Thank you, ma’am.”

I wait. My stomach is sick. There’s a fever in my cheeks.

When she starts talking without pause, I know he didn’t pick up and she’s leaving a message. This hurts because we always joke that Ray is our emergency line, he answers no matter what.

She leaves a message about a man in the road, then pauses to ask, “What’s your name?”

I answer.

“He says his name is Brian, and he asked me to call you.”

She ends with our location.

Now what?

I’ve got to give her the church’s phone number, and they could send anyone out to get me. Why, if it’s a certain day, the person answering might not even be in the loop. They have regular service there too.

“Alright then,” she says. “He says he’s sick, and he looks like he’s been through hell. You want to meet us at a hospital? Alright. Alright. Well...

I'm not gonna leave him. I'll just wait until you get here, I suppose."

New hope surges through me. He's there! I can breathe easier now, hoping Theresa might be alive too. Maybe.

When she ends her call, I'm grinning ear-to-ear. Maybe He did pull a little something for me.

"He's coming."

"I know. Thank you, ma'am."

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Chapter 5



Hearing his breaks squeal after not much time tells me that he's coming from the Church, not from his home in the city. Ray doesn't live in the barracks, he rents a small place of his own, so this means there might be a live catch in the cell underneath the Church. Or he's hurt as hell and getting treatment. Or Theresa is in bad shape.

Could be a lot of things, but none of it means 'operating as normal.' He's speeding to get to me, crossing the lines with his tires, so much so that I'm worried he'll hit the nice lady's car when he pulls off. He comes to a stop though, the brakes screeching. Ray is always hard on the pedal.

It's a red beat up truck he drives. He's out of it as soon as the tires stop skidding.

What follows is a heartfelt thank you and an offer of money, which has to be declined by the nice woman of course, then a little bit about who we are. Not the truth of it, obviously, but Ray does invite her to service and promise to get me some help.

He knows right off what I am. When he grabs me, he's got one hand on his hip, ready to draw a blade and slit my throat fast. It won't kill a vampire, but it'll weaken them.

He hauls me right up without any gentleness and steers me to the car with himself as a barrier between me and the woman. He slows down a bit as I struggle along. If she weren't here, he'd probably be rougher.

Ray's a good man. A smart man too, when it comes to hunting. Everybody's got their special talent. He's not so bright at nearly anything else, including reading, but he's one of the old hounds. He wants me in that cell asap, no matter how hurt I am or who I am. I can understand that, and I do everything I can to help, shuffling along at speed, pulling myself into the truck. He left handcuffs on the seat for me.

Pleasantries and shaking hands take place outside my door. I thank her again, and finally the woman bids us goodbye.

That's what I don't get about keeping this all secret. Women like her are just ready to be snatched up.

But then, I suppose vampires aren't the only predators who do that. Nice and naive have always got to be the same thing.

"Fucking bitch," Ray says, getting in on his side. I've never been so happy to hear the man cuss. "What're you so happy about?"

I shake my head because he doesn't know.

"Glad you got to me," I say.

"It's still you in there?"

I haven't heard any voices, so I assume so. "Yes."

"Well, you know what I got to do, don't you?"

"Yeah, I do."

She's driving off, so it's safe to cuff me now. I turn and cross my hands behind my back for him. They're strong iron cuffs, heavy as hell and they'll hold a damn elephant.

Some vampires can break them, but most can't. I pull on the chain just to see what it's like. Solid. I don't have inhuman strength as far as I can tell, but my eyes are still showing proof.

“Jesus, look at you,” Ray says under his breath. I always knew the old man has more emotion in him than he lets on.

“Yeah. You better drive,” I say, but Ray doesn’t take the brake off yet, just staring at me. So I ask some questions. “Did Theresa make it out? She was with us, right?”

“Yeah. And no.”

I’m relieved, but then he goes on, eyes downcast.

“She’s been MIA for a week now. Same as you. Shit.”

He checks his phone while I process that Ray, the big idiot, answered backwards. She *didn’t* make it. She’s still missing.

Why would they hurt her? She only wanted to understand them.

Amazingly, these thoughts still occur sometimes. The thing about fighting nonhumans is, you can’t apply human reasoning to anything they do. It’s like asking a dog why he kills a helpless rabbit.

“Let’s hope she’s dead,” I say. There’s a brief moment of anger on Ray’s features, but it’s a saying we have for when hunters go missing. He must be holding out for the unlikely outcome. He’d have given up on anybody else in hours.

Clarity returns, but he doesn’t sound convinced.

“Yeah. Let’s hope.”

Poor guy.

He throws the brake at last. “I woke up and nobody was there. It was just me hanging upside down in the van. I had no idea what happened, except everyone, including our catch in the back, was missing. It was that damn brother.”

“What happened?” I ask.

“You don’t know? I was about to ask you the same thing. You remember anything about Theresa? Where they took her? What they did with her?”

“No. The last thing I remember was us all in a van, driving out with the fleet.”

He sighs, shaking his head. “Shit man, that was weeks ago.”

“*Weeks?*”

“Yeah. Two or three.” He starts the pickup and waits for a car to pass. “We finished that attack ages ago. Hit five, maybe six...” He thinks as we start up the highway toward the church. “Yeah, six, I think, slugs into the demon, and that bastard still wouldn’t fucking *let go.*”

This isn’t making a lot of sense to me. “Of what?”

“The childe. Well, we thought he was human, but he was—you know. A demon baby, basically.”

With Ray’s driving, I’m oddly concerned about not wearing a seatbelt. I guess it’s a habit, I always strapped in first thing. I feel naked almost, as I’m leaning with the turns.

I describe my image to him. “Is that the boy?”

“Yeah, that’s him. And we pissed them off something fierce, man. I said it was a mistake. I said we shoulda killed him outright, before the demon took hold, you know? Get him done while he’s still human. But Theresa said we oughta study him for a little bit and ask questions. See what he’s all about.

“Of course, the father, he ain’t got no common sense with women. Theresa talked all that science shit to him, and the father agreed. She said he’d be weak, and she was right. Except the family? *Wasn’t* weak. And his fucking *mama bird...*” Ray snorts. “...was pissed as hell.”

The story feels right. I don’t have any memories coming to me, no specific moments or nothing like that, but I trust Ray’s word as much as I trust him with my life.

I've got a question to ask.

“Ray, could you kill me? Before I turn?”

He runs a hand through his hair and gives me a long look, driving blind for far too many seconds. But he knows the road.

“No.”

“Why? The demon hasn't taken hold, right? I'm still human. Feel me.”

“I know you are. There ain't no other reason for you to contact me. But it ain't up to me.” He says this with a deep frown. He knows what's going to happen to me. Purification isn't easy when it's monsters, and now it's me.

“Tell me the rest,” I say. Just so I can listen to him for a while, as I've done for years.

* * *

Ray calls ahead from the bottom of the driveway. “Hey, I got Brian. All clear up there? Yeah, he's secure. No, I don't think he's a threat. He seems like himself. He don't seem dead either.”

He pinches my arm.

“Okay, but... Do we really have to? It's just his eyes that look a little funny, the rest of him—” Ray breaks off. “Yes, sir.”

He hangs up the phone and pulls a pack of cigarettes out of his front pocket.

“What'd he say?” I ask, trying to sound casual.

Ray doesn't look at me as he lights up and takes a drag. “We're not taking any chances.”

“Oh. Okay.”

I keep my features clear of the panic I feel building inside.

The Lord could have done it Himself, while I was begging in the river. I did it long enough, didn't I? This must be what He wants.

I try to not let panic overtake my features. My body seems to want to cry—or scream—but I can't react, or Ray might believe I'm not myself after all.

I'm going to be killed. Whipped and bled to death, and all I can do is sit here.

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Chapter 6



I cry. I scream. I open my heart to Him and beg for His mercy. But now I know the texts have it all wrong. It isn't that I do not wish to be saved. It is that He does not wish to save me.

“Stop this! Please!” I yell and hope they'll listen because they know me. They're my friends, my only family. Just hours ago, before all this, they prayed with me outside of my cell.

“Repent!” the father yells, and the whips strike me.

My body has been reduced to a trembling mass of nerves. I feel every lash, yet it's more than I can comprehend, more than I can stand. My entire body is burning all over.

“Listen! Please!”

“Repent!”

They strike me, and I cannot kneel any longer. I fall sideways, into my own blood. They did not slit my throat because of the risk that I would die instantly. They have to redeem me slowly through blood and pain.

The father prays for my salvation. I will not live to see it. The vampires are strong, but I am weak. I won't make it to dawn, when the sunlight burns the demon away.

“Please listen,” I beg as I lay in a curled, weeping mess. “I have opened my heart to Him. I have asked His forgiveness. He does not receive me. He does not want me.”

Our methods are wrong. I think Theresa knew that. It’s why she crossed out that half-statement in her notes. She never attended these, even though she accompanied the hunts. She always wanted to talk to the monsters more than save them.

“It doesn’t work!” I try to shout, but my voice has gone hoarse.

The father finishes his prayer and lifts his head. This father does not wear glasses. He is portly, with a large nose, a loud voice, and usually a jovial demeanor. I’ve always liked him. Everybody does. But now he will kill me.

“You think you have opened yourself to him,” he says, “but sin still lies in your heart. You are wretched. You claim to have accepted his love like he owes you redemption. And in this, you reveal the true greed and selfishness of your heart!”

He slams the podium. The whips come down with it, across my sides. “Repent!”

Behind me, the very nuns who cause the most pain and damage to my body pray for an end to my suffering and my my salvation.

"Let this wretched see the wickedness of his ways..."

“Repent!”

They strike me.

“Please!” I shout, forcing myself to get up on my knees and bow to the floor below him. Not the Lord, but the father, who is a far more powerful force. It is his mercy I must ask. Why did I not see this before?

“I will not last!” I say, crying. “I am not as strong as them, father, please. Have mercy!”

“Mercy is in the Lord,” says a woman’s voice behind me.

Terrified that she will strike me again, I scoot forward as much as the chains will allow, to the edge of the purification circle.

“I will not make it,” I say. “For whatever reason... the Lord does not hear me. Please believe. He doesn’t listen! He doesn’t forgive...”

“Demon lies.” Though she doesn’t strike, I know she holds the whip high.

“Father! You have to do it. Forgive me! Have mercy! I have served you.”

I make the cross and clasp my hands in prayer.

“I begged at the river. Before I came to you. I was there for hours, I opened my heart to him, I did not give up. I only returned because I knew I wouldn’t have the strength to come here if I went on. I prayed for His salvation until I had no choice. I knew what you would do to me. Still, I came, because I believe in His love, and I am a good man. I always do my duty to Him. And I have always served you. Father, please...”

The nun steps forward. I hear her shoes. But the father holds up a hand to stop her.

He turns from the podium to face the stained glass window. For a long time he is silent there. I am glad for the pause, though I sink to the floor, unable to hold myself. Soon I will be unable to speak.

There is an odd sensation in this. As I stare up at the rafters I feel...

Not sadness. Not relief that the moment is close at hand.

I feel...

Anger that this has been done to me. God has wronged me. After all I did for him, after how I begged, this is the end I get for being a soldier in His army?

I'm aware that this only proves that I am flawed and wretched and unworthy of His love. But knowing that doesn't change this feeling.

I was supposed to live. That thought is certain. He shouldn't have abandoned me.

Yet, I've accepted how helpless I am to my fate. Maybe if I had felt like this on the roadside, things could have been different. I could have struggled on. Maybe without drinking blood I could have cured myself.

"The Lord has spoken to me," the father says. I hear his steps coming down from the podium, and I dare to hope for an end. He walks past me though, gesturing for the nuns to follow him.

"Purification cannot be interrupted," one of the nuns protests. He does not respond, and she rushes after. I am left alone in the room.

I am slighted by the fact that no one has cried for me. Ray couldn't take it. I assume he's smoking and maybe crying in another room. I called out to him for a time, hoping he'd come for me. Ray is as nonbeliever as the Clan allows. If anyone would come for me, it'd be him.

The nuns don't pity me because they're used to this. But I thought with me being human it'd be different. I feel like it's wrong that it's not. Servants of the Lord shouldn't be able to torture a man without crying.

Maybe, because of my eyes, I'm not human to them anymore. But I don't think that's it. I retain the rest of my appearance as Brian, the man. I've said enough to prove that I'm still alone in my mind. I think the Church and the ritual has broken something inside and they don't realize it.

I hear their footsteps coming back.

Ray is with them, and I see that he's red in the face, weeping openly. I feel better knowing that he at least is a good man. Though, when I call out for him, he turns so he can't look at me.

The father approaches stoically, the nuns staying close behind, clutching their whips. He kneels by my head and takes my face in his hands.

Ray draws a blade and the father speaks.

“You must live another day. The Lord is not done with you yet.”

I am confused. If I must live, why has he brought Ray to kill me? Does he mean the eternal life after?

Ray holds his wrist over me.

“What’re you doing?” I ask.

He doesn’t answer, and the father nods to him. “Do it now. Quick.”

Ray winces and presses the blade into his wrist. Blood suddenly drips from his flesh, and I turn from it.

“Drink. You must live,” the father orders me.

“Why?”

“So we can execute a plan.”

Warmth splashes on my cheek, then the father positions my head and the blood hits my lips. I keep them tight so I won’t taste a thing. Not a drop. I turn my head into the floor, trying to escape. I’m no fight for the father when he grabs my chin and forces me to look up.

Ray speaks up. “Hey, if he ain't taking it, do you think...?”

“No,” the father says firmly. “I read the book and Theresa’s research. He is a babe in their earliest infancy.”

His wetted finger pushes through my lips and spreads the copper taste against my teeth. I tense against any kind of longing sensation, any hunger in my gut that may drive me to bite and suck like one of those monsters. I will not become the thing that killed my mother.

I taste the blood, but it doesn’t happen. I feel only revulsion and the father’s fingers keep me from closing my mouth.

Ray huffs.

“But he’s not, you know, freaking out or anything. He doesn’t want it and you’re *fucking*—” He realizes he slipped. No one reacts though, so he goes on. “You’re forcing it on him. He doesn’t want that stuff, he’s not one of them!”

He takes back his hand, and the two nuns grab his arm to keep it held over me. They’re stronger than they seem.

Calmly, the father explains, “He is in the womb, so to speak. He is neither human nor one of them yet, but he will change. His body needs nourishment to survive though. The book describes methods to get a newborn to...” He makes a face. “...*nurse*. But we won’t be trying those.”

Firmer, he speaks to me.

“Brian, you are a soldier of His light. And God has a purpose for you. So you will drink.”

But what about the demon? I want to ask.

It doesn't make sense. If vampirism is truly demon possession, there can be no purpose under God's will for the affliction, and the task couldn't be done in God's church. This can only be the devil's work.

Looking into the father's eyes, trying to bite down hard enough that he'll take his fingers out of my mouth, I realize he knows it isn't demon possession. He knows all along that what we're taught to believe isn't true. That's why it was so important that Theresa follow along and make her notes.

The father's hold hurts my jaw. “Do not disobey His orders. You have a greater purpose, which He has spoken to me. Open. Drink.”

It is a lie. It keeps them going, keeps them believing. But why, why would he do this to me? What purpose could he have for turning me? More study?

I hate myself for swallowing so much. For letting him in. But I'm too weak to struggle forever.

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Chapter 7



I cough and spit. On the floor, I can't tell the difference between what's my blood and what of his I may have expelled. My breath is coming in gasps, but I can't force myself to vomit. The father kept my head back until I swallowed nearly all of it.

“Why?” I ask. With strength I didn't know I had, I shout, “*Why did you do that to me?!*”

I listen in case the demon possession will come over me now. I think it will be a deep-voiced laughter, in the back of my mind, chuckling then building up. The father must be an agent of the devil.

But I hear nothing. It's still just me. My insides are alive with a tingling that's warm and spreading, deep inside me where there should be nothing.

I didn't enjoy the blood. Perhaps I am not afflicted.

Maybe.

I don't feel so weak.

I twist to look at my back. The tears and red lines are still there, so I'm not healing like I should if I were one of them. But I'm also not bleeding anymore, and I notice I have more strength as I move away from the father, sliding in my own fluids until the chains clink. I'm a pathetic thing.

I don't like to think that his blood has given me strength. But I feel like, if this straitjacket were removed, I could run probably.

"It is necessary for you to survive," the father says, standing. A nun has abandoned her whip and begun to wrap Ray's wound. The other is opposite me, her expression shocked and her eyes terrified.

"We don't make vampires," Ray grumbles.

"True," the father responds, "but the Lord made this one, not I. I do not have such powers."

"Bullshit. You forced it on me." My voice has gained more strength. God, I *am* transforming. The blood is doing something in my gut. I have more energy. I'm not on the brink of passing out anymore.

"Bring my coat," the father commands, and the nun wrapping Ray's wrist shoots him a mad look. But she ties off the bandage and leaves to obey.

"It was God's will to make you, Brian," he says. "The Lord has given our war an insider."

"It doesn't work like that!" I shout at him.

How could it, with demon possession? The transformation is the work of evil. The hunger for innocent lives, fear, violence, sex... Sins, all sins. Evil. Their beauty is the gift of the devil too. God does not give beauty, for vanity is another sin.

I shake my head, trying to make it all make sense.

But I can't.

"I'm going to become a monster because of you."

The father kneels. His robes were already dark with the mess, and he doesn't react to putting a knee in the blood.

"You will turn, but you will stay true. Bringing yourself to us for healing was proof, but if you had a chance at salvation, I had to give it to you. The Lord keeps you here because it is in his plan. You will be his warrior outside of the light."

The nun returns with the coat, and the father digs into a pocket for a key. He reaches behind me for the lock on my chains. It hurts, the way he maneuvers me. The wounds are alive, ragged, and screaming. But I force myself to endure it just so I can be free. He leaves the irons on my wrists, but I'm no longer attached to the floor.

I see now how those two beauties could turn on me. I'd do the same to him in a heartbeat, only I require my shotgun.

"We do not have time to set you free tonight. It's too close to the morning. So we will bandage you and release you tomorrow."

"This is fucking madness," Ray says. Again, no one takes notice of his language. He paces, mumbles something vulgar, and his hand touches the holster to his gun. "Do you know what he could do?!"

The chain falls to the floor, and I stand to get away from them both. I don't make it a step before I'm collapsed on my side, splashing in the mess, and even then I kick my legs against the floor. A nun encircles my position, whip poised. I stop. There is no escape from them.

"Brian?" asks the father, stepping calmly after me. "Do you feel the demon's presence? Do you think you could turn on us?"

I meet his eyes. "I don't know."

"Think and answer, my son. Serving the Lord isn't easy, but you must labor the yoke. We all do."

I have the urge to show my teeth and bite. But I am still in control, so I say, "No. I don't think so."

Whatever else Ray has to say gets mumbled as the father gives him a stern glare. I've never seen it happen, but in the Clan, whips aren't only for

the captives.

“You’ve spoken your fears. But you have not listened to the Lord, who speaks if you would only still your mind and feel him. Brian is a rare gift. The only we shall ever have like this. Do you doubt the Lord?”

Ray must be careful here. *Agnostic* might be too strong a word for him, but doubting? Certainly. The Clan gives him a lot of leeway on account of his proven skill.

“No. I am a servant of the Lord.”

He says it strongly, though he has little regard for the oaths. *Actions over words*, he’s said to me.

“But that doesn’t mean I think we should be taking the confines off a vampire,” he finishes.

The father holds up a finger to quiet me. “We will keep him in the cell, and we will watch him every hour. We will continue to feed him.”

“No,” I protest, but I’m ignored.

“If I have doubts, we will finish the purification. No second chances. But if he maintains his mind, he will be our greatest weapon—and our greatest ally. He will cleanse this city fully.”

Ray has more to say that gets mumbled behind his hand. Then he only turns and begins to pace madly. He won’t risk discipline.

“Father, I could not have my mind by tomorrow. I could hurt innocents. Please, Ray is right, just kill me.” *Continue the cleansing*, a faithful hunter would say, but I can’t. I can’t take anymore. It won’t work anyway.

“Just kill me,” I repeat until I’m begging, while the nuns work together to carefully lift me off the floor. Neither want to be touching me.

“Brian. You will turn. It is a terrible task, but the Lord never asks for more than we can bear. Trust in him.”

The nuns have abandoned their weapons entirely, and I feel like no one has learned the lesson I bore long ago. If I was one of the evil ones, I could make a game of killing them now. Unfortunately, I am truly weak. I cannot even shrink away from their touch as they guide me toward the door leading downstairs.

“What if I can’t do it?” I ask, trying a different approach, getting on his side. “What if you let loose a monster, and it’s for nothing?”

I think about their necks, just to tempt the demon in showing himself to me. Nothing.

“You will. The Lord will reveal your path. Find strength in him.” They carry me out of the room, and the father follows behind us. “By your doubts, I know I am not wrong. The Lord has chosen you. This is a hard task, but also an honor.”

It is never easy to argue with the church about anything. Still, I try.

“What if they kill me? I have taken two of them to cleansing. They won’t want to keep a murderer of their kind.”

“You are their childe. You will be precious in their eyes.” He grins slightly. “Use your allure and turn their weapon against them.”

“That won’t work. They don’t have children, the love is a lie.”

“You are not putting your faith in the Lord.”

I’m frustrated. We hunters hear this a lot when we voice concerns. It’s always some version of the Lord and trust. We get used to it. It is not a soldier’s duty to know the reasons behind the commands, after all.

But can I accept my orders this final time? When I am this?

We go to the hidden door and head down the secret stairs.

“How will I kill any of them?”

“Don’t kill them directly. Bring them to us for purification. Save their souls. That is the Lord’s work.”

That’s worse. Killing is simple. Live captures aren’t easy.

“I am not strong like them! I do not look like them. They will kill me.”

“The Lord will make them see you as one of themselves.”

Before they put me in the cell, the nuns turn me around to face the father.

“Brian. You know the rules.” He gets close and his hand touches my face, making me look at him. “The unwilling cannot serve the Lord.”

Yet, I feel like I have no choice. The death he plans for me if I refuse is not swift. Though I’ve tried to do nothing but good, God has not accepted my plea for salvation. The only way forward is through the father and the Church.

“I am in God’s army. I will fight for Him. I accept His work.”

The father caresses my cheek. “Good.”

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Chapter 8



I spend the day sleeping, only woken up when a cup is pressed to my lips. I ask for water as well. They do not refuse so long as I finish the blood first.

"This is the shittiest, most disgusting thing I've ever had to do in my service," I grumble, not caring enough to mind my language. Petty punishments are beyond me now.

I am reminded of my commitment to the Lord, and the cup is tilted up so I can drink. And that is that.

I wish I could say the transformation has not taken effect, but I am noticing changes. My ears can pick up a running faucet in another room. My eyes do not open when I urge them to.

The father is right. I will be a vampire made by the Lord, and in our church. It sounds ridiculous, even in my head. *A vampire of the Lord...* Pff. But perhaps it is possible. I have no inclinations when I think of blood, so I can only assume the Father is correct.

I am afraid. What will I have to do to earn the trust of their kind? Will I kill innocents? Will I standby while they are slain?

They will kill me, I'm sure, but I also kind of hope they do. The thought of pretending to be a vampire and assimilating with them is terrifying.

Maybe more so than the whips and purification. There is no greater unsettlement than facing something so unhuman.

Animals respond to their nature. They kill out of fear, hunger, or simple aggression.

Vampires keep their prey alive for days sometimes, feeding off of them, talking to them, sometimes having sex with them. Sometimes they let their victims go immediately, and sometimes they keep them until the victim dies of exhaustion. Some spare children. Sometimes we find entire families dead in their bedrooms.

We have not found evidence that there are good vampires, but there are varying levels of cruelty. They're unpredictable. They act on their whims without empathy.

The door opens. "Brian, are you still yourself?" the father asks.

"Yes."

"Are you ready?"

"Yeah."

"Ray, he's yours from here."

I can hear their feet, and the darkness shifts sometimes. Ray is at my cell door, I think, and I hear the father whisper, "You follow orders. Even if you don't like them."

"Yes," he consents, and I know he will. Ray has a habit of running his mouth, but when it comes to down to it, there isn't a more loyal man than him.

Aloud to me, the father says, "Can you make the trip safely without confines? It's okay to say no."

"I'm blind, so I'm no danger to Ray or anybody." I listen still for a whisper of an unknown voice. Demon possession either does not grip me or is not the source of vampirism after all.

“Can you walk?”

“I don’t know.”

My muscles have gone stiff. My back screams when I move. The blood has helped, but it’s not the instant cure I have seen close a gunshot wound. For a short time after ingesting, I could move on my own. Then I was crippled again as my muscles locked up and hurt.

“Well, you must,” the father says. The door swings open. I hear his clothes rustle. “It is your task to find them.”

“How? I can’t see.”

He takes my chin, and I hear a cuss word from Ray, as well as the strap coming off of his holster.

There’s a pause. I know what this is. A test. Proof for the others.

“I am the Lord's creation,” I say, admitting it to myself as well. It is the only thing that makes sense, though I do not understand why God would speak to the father and not to me.

“Good. Then you must get up. He has much for you to do.” He takes my arm and pulls me to my feet.

Together we go out to the car. It is a long journey for me, but I don’t dare ask for more blood. I wouldn’t be able to explain that I’d want it only for mobility and not for hunger or want of anything else. I’d be ashamed of myself too, so I keep the idea quiet.

Ray never comes to help me up the stairs, the hardest part. He’s likely got his gun drawn, perhaps already aimed at my back. The creatures move too fast to waste a second.

“I don’t think it’s going to work,” I say, though the argument is long gone. Now I’m just talking to distract myself from my broken body. “I am too weak to do anything to them. Theresa said most people die before the transformation completes.”

“The Lord has more in store for you,” the father says.

When we get outside, I feel stronger. I turn my face up to the sky and feel a soft tickling, like sunbeams hitting your skin on a cold day. But instead of an overwhelming brightness overhead, this is a glow with nearly indiscernible origin, a light all around me.

Moonlight, I realize. I can feel it. I know where the light passes through tree limbs, and I can sense the presence of the church behind me, blocking the stars.

Otherwise, the night is utterly silent and the world imperceptible. There is only the stars over head and my feet on the ground. I sense that the space out here is wide open. Every breath I take of free air is deeper than the last.

There is still no voice, but I am changing.

I don't wear a shirt, and I cry out as Ray slings a coat over my shoulders, then passes me to open the car door. It is difficult to get inside. I am still in irons, so I have to pitch my body onto the seat and crawl in. He helps get the coat back on right, then he slams the door and I have to shoulder my ear from the sound.

“What if he tries to hurt someone?” Ray asks in a tense whisper from outside the truck.

“All is God's will now.”

“But I can bring him back, right? Can I... put him down? If it's an emergency?”

I rest my head against the cool glass window, wishing it didn't filter the star's light. My body is sensitive. I must've sat in Ray's truck a thousand times, and this is the first time I've felt the press of the seams in the seat.

“No. This is Brian's mission now,” the father says. “Drop him off and go home. That's all your allowed to do.”

“What if he attacks me?”

“Leave, Ray. We will be lucky if he doesn’t die in the sun anyhow. It is mere chance that he will find his kind in the first place.”

Ray kicks the tire before he gets in the truck.

I want to tell him he has every right to shoot me if there's an emergency, but the truck coming on makes me cover my ears. Then the tires are spitting dirt and we're barreling off. He hits potholes. The brakes squeal and hurt my ears every time he slows down.

It's a relief when he gets on the highway. Until I remember that he's driving me to the city, the worst place for a vampire to be.

“This is a crazy idea,” I say.

Ray huffs. “Yeah, you ain't been around though. You ain't seen it.”

“Seen what?”

“All the bodies. Not just doped up kids, neither. Not homeless guys, not ‘night people’. You know? Now it's people disappearing right out of parking lots, with witnesses and everything. Nobody sees the creatures, of course. They're fucking sly about it. One minute you're coming out of the movies, then... *woosh*.”

I can picture his hand movement with it. Ray's always been a gesturing kind of guy. He tells a damn good war story. But this news makes me frown.

“Why didn't you tell me?”

He snorts. “Well, you were fucked. I thought there was no point in telling you about our grand failure.”

“What failure?” This must be about the flipped car, of course. “Did I do something?”

“No. We. We lost the newborn. So the monsters are stirred up something crazy to feed it. And it's disappearances, like I said, not murders. Which means...”

“They’re slow bleeding them.”

“Yup. We got eighteen confirmed murders, but you know, we could be well over forty unconfirmed ones. You make nineteen, actually, and Theresa...” He sighs. "She's twenty."

“That’s not... maybe...”

“No, it’s true goddamn it. She wanted to be there and observe and study. She convinced the father to wait for his turning. And now the fucking vampires are running a goddamn nursery, just like Theresa said.”

He rolls down the window and I hear the click of his lighter.

“I won’t do it, Ray. I can’t... I don’t even know what I’m supposed to do!”

“Now, you listen here...” The lighter is still clicking as the car leans through a tight curve.

“The father’s fucking crazy, alright? But this plan is either genius or the worst goddamn stupidity. Either you’re gonna be our spy on the inside, bringing ‘em to us, calling in and telling us their sleeping locations... Or the disappearance rate in this city is about to double, alright?”

He adds, muttering, "God's plan... Shit."

“Assuming I don’t burn in the sun first.” The trickiest part is the part they’ve left up to me.

“Yeah. Assuming that. You’re either gonna put a stop to this shit, you’re gonna die, or you’re gonna start up a modern plague, man.”

“Aliens,” I murmur, not expecting him to hear it.

This isn’t the first city or town to see an increase in activity. It’s just *our* first, because we’re very good at what we do. We make them afraid of us.

“Yeah, but a few aliens aren’t going to keep the blame for long. You don’t know how hard the hunting gets when the government gets stirred

up.”

“Yeah.”

“So you’re going to pull this off for us, Brian. If not... Well, actually, I promise I'm gonna shoot ya either way. Understand?”

This isn’t a threat. This is a tremendous relief. “Thank you, friend.”

“We ain’t friends. You’ve turned already, you just can’t look at yourself.”

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Chapter 9



The rest of the ride is quiet. It needs to be. Ray would have to talk over the sound of the truck engine, which is as loud as a roller coaster in my ears. I'm glad he doesn't turn on the radio like he usually does. Those guitars twanging would be the screams on the ride.

He's right about me turning. I am already this *thing*. I can't see myself, and I don't feel any different, but my senses are too good. My heart's racing too, but that could be the fear. I've heard it's supposed to stop completely when I've completed the transformation.

Taking a breath, I sense no pain like a heart attack coming on. My back though...

I curl into the door and pull the coat around me. My arms aren't through the sleeves since my wrists are still in irons, so it's like a big blanket. I wonder what people are going to think of a half-naked man running around the city in cuffs.

I'm not wearing fresh jeans either. Thankfully, I haven't soiled myself. I haven't used the bathroom once. Small perks. They've got to be stained with blood though. I can't imagine the state I must be in.

I know we're getting close when my eyes sense lights passing overhead. There's few cars at this hour, and I feel every streetlight.

"Where will you drop me off?"

“Downtown with all the clubs and stuff. It’s still the best place.”

“How will I find them?”

“That’s for you to figure out.”

I shift in my seat to sit up a little straighter without scraping my back.

“I’m going to take this seriously, just so you know.”

It didn’t occur to me to think up some last parting words for Ray. I guess I’ll never remember the real ones anyway, when I was fully human.

These feel like a sincere parting speech as I give them: “I’m going to do everything I can to stay who I am. I’m going to be loyal to the Clan. I’ll do anything I can to stop the murders.”

“That’s the only reason I ain’t put a bullet in you yet.”

I make a weak imitation of laughter. I know he’s not joking, but he’s still my friend and the man I trust, no matter what he says. Then I think it over.

“What about your orders?” God knows, Ray is a man who keeps to his orders. He’s stopped my hand a few times.

“Fuck those. I know Brian. I’ve helped that boy cry. He’d rather be dead than helping commit murders. He’s not God’s soldier, he’s just a good man.”

Ray’s voice is thick, and my own throat is tight.

“If anyone’s going to be a good vampire, it’s going to be him. You’ll do your best. That’s why I’m gonna drop you off instead of killing you in secret. But know this... No vampire stays good forever. You gotta kill sometime. It’s just how you eat. And someday, hopefully when the body count has gone down...”

I hear him take a breath and rustle around in his seat. Then his voice is dead of emotion when he speaks.

“I’m gonna repay you by hunting you. And then I’m going to get revenge for you by hunting every last vampire on this Earth. I’m not going to stop with this city, or this state. I’m not gonna do it the Church’s way either. Killing is just efficient.”

He’s been chewing on those thoughts a long while. Every vampire escaped is scores of lives lost. This newborn thing has finally pushed him into making a decision. The Church and the Clan won’t like him breaking their principles, but they’ve always need him more than the other way around. I think Ray’s just stuck with them because it gives him a sense of family.

Perhaps my turning fixed that.

The car takes an exit, slowing into a curve, then stopping. The brakes make me forget what I was working up to tell him. Something mushy maybe, about what he meant to me spending time with me when I was a teenager. We went fishing. But then, as we progress slower within the city, I think it’s alright to leave it.

Brian the man never felt the moonlight on his skin. It’s nice, but it’s not human.

So I leave Ray alone and we come to a loud place with different kinds of music happening on both sides of the street. The lights are bright enough that they shine through my closed lids.

The car slows, swerves, then stops.

“Is this it?”

“Yeah. You still can’t open your eyes?”

“A little, but it’s not helpful anyways.”

“Well, I ain’t got a walking stick, so you’ll be bumping into things.”

I take the door handle for my departure, but he yanks on my arm. Then I feel a key working on the irons.

“Are you sure?” I ask, surprised. “I could hurt somebody.”

“Just saying that proves you won’t. Yet. But also, a human can just outrun you if you tried. No point in losing the equipment. They’ll break you out of it anyway, so we might as well keep these intact for another time when they’re useful.”

My hands are free. I rub my wrists. I’m about to say, *Bye, Ray*, but I feel like it’s good where we left it. Getting out of the seat is difficult, as I have to lower myself over a drop off, into a space I can’t see. I get it done though, balance on my feet, and I shut the door.

He doesn’t pull out right away. The car doesn’t start. I assume he’s just in there, staring at me, making it a whole lot more awkward that I don’t know where to go. Or what to do. The Church figured that since I’m one of them, I must automatically know where I’m going. Like animal instincts.

The stars out here are nice. I hate having to cover up in this coat, but I’m aware that I’ll be found by humans first if I’m walking around in all these bandages.

I take my first step. My mobility hasn’t improved any since the car ride. I can only hobble, and it requires a lot of effort.

Goddamn it, why’d they have to beat me? They’ve made me useless.

My mind has time to work on it, as I’m shuffling away from the car, no reference for where I’m at, just lights to hint about the line of businesses, and the feeling of sidewalk cracks under my bare feet. Otherwise, I might as well be stranded in the ocean, no direction, not too many sounds.

I’m moving away from the source of music. So I guess that means I’m heading the wrong direction, since the vampires likely hunt off the drunks at the bar. Witnesses aren’t credible when they’re smashed at a certain hour.

I turn around and start that way. Meanwhile, it occurs to me that they might have done this on purpose. Ray would’ve called them immediately after I contacted them. The Father would’ve had time to work up some kind of plan, possibly just an idea.

They might have put me through purification to make sure I'm too weak to be a threat. Or maybe, the better side of me would like to think, they needed to see if the Lord would take me, I'd be cleansed, and that would be my fate.

I don't know. Either way, it's the best thing to do from their perspective. I wonder what I would have thought about the plan if I was back there in the truck with Ray, watching some other poor bastard go through with it.

I don't think I would have saved me either. Maybe.

When they force fed me, I think I would have stopped it.

I lift my face to the night sky. I can feel the moon even though there's a street lamp overtaking her shine.

Ray is right. I am the guy to go through with this. If a demon speaks to me, I'll call Ray with the time and the place to put me out.

A long time hobbling, and the music gets louder. It's the thumping beat of some country mix. Not the good stuff, the new crap. I know this place. Hunters can draw you a map to every bar and nightclub in the city. This isn't the heart of downtown, it's a little more obscure.

"Goddamn it, Ray."

Likely, he didn't want to put me in the throng of university students. But that means I've got even less chance of accidentally bumping into the creatures I seek.

I feel up the coat pockets hopefully. I could schmooze someone into helping out a blind guy. But nope, no money.

"A dying man can't even get a drink," I mumble, and continue on. To nowhere.

Chapter 10



I know I'm in trouble when I've only passed one or two groups of people and have crossed nearly a dozen streets. My hearing tells me whether it's safe to cross or not. Yet, I can't pick up the sounds of people, and that's bad. I've got to be near the right location.

Maybe my mind drifted a little. Maybe I took a wrong turn or forgot a street in my head. It's very possible, because I'm sweating and straining to go on, moving so slowly. Lack of blood maybe, either in my veins or in my stomach.

I could actually be dying. I don't think I'm going to be one of those food sources that makes it.

"Well, this is a shitty way to do it," I say to Him, though I'm not sure he's listening. "Coulda just let 'em kill me." Any of them, the Church or the vampires. "Coulda heard my begging and taken me into your arms or whatever."

I hear someone walking towards me. She's in heels. I've got nothing to lose.

"Ma'am, excuse me could you...?"

There's no change in pace and she's coming right toward me.

"Could you tell me what street corner this is?"

She goes past, and the only thing I feel is the movement of air. I hear her heels clacking and smell her booze, like she's close, but she never touches me and she's already gone.

“Just tell me the street corner! I can't see!”

The heels stop and I wait. After long enough, I can't figure out what happened. Maybe there's a bus stop. Maybe she sat down. There was no car door, so she didn't get in a vehicle, and her heels are too loud to just disappear like that.

Maybe she's just standing there, staring.

I go on. This was a stupid plan anyway. What was I supposed to say or do when I found the vampires? I won't be walking much longer. My body shakes. I can still feel my hands, but my legs seem to be going numb. Soon, I'm going to collapse.

I should try to find a nice alley somewhere. Maybe some place out of the sun, if it's possible. Then I can rest.

I'm almost there, at that tipping point of giving up. But I had better find a dark place first. I'm drawing a blank on possible places, but if I knew the street I was on, I'd at least have my options.

My arms are too tired to keep my hands in front of me. Stepping off the curb, I bump into somebody's parked car. As I'm navigating around it, I walk into something—someone—solid.

“Oh. I'm sorry, I didn't see you. I can't, uh...”

Cool fingertips touch my eyelids.

I try to backpedal, but the curb is behind me, and I'm wobbly on my feet.

“I can't see. I'm blind. Er, I can't open my eyes. Because...”

They grab my jacket, steadying me, and I flinch with the pain of the clothing moving against my torn back. I don't smell anything. He or she doesn't say anything.

But the hands are on my face, prying lightly to see my eyes.

“Hey, don’t do that.” I don’t know if my irises will glow or not. Whoever it is might freak out, and they might be the first person all night who’s willing to help me.

Lips. Are kissing my cheek. I put my hands on this person and push. “Oh, okay, you’re, uh, probably shit-faced.”

It seems late enough that the bars could be closed. I’m exhausted. I’m not going to make it much longer, and I don’t have any strength or patience for this.

“Don’t, okay?” I sag against the car. My head is heavy. I’ve got to find somewhere to sit down and never get back up. “Do you know what street this is?”

They pull me closer. ‘They’ is a person hard, solid, and not female. I lose my train of thought while lips are kissing me, along my jaw, and then this person’s nose nuzzles my neck.

I made a wrong turn. I ended up on *that* side of the downtown area. I’m trembling all over and starting to sink, but at least I can picture where I am now. It makes sense why the streets are so empty. Here there’s only art galleries, lawyer offices, several cafes, and *that* place.

They don’t put it by the bikers’ bar for a reason. Though, I do happen to know they have a theme night once a month.

I shouldn’t know that.

I push him back with both hands. This time I’m successful and he lets me go.

“Listen. I’m blind. I’m lost. Just give me the damn cross street.” *And maybe help me to an alleyway.* If I thought he’d do it, I’d ask, but I think it’s going to be difficult to explain why I want to be left alone after that.

Just a little more. Soon I can quit.

It's bad that I'm thinking I could go on with a little more blood. It's disgusting and I don't want it, but it did get me this far.

Maybe I'm better off just curling up and saving my strength. The sun didn't burn me in the woods, so I could be alright where ever I end up. I shouldn't be near people though. Maybe I need to call Ray and let him know to take me some place abandoned.

“Actually, a payphone and some change would really help me out. I'm not homeless and I'm not a druggie, I'm—”

“You are lost.”

“....Yes.”

His voice makes me perplexed. It's strong and calm, not drunk at all, and come to think of it, I still smell nothing. There's no booze on him. With this little space between us, it's almost like I'm here alone again. I can't hear him breathe, I realize. But then, unless he's panting, I'm not sure that I should. I listen very closely to the night air and the distant sound of cars from the highway. Something plastic rustles around, maybe some litter in the street, but not him.

You're making yourself paranoid.

If walking around at night was all it took, we hunters would be bagging them like Halloween candy. But if he saw me hobbling along, he might have known it would be safe to come out.

His soft sigh and the normal rustle of clothes and movement convinces me that I'm wrong. I'm being overly paranoid. I'm just exhausted, delirious perhaps, and he's just some guy heading home.

He takes my hand and guides it to his waist like we're going to slow dance.

“No, no, what are you doing? I'm not g—” It's best I don't finish that. “I can't—I'm not—”

I'm very hurt is what I am, and I make a terrible cry when he grabs me to keep me from getting away. I'm sure he meant this to be dominating and sexy, but my back still burns with pain.

He doesn't ask permission, and he doesn't hesitate longer than the second it takes me to inhale again. Now he's pulling my coat as if to take it off, and I have to wrap the edges around me. He goes low, lifting the ends and seeing that I'm wrapped in bandages.

"What is this? What has happened to you?"

"I'm fine, I just need a little direction." My head's foggy. I think I was wrong about him being so invisible to my other senses. He does smell like something, but I can't figure it out. It's making me want... I don't know.

It's making me curious.

He makes a sound when he gets sight of my body. I can't turn and fend him off fast enough.

"Who did this?!"

He's outraged.

"It's nothing. It..." I have to think of something. "It happened a long time ago. I've already been to the doctor for it."

"Why are you lying?"

He pushes me up against the car. I'm weak, anyone could have done it, but he's still a lot stronger than I thought he'd be. Not rough, just strong. When I try to pull my arm out of his grip, I achieve nothing. I don't even feel his muscles tighten to resist me.

He pulls the coat to expose my shoulder.

"Alright, that's enough." I try to hike my coat back up while he's tugging on the other side. "Step away from me," I say in my 'not messing around' voice. "I don't need your help, I just need a place... to lie down."

I'm a bit woozy. And that scent...

It's... He's...

I need something.

"I need to get out of here!"

Not listening, he's working my arm out of the sleeve.

"Look, I can't fault you for being concerned, but I don't have time for this shit." The arm comes out. Now half my coat is dangling and my hurt body is exposed for the city to see.

He backs off finally. Perhaps shocked, I don't know. I haven't seen me. Or him. I just know that I'm wrapped in bandages around my chest and I feel like hell. The nuns haven't changed these since they put them on, so I assume they're a red mess. They're uncomfortable.

I think I'm going to hear his horror any moment now. He'll be dialing 9-1-1 and I'm going to pass out in a loud, screaming, bright machine. God, I could turn in the middle of the hospital, or burn up from sunlight in one of their beds.

"I'm fine. It doesn't hurt." I hiss with pain, trying to get my coat back on. "I just got into a... street fight is all."

It's more plausible than saying I got whipped, in this day and age. He wouldn't understand what I meant by cleansing or purification.

"Brian," he says in that calm voice. "Did you come from the church?"

It takes me a long minute just to process the words. And then to realize what he must be. And then to feel his lips against my face again, softly kissing.

"Are you my bait?" he asks over my mouth, and now his search is not so gentle, going into my pockets first, then taking the rest of the coat off me. I don't resist him. Every moment of him against my skin is noticed, but my body remains still. Passive.

He shakes out the coat. Then his fingers are digging into the front of my jeans.

“Will they swarm the streets? I don’t hear anything.”

This is your job. To be one of them. To be accepted by them.

I’m supposed to mimic their children. But I’ve got so much fear in me, I can’t remember my training or my purpose.

It’s like this with them. The Clan tries to prepare you for it and teaches you tactics to get past your own mind. Like ‘disconnecting’ and pretending the circumstances aren’t real. Feeling for the Lord’s light, his love, and his bravery through you.

But my body has been bled. My skin is lashed and torn. I cannot disconnect when my nerves are so alive. And the Lord’s love?

All I feel is pain.

I’m a small, frightened boy again.

I stutter something. Nonsensical words.

This thing turns me against the car. Now I know why he seemed so solid. Even his lips seemed firm. If I wasn’t so tired, I would have noticed first thing. He’s as cool as the car in front of me. Smoother, but not pliable.

“If I hear them, I will kill them. It doesn’t matter to me if you are my bait. I will take you to my nest and you will be my childe to raise. You are safe with us.”

Us? The plural implication is startling. Does he mean it figuratively, or...?

I was only focused on him, but now I’m suspicious of my surroundings. The plastic bag, the wind, the girl—oh God, the girl.

His fingers peeling back my bandage distracts me. He does it slow enough that it doesn’t hurt, but the slight breeze singes over the wounds.

Yet, when his fingertips brush over them, there is no additional hurt.

“They have torn you apart, dove.” His voice is strained. I can feel his breath against the wounds, and that means his teeth are also so near. He’s smelling me out. Tasting, maybe.

My knees give out and I rest my weight on the car.

Well, this is it. I found them. Now what?

I don’t want to be consumed again.

But I guess I’ll have to wait and see what he wants to do. I can at least relax now that the circumstance is out of my hands. Task complete. The Church can’t expect anything else. The creature has complete control of the situation, and I can let go.

He’s ghosting over the deepest gashes now, the ones that cross the middle of my back, and his touch lingers on the swell, where the burning is bad.

“I am sure they’ve not given you up to make peace. If they were mildly intelligent, I’d say they gave you up in this condition to escalate the war. But I’m also sure that those morons have no idea what you are.”

My fear caves.

“Yes, what am I?” I ask. “I haven’t needed blood, I haven’t felt any demons in my head. I’m not like you, I’m still me.”

“Brian.”

“Yes,” I say, thinking he’s finishing my words for me.

Until he says, “You are precious to me.”

Chapter 11



The Clan should have kept me. I think the father got wrapped up in Theresa's analysis and started thinking about them like animals. Not like demons, which are smart and guided by evil. The creature knows I'm a weapon, but he wants to keep me. Seeing as how I had no plan he's not going to guess, such as contacting the Church, the confidence of his tone tells me that this has already gone sideways.

"Kill me."

"No."

I do not appreciate the irony of two enemies that don't kill each other outright. It's confusing and wrong. His cold hand opens and sprawls over my wounds, carefully, so slowly. I admonish myself for it, but I can't help sighing and leaning my body's weight fully onto the car. It's not as frigid as ice, but that makes it better. His touch is like a cold towel, but softer, draped down my torn back.

Despite myself, I'm disappointed when his hands disappear. I got so used to the pain, the absence of relief makes it worse than before.

I hear cloth. I sense his movement. Then all at once, he wraps his arms around me from behind and pulls me into his naked chest.

"Ahh," I whine, cry, and whimper all at once. His body feels good. He's strong too, his muscles defined. Smooth and hard, and so perfect for leaning into. His arms around me hold me close, and his lips touch my neck.

I'm shaking. But I expose my neck to him.

I've never felt one of them like this. I never got this close, not even during the attack.

"You will be mine and Evelyn's. Katie saw you first, but everyone knows we have a special claim to you."

I wonder what that means.

"You are starving. You need to be fed."

As I try to pull away from him, he tightens up on me. He doesn't have to exert much force. Now that my body is relaxing, it's even weaker than before. I don't know if I could stand without his help.

"I know you do not wish to, but it does not matter. You are mine."

I remind myself that I'm *supposed* to be his. Or somebody's. And I'm supposed to somehow kill them all.

So I have to do this.

"Okay."

"You will not fight it?"

"No."

His tone becomes amused. "You *are* up to something. Oh, baby bird, you are not the first hunter to turn. You're just the first in a really, really long time. We don't keep you around long enough to see if you wake up." His lips press against the back of my neck. "I'm sorry about that. No baby bird should be left squalling in the woods..."

His arm bends up so that his wrist comes near my cheek, then I hear flesh ripping. It's a weird, distinctive noise, wet and pulpy.

"Oh no."

"Shh."

The smell. It's what I sensed before, that I thought was faintly good. Except then I thought it was the smell of his clothes or his shampoo or something. It wasn't like cologne, but it was good and I couldn't place it. Now I know.

I keep my lips closed for only a moment, in which I'm horrified and disgusted. Blood was forced on me by the father, but this time I'll be drinking directly from a demon, and somehow it's better.

Lord, give me strength.

I tell myself I do it because this was my mission. My task requires becoming one of them.

But the truth is, my mouth opens on its own. I don't think about it, I just do it. My tongue touches his flesh and my lips seal over the open wound.

“Mmm.”

The sound is little, involuntary, and honest. The father's blood only turned my stomach. It was hot and awful and it reminded me of raw meat, gutting deer, and all those others we bled over the church floor.

This is better. And it's because it comes from him. His cool flesh touches my tongue too with the warm liquid. The blood is sweet and flows freely. I swallow fast, wanting it all, then wanting more. My strength returns, to my fingers at least as I dig into him with both hands. Blood surges when I bite. As soon as I discover this, I start gnawing on him frantically, swallowing fast.

“Shh. It's alright, sweet dove,” he says in my ear. “I am gluttoned, and you will have everything.”

Again, I have the thought, *The woman in heels...*

But that is just a blip of guilt as an aching fire begins to fill me from the inside out. I need more of this liquid to keep it from eating through me. This is it, the demon's voice I was waiting to hear, but it's not a sentience, it's a hunger.

It's more than that. I need him too, the man giving it. I'm not only starving, I'm also grateful. So grateful that he's giving this to me. That I don't have to die and suffer without.

The thoughts are confused, jumbled, and fast. As I suck for a long time and the fire gradually abides, my mind comes together with a startling realization for me.

I want to live.

I hold tight to his arm, my breath calming. I have a rhythm for the feeding now, letting the wound slack and rebuild so I can bite and force it to bleed again. It's so good.

I don't want this to be the last night with the moonlight on my skin. Though, I'm more scared for living on as this thing than I am for dying. I guess the realization is conflicting.

I've been devout. I believe there is a heaven for the good people, where my mother is waiting for me. Yet, I don't want to go.

I don't want this vampire to leave me to die.

I try to see him, but I find my eyelids are too heavy. I can't even open them the slightest bit. I become aware that he's speaking to me, murmuring.

“That's it. Drink up, little one.”

Another man's voice speaks next to me. “Will he survive?”

His free hand covers the back of my head. “Yes, he will live. He survived last time, didn't he? I think this will be the same.”

“Good.”

This new person touches my back, sliding his hand down the wounds. I don't feel the pain anymore.

Chapter 12



When a car comes, they don't do much. The other man just stands closer. I'm ashamed in that moment for how easy it is for the vampires to conduct their business among us. I, a newborn, am feeding openly, publicly, and society goes on unconcerned.

A few cars pass, separated by lengths of time. All the while, I feed.

It'd be nice if a demon's voice would talk to me now. Then I could surrender all blame for letting it carry on this long. The rush is spent. I'm not crazed. I could give this up if I was forced to, but I would fight and beg to not be separated.

My gut seems to hum pleasantly. My belly is full. I used to have warm memories of my mother. I lost it along with her face, I only know that I used to have it, and that memory of a memory is all I have to compare to how I'm feeling now.

It's perfect. I'm still scared, but I want more moments like this.

No. Don't forget who you are. Don't forget your purpose.

I don't think I've changed so much in a few moments that I've forgotten who I am. I'm still Brian. I recall my name, the barracks phone number, all of it. The elements just feel weak. Purpose is not such a pull now I'm completely satisfied.

And yet, a tinge not. I'm distantly aware that I've been denied this waking in the woods. That I was abandoned.

It makes me afraid of what they will do with me now that I'm at their mercy. For he is my source now, and I don't want him to leave me.

Brian! another part of my mind seems to scream. *If you're not strong enough...*

Then I will become a demon. I don't want that. Though, even that desire is weak in the presence of bliss.

This is how they mean to use you. Like a drug dealer to an addict. Do not let them.

But I must pretend to. That is how it starts. The pretending part is easy, at least. Perhaps a little too authentic.

With effort, my eagerness wanes.

"I think he's done for now," says my giver to the other vampire.

"He hasn't had much." The hand continues to pet strokes that glide over the swells and ragged edges. "He may be too weak."

"He will live." My giver turns me to face and presses his forehead against mine. "Won't you, Brian? You've always been a stubborn man."

"He's the old man's apprentice. In short time, he would have matured and exceeded his numbers." The other laughs. "They have truly been kind to us tonight."

"Not them. Fate. Brian is mine."

"Yes, that too."

"You aren't worried about keeping the secret? The old man will get a new apprentice. They will fight harder to suppress us."

I log everything, telling myself not to forget. I will have to remember all of this later, but I'm too lazy to think of why.

“I am worried.” We move out of the way, my giver guiding me, and the car door opens. “What will we do? Sam is ravenous. He three times a night.”

The other laughs. I’m maneuvered into the backseat of the car, and I cling to my giver’s arm as he pulls away gently.

“You will have more. I promise,” he whispers to me.

With a chuckle, the other says, “You were the greediest of all children.”

My giver tugs not so lightly, using a hand on my throat to keep me back. I find myself less willing to part than I thought when I had the blood slowly filling my mouth for each swallow. I make a noise of want when my bite is torn off. Now the blood will drip and waste to the air.

“Please, I’m sorry, let me, *please*...”

“Shhh, shh, shh.” He kisses my forehead and the wound is laid back against my lips. “It is not forever, see?”

Another car passes. Meanwhile, the other gets in the driver’s seat.

“You liked your pleasures, remember? You loved to be fulfilled.”

“Heh. Yeah.”

“You never left the bed! Three to five a night, I remember, and eating the whole time. The girls did nothing but complain about you. The pressure was on to get enough to feed you. Just one hungry little baby, but you ate enough for three. So this shouldn’t be as bad as that.”

“Exaggerations.”

The wound is taken away again. This time when I cry, he kisses me. I lean into it, eager for a hint of the same taste in his mouth. He pushes me to lie across the seats, then he pulls away.

I let him, though I am unhappy. I know part of why I don’t want it to end is so that I can postpone responsibility for my actions. I don’t have to think

so long as the stuff is making me feel good. With it gone, my own thoughts want to remind me that what I've eaten may very well have come from the woman on the street.

It certainly came from someone innocent, even if not her.

"Those exaggerations are mostly truth," the other teases.

My giver gets into the passenger seat. This car is not half as loud as Ray's, for which I am grateful.

I realize my back against the seat doesn't hurt. I move and I don't feel the sting of torn flesh at all.

"These two will still eat more than one of me. Besides, we haven't entirely avoided notice as it is. Now with our efforts doubled..."

"Going unnoticed is no longer the plan."

My guilt begins to regain its effectiveness.

"Oh? But you've always said..."

"I was wrong. Everything about how we've been living is wrong. I've been contemplating it since baby Sam."

"Yes?"

We are driving now. With my eyes sealed shut, I can be no help for giving directions to the nest. My best move, in my capacity, is to relax and listen. Though I do try to determine generally where in the city we might be headed. I feel the car pick up speed and we get onto the highway. East, I think.

"Do not tell Darius I said any of this. He would not understand."

"Well, it's funny you should mention changing your mind because of Sam. You and Darius are exactly alike."

"Hm," he says like he disagrees. "What is he changing his mind about?"

“That the old ways had some merit.”

“Yes. The demands of a babe will do that. But we cannot afford the isolation our parents had.”

“So what is your plan, then?”

“Not a plan, really. Just a perspective.”

“Which is?”

“A surviving species procreates. The newborns must be kept, no matter what risk. If feeding them results in our destruction, so be it. If we cannot have children, we are already extinct.”

“So are we done being careful?”

“Careful? No. But silent, unnoticed, unfelt? Yes.”

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Chapter 13



This is why I cannot let the good feelings overtake me. I must resist the seduction, even while I feel this good. Ray said they had started killing more often. The Clan was giving me up in a gamble to stop these killings.

How desperate will the Clan be when the vampires no longer care about being unnoticed?

I can't imagine. And they will hunt to feed me, so I will partially be the cause.

This won't be a fast mission. I will have to complete my transformation. I will have to form a relationship with the monsters. They will make me feel good, and I will let them. But when I'm strong enough, I will have to betray them the moment I have some freedom. Likely, I will start with the location of the nest.

For that, I have nothing without my eyes. We get off the highway, slowing down. Everything is silent. I don't have a clue where we might be, I'm not even sure how long we've been driving. Already, I'm failing. But I suppose this won't be over in a night, so I have to be patient.

A hand touches me. One of them, I assume the passenger, reaches back and pets my cheek like I'm a sleeping child. I let him.

"Is Katie very mad?" my giver asks.

"Furious."

“She didn’t say anything to me.”

“She processes emotion differently. She will be alone awhile. But she understands the connection with you three. She doesn’t blame anyone directly.”

“She will have the next?”

A next? Are they raising an army against us?

Now the other’s words fall into place. They’re striving to reproduce. Army or not, they’re after survival in numbers.

I must stay true to who I am. My last mission could be *the* last mission. If this is true, I am the best weapon the Clan has. No wonder Ray went along with it.

“I do not have a queue lined up,” says the other, “Though, perhaps we should get a system. It was easy in the old days, you know. The babes were made without jealousy. Our mother and father raised everybody. We were siblings, not parents.”

“Do you think we can’t do it?”

“We must. Adaptation is key. But the babes must be assigned fairly. Darius is biting first from all the stock, is that right?”

“Yes. And we keep one from who only he feeds.”

“Good.” The car slows to a stop. “He is the closest thing to a breeding stud we have.” He laughs. “You should tell him I said that.”

“Are you not coming to the nest with us?”

“No. You’ve done an excellent job of staying close to Darius for me. I don’t want to upset the trust you’ve gained from him.”

“He is different now that he has the babe.”

Both vampires open their doors and get out. While I’m gathered from the backseat and made to stand again, the other speaks.

“I sent Evelyn to hunt, to make sure this one has plenty to eat. Make *sure* he eats. The weak ones try to give up.”

“It will not happen.”

I feel no pain for my giver’s arm wrapped around my waist, but I am heavy, off balance, and uncertain. Like I’m drunk and falling asleep. But when I’m steadied in his hold, I don’t hold myself in a pained hunch. I reach back to touch the wounds that are low on my back, but my giver gathers my curious hands.

“You will eat for me, won’t you, Brian?”

God is watching. I nod.

“See? He will live. He is a good babe.” Hands brush the hair out of my face.

“He must be watched at all times. That is why you will nurse him and Evelyn will hunt. I don’t want the babes leaving the nest anymore.”

“But how can Evelyn hunt enough by herself?”

“We have a few weeks to prepare. He’ll be timid about feeding at first, so you’ll need a lot of patience. Then, when he’s got an appetite, expect visitors every few days. If Darius has come around, as you say, it shouldn’t worry him. But you will let me know if it does.”

“Yes.”

“Good. Then Evelyn is your hunter. You are the nurse. Everyone is eager to participate with the babes, so when the visitors come, I will not tolerate jealous hoarding.”

“I will... try.”

“Yes, I expect Darius won’t like that. Do what you can with him.”

The other’s hands make me startle and shrink away. His voice came from farther away, and now he’s touching me. But of course, they move absurdly

fast and silent.

“I must stay away,” he says to me, his face close to mine. “It is safest. But you are *my* babe, Brian.” He picks up my hand and kisses the knuckles. I cling tight to my giver, though that shouldn’t be much comfort.

“Do not believe the things Darius says about me. I am your father, and you are my heart. When we finally meet, you will not fear me, alright?”

Oh God, I know who he is now. The one we fear the most, their king. I saw him once. He was distant, his eyes glowing vivid blue, and he smiled at me before turning to leave. It was because Ray and the others had showed up to save my ass, not out of any pity, which he does not have.

Fingertips touch my eyelids.

“You will take care of him for me?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Good. I think you and Evelyn will make good parents, though you will over spoil him a bit. Just make sure he is not allowed to harm himself. He will be stubborn, as you say.”

“He won’t get a minute alone.”

“That is what I wish to hear.”

The king is gone again, at least from my senses. Anything or anyone could appear. Only my giver remains constant because he is attached to me.

“Goodbye, Brian. Zane. If all is well, you will not hear from me directly.”

“Goodbye, father.”

“Say hello to Darius. Assure him I won’t invade his space.”

“Yes.”

The car doors close. The vehicle starts, and the vampire—Zane—holds me into his chest to shield me from the lights. It is safe and dark against him.

Then we are alone. I hear the car drifting off for a long ways.

“Well, baby Brian...”

I have bigger problems, but I cringe a little at the nickname.

“Are you ready to meet your family? I hope Evelyn’s not too mad at me.”

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Chapter 14



We're in the country somewhere. I can surmise that much. It's quiet. Weeds and dirt are under my bare feet. The stars are a lot brighter out here than they were in the city. My jacket must have been left in the street, and for a moment, I stand with my face tilted up to sky, feeling the starlight tickle my skin.

He nuzzles my neck. He never really stops touching me in some fashion.

“Can you walk, baby bird? Shall I carry you?”

“No, I can walk.”

I'm nervous after speaking. Talking to the creatures is an unfortunate part of the job, and the Clan puts you through extensive training to prepare for it. But nothing really prepares you for it, thus my attack and that father's death.

Now it's different. He's calling me 'baby' this and that, and when his lips come near mine, my nose fills up with that wonderful scent. My mouth floods with saliva in anticipation.

But I'm still Brian. As far as I know. These are all physical responses.

“There will be more for you,” he promises, seeing my desire. “Come on. Evelyn is going to love you to pieces.”

Later, while walking, he adds, “I'm glad it turned out this way.”

I can sense trees when we pass under them. Otherwise, I'm completely helpless and lost in the world. For now, I can only accept that I'm his puppet. Theresa was right, they do seem affectionate with their children.

It's possible their affection is true, I suppose. Even vipers have babies. But my value to them must be magnified by the fact that they need to survive, they need procreate as the other one said. And they're perhaps hoping I'll turn on the Clan when I become one of them.

I will disappoint them. It will be my duty to kill their children.

When we've gone a ways, a woman's voice calls out to us.

"There you are, finally!"

There's the slight movement of air. Then the press of body and cloth against me as I'm enveloped in a hug from the side, compressed between him and her. She's a bit small, her chin at my shoulder, my nose at the top of her head. I have my arms up as if to hug her too, but I let them hover there, not fully touching.

"Oh, he is *lovely*."

She grabs my head to bring me to her level, and thumbs brush over my features.

"Just beautiful," she says like she's breathless. Then her awe changes to horror. "What *happened* to him?!"

"You should have seen him when I did," Zane says.

She makes a hurt noise, her hands running all over me. "We've got to get him inside. When he feeds again, he's probably going to go down." She takes my arm. "This will serve Darius right and make him see that he needs to stay with us."

"God, what's his problem now?"

"Well, he doesn't want to keep two precious things in one place. He thinks we should nest separate. Which would be a shame, because they're

going to be so cute playing together.”

“Edmund is taking care of it. He’s going to keep the Clan busy.”

“Yes, well don’t worry about it.” She pats my arm like the sentiment is meant for me. “Sam keeps him too tired to think he can go single parenting on us. If he does get an itch in his sock, I shall simply drag him back.”

“Ha! Not so tough and scary anymore, is he?”

It’s weird hearing them talk about each other like they’re family, and referencing me as a sibling to this Sam. The name is familiar and brings to mind the sleeping boy. I still can’t recall what happened though.

“Edmund doesn’t seem concerned about feeding two children. He’s saying some dangerous things.”

“Like what?”

“About us not going unfelt.”

She’s quiet, thinking that over. Then whispers, “Maybe it’s time.”

“Maybe.”

“It’s dangerous,” I say quietly. I know I should stay out of this and play their ‘baby’, but I feel like I can’t. Not when my input might sway the opinion of murders.

I’m immediately shushed.

“You don’t have to worry about the war anymore,” Evelyn says. “You’re officially out of it.”

Ultimately, I will go along with whatever they wish for now. I can’t even see, after all. But I add, “We should all worry about the war. We will live with the consequences of it.”

“Shh. It is Edmund’s war now. We are not fighters, and neither are you. We’re a family. And my only priority is to hunt and protect.” She sighs. “Two children. And so young! You know, in the old days, we’d call you

twins. It'd be a special thing because you'd feed together and develop a deep bond. Darius and Sam are selfishly in love though."

"It happens," Zane says and pulls me closer.

"You're going to be just as greedy?"

"No. Of course I will share him with you. You're sort of his mother now."

"We shall see what the babe chooses." Then, "We're here."

It is all the same to me until I'm guided under a roof. There's a linoleum floor. The sensation of the stars and moonlight goes away. I have no idea though if this is a big house, a shed, or what sort of structure it might be. I'm lost except for the two of them.

Though, I sense an extra set of eyes before one of them speaks.

"Is that him?" It's a man voice that sounds familiar. It creates the strong sensation that I've forgotten something.

This must be Sam.

"Yes."

"He looks, um..."

"Like a train wreck? That's because the Clan nearly lashed him to death," Evelyn says.

Something bumps my feet and Evelyn guides me down. It's a mattress on the floor, bare, with no box spring.

"I take it that's what happened to his back? Jesus christ."

I snort. *Christ had nothing to do it.*

Zane answers him for me. "He turned himself in for cleansing. He's pretty, but not much for brains." He kisses my head.

Surreal.

Family, joking, caring for me, inquiring about my wounds which I can't feel anymore. Not enough that they hurt.

They don't sound like demons to me, just normal people. But that's because I can't see their eyes and their unnatural doll-like faces. When I get my sight back, they shouldn't seem so human to me.

"Oh god... I'm sorry," says a new man's voice, deeper in tone.

Zane coughs.

"You don't have to be," Evelyn says as Zane sits next to me. He guides me to lie down, which I do slowly, cautious of the possible filth, until I realize this is much better than the conditions I stayed in inside my cell. The mattress is more comfortable than my cot in the barracks, too.

I feel no dirt underneath me, and in moments I relax.

"I left him," Darius says. "I thought I snapped his neck. I'm sure I did."

"The venom heals some," Zane says. We lay side by side and he cups my face like we're lovers about to kiss. I only care about the scent on his breath. It makes me part my lips and I have the urge to...

Taste. Plead. I don't know, but I don't actually want the kiss, I want him to feed me.

"For most it's a poison." When Zane speaks, I taste his breath in my mouth. "They either survive it or they don't. But for some it's like the venom doesn't let them die. Like they're chosen."

"I wish I hadn't left him."

"You're being overly emotional," Evelyn says sternly. I am so distracted with the lovely blood scent and how Zane's breathing on me, that I'm just now realizing that this vampire is apologizing to me.

I have nothing to say to that.

I have nothing for anything. I'm helpless. I just want some blood again.

A noise comes from my throat, like something of a pip and a keen. It's too high pitched to be my voice, and it sounds more like a bird than a human. So maybe that's where 'baby bird' comes from.

The scent of the stuff is suddenly strong, and I grab his wrist, biting into it. I feel the puncture marks with my tongue, but the wound does not bleed no matter how hard I bite.

“Not there, baby. This will work better.”

He uses the hand to guide me. As my nose gets closer to his body, I can taste the stuff on my tongue again. My mouth fills with spit. I seek the delicious scent.

I swear I am a good, God fearing Christian.

Or I was. I thought.

I lick his chest. The blood has cooled on his skin. I latch on, finding the place where he cut, suckling.

“Ah!” he cries because I dig in with my teeth and twist. It's easier to bite now because of the bud in my mouth.

He's given me his nipple, a part of me realizes. A deep cut above the bud is the source from which I feed.

Someone pets my hair.

What am I going to do? a part of me bemoans.

I won't be 'fooling' them. I won't secretly be a hunter undercover as a vampire. I'm going to truly become one of them and I can't stop.

I just have to remember to betray them when the time comes.

Yes. But what good is that for me, personally? How can this be God's plan? As far as know, sin is sin. The Church was always adamant about that. You can't do good things to counter act the bad and expect the angels

to keeping a tally. You're either all good, and you go to heaven to rejoice in the Lord's salvation, or...

You're all bad.

There is a man's nipple in my mouth. I'm drinking the blood of innocents. I am the monster I've always despised.

Yet, the father made me. In the house of God.

I cannot find the right thing. I twist the flesh and it gives me great hot spurts of loveline

"Ouch, be careful," Sam says, and he's soon corrected by Darius, the older man.

"He's hungry, Sam. He's been starving for blood and a whole lot more."

"What do you mean?"

"The hunters work closely with the church. Sexuality is not allowed."

He's guessed it. My body is not as exhausted as it was. The rush is traveling from my head to my stomach to my groin. And I've got a half-naked man under me. That has only happened a few times before, and I punished myself wickedly for each. This time, I'm in over my head. I won't be able to expel the burden of this with some nightly prayers and chastisements.

So I might as well go all the way.

When nothing is good, there is freedom.

"Ahem. We should leave. Come, Sam."

"I want that too," says the younger voice.

Darius sounds a bit tired as he responds, "Yes. Then you shall have it."

"Where does that leave me, then?" says Evelyn, and another weight sets on the edge of the bed. "I'm just the hunter while you two are embraced in

each other's arms?"

"It is the more important aspect," Zane offers, sounding out of breath.

Really, Brian? You will sink so low as to fuck him too?

No, I tell that self-loathing thought. I don't have the energy for it, or the will. My back doesn't hurt, but it is still torn and I must be careful in my movements. I just want to feel him. A man under me. I've never confessed the dreams, only the actions. If I'm honest with myself, I've never been healed of this. It was a source of great frustration for me, and now it's a better addiction to give into than the blood coursing through me.

"I didn't know you'd take to it this well, love," my giver says, lifting his hips for me. He undoes my jeans, and the coolness of his hands is no deterrent for me.

"I did," Evelyn says, sound like she's pouting. It's bit unusual that she's just... sitting there. Watching us. I guess we're all terrible sinners to end up like this. "He always looked at you. You knew it too."

Then her hands grasp the bottom of my jeans at my ankles.

"I want these off. We'll get you some new ones, though you're not going to need them for a few weeks."

She strips me efficiently, leaving me barer than I planned. At the cost of losing the precious blood, I sit up and I wrap my arms around myself.

"Oh, none of that," Zane says, sitting up with me and pulling me down. "You need to eat."

He forces my nose to the wound.

"It's all for you, see? I want you to live, baby bird. Drink, and I will do sweet things to you."

"Ugh," Evelyn sighs. "I'm going to get us some supplies. Sheets for this bed, for starters, and everything baby Brian needs. There better be a kiss for me when I get back."

My tongue betrays me first, licking up what has spilled. Then my lips. He scoots so that he's against a wall and I'm draped sideways in his lap. Just like a babe, I'm chagrined to admit, but too eager to care.

"There is a kiss for you now," he says.

Then Evelyn is pressing against me and I'm caught in the middle of the two of them. I can't see them kiss, but I can hear it. Her covered bust is over my head as they get into it.

They kiss, I drink, and his hand strokes my hair.

She smacks her lips when she's done. And kisses my head.

"I'm off then for baby stuff." She laughs. "Any requests?"

"Maybe... pillows? A chair? Any kind of furnishings for this place to make it comfortable for him."

"Of course. I shall go shopping in that nice hilltop neighborhood, what do you think? Lots of thick trees, plenty of cover."

"No. Don't get fancy. The retirement community by the golf course is just as good."

"Eh. Old people. They have a smell..."

"Evelyn. Be safe."

I'm feeling less good about what I've done here. But also resigned. These are my choices. This is the mission the Church dealt me. I will do as I'm supposed to, but I won't do so in His light.

If a demon were to speak to me, I would say yes. For now.

Still, nothing. Only me and the urge to keep drinking.

Chapter 15



While I sleep, I have a long, complicated dream. Memories loop without end or beginning, happening out of order, some repeating. In particular, there's the moment I killed the father. There's hunts and child-like faces. Those ones are constant and best remembered when I awake. But there's also Brian as a boy, feeling angry and depressed, missing his mom.

I have no attachment to the Brian character in my dreams. I watch him with outside eyes, like he's the character in a movie, and not a particularly good movie at that. I feel nothing when he is in danger. I know what he is thinking all the time, but I have no reaction to his struggle with his attraction for men.

While he is wondering what is wrong with him and why the therapy doesn't work, I am indifferent. He is not me.

I also have wakeful moments, and these aren't much different from the dreams in their significance. They are more pleasant though. Every time I wake and move, there are soft words. There is a body with me that I hold to, and someone touches me. When I am uncomfortable, I am fed and the feeling goes away.

The only thing I don't like is that I'm pressed to drink more than I have the stomach for.

“You need it, love. Come on, drink for me.”

I don't know who he is, but I like him. At one point, the memory of me waking up alone in the woods plays in my dream, and for the first time, I wake up afraid. I whimper and cling to him. I am quickly fed and put to sleep.

There is also a moment, close to when I finally wake, that the dream ends and I find my darkness penetrated by four orbs of blue light. I have an intense emotion for them. I want them to love me. I will do anything. I am petrified that they will leave me.

"He's been asleep too long," says a woman's voice, and a hand touches the top of my head. "Has he eaten today?"

"Yes. It wasn't much, but it might be because we wake him too often."

"He will starve if we don't."

"He may die if he's unable to rest, Evelyn."

"He needs to eat." The orbs come very near, and I reach to touch them without thinking about it much. I am not truly connected to reality during my sleep, so her words aren't meaningful, nor do I understand that they're meant for me.

She comes very close, and I try to open my eyes fully, but I can't.

"Eat for me, won't you baby?" The air becomes sweet. I have no longing for it though, and I try to twist out of the pressure on my head of her guiding me. "You're my baby bird, Brian. Won't you eat for me?"

"Evelyn..."

"He will eat." A wet finger forces its way into my mouth, and I don't like this.

"*Evelyn.*"

"I can't take the death of another one!"

I do not eat. I have no urge to. I sleep that final time between the two of them, and her body against my back is felt in the dream while the events are entirely different. Brian, hurt and staggering, shuts the truck door. He's completely helpless and dying.

When I awake, I am confused. Am I the one belonging to her or am I the one left abandoned?

I am blank. I am lost.

I turn in the arms that hold me, and those orbs hold me transfixed. Her face with it affirms that she is real, she is with me, and the dream is categorized to that place where fantasies are forgotten. My memories become dull like a nightmare that once gripped you, but is no longer of consequence by the time you're brushing your teeth. The moments of wakefulness, of suckling and soft voices, they are more real, and they stay with me.

Her smile is beautiful as she wipes her eyes.

"Oh, baby Brian. You've done it!"

I dislike the nickname, though I'm too disoriented to really know why. The way she pulls me close and kisses me is alright. As long it's just kissing. She's cool and soft and pleasant, and I move my lips with hers. I'm clumsy with it. I haven't done this much.

I shut my eyes to focus on the sensation, and she breaks off.

"No. No, no, baby, keep them open for me." Her thumbs push up on my eyelids. "There we go. Alright. Awake is better, yes?" She's smiling, but she seems a bit afraid. She gathers up my hands and hers are shaking as she holds them over her heart. "You're going to stay here with me, aren't you? You're not going anywhere. That's right."

I unfold my hand flat against her chest, feeling her smooth form and nothing else. No heat and no heartbeat. That seems wrong.

"Do you know who I am?" she asks.

I shake my head.

“I’m Evelyn, your sister.” She bends to my ear and whispers like it’s a secret, “I’m going to take care of you like a mother.” When she pulls back, she’s beaming.

Then she puts a finger to her teeth, bites delicately, and balances a red droplet out to me.

“Are you hungry?”

I shake my head.

“Oh, won’t you eat for me?”

I’m not inclined to. The liquid smells fine, but I’m not inclined to it. I remember this stuff from the dream, but the same compulsion does not move me now. Sometimes, the urge would take me. That’s when it was uncomfortable, and those are the moments I would wake up. But now I’m fine.

The droplet builds and streams down her fingertip.

“Baby Brian, you must.”

“Don’t call me that,” I whisper.

She blinks. But her smile grows wider and she touches her nose to mine. “Well, alright. Love, then? Do you like love?”

I don’t mind either way, though it does seem a girly nickname.

Her tongue cleans the spill in the crease between her finger, then she says, “Why don’t eat for me, and nobody calls you baby again?”

Deal. I capture her finger, holding her wrist with one hand and sucking the digit. The urge for more is dim, but there.

“That’s it. Good... dove.”

I like the way she smiles.

She reaches across me and shakes the one who holds me. I turn, suddenly aware that I want to see him, and I discover that they're both familiar faces. Now the dream makes sense, both of them in it, and myself, Brian, the guy who watched. The guy who bled.

This first connection to my old life is confusing and distracts me from sucking. Evelyn tilts my chin up, touches my Adam's apple. I swallow reflexively.

“Zane,” she says. “Wake up and look at your childe.”

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Chapter 16



His eyes open, and the handsome face doesn't change in expression right away. He remains blank, indifferent to me, and I feel a lurch of emptiness that has nothing to do with hunger. I'm sure he's going to bare his teeth in an angry way and pull his arms away from me.

I've seen him do this before, in the dream. I don't make a direct connection to the man in it, I don't see the figure as myself, but Zane is a real part of the dream for me. And I've seen him angry at me.

A finger touches my cheek and I flinch.

"You're beautiful."

I am still unsure, though he is breaking into a smile, looking at me fondly now.

"I've got him started," Evelyn says behind me. "Do you think you could...?"

There's some shifting from him, and I become aware that we're on a mattress on the ground. It seems daylight to me, but somehow, I know it isn't. Colors clash less in the night, but objects aren't really faded. I can see every detail of this small room we're in, which is empty besides a pile of clothes and the bed we're on. There's no windows and no light. But somehow I know it's dark outside, and I have the urge to look and see where we are.

I'm sitting up, but I'm caught by Zane's arm.

"Here, dove. Drink some more. You've barely had any."

His chest has a dark red line cut above one nipple. I really don't care, but the two of them seem happy and eager to feed me, so I let them guide me to it. Evelyn holds the back of my head. Zane slowly lies back to the bed and I must go with him, drinking lazily.

The nipple makes it easy to keep the flesh, even if it is not the source. I remember, again from the dream, clutching to his arm and biting hard. This is definitely better. When he lies back, I don't have to bite at all, I can just leisurely swallow what his body offers up to me.

Evelyn takes Zane's hand. Her grip seems hard and nervous. She holds it to her breast much the same way she did with me, and both are staring.

I ignore them. I also forget her insistence on seeing my eyes open, but she doesn't seem to mind this time when I drift.

"Is that all?" Evelyn says when I pull up, wiping my lips.

She wants me to take more? I wonder why. They both look at me like they're scared.

"I'm not hungry."

This causes them to frown.

"What if it's a false wake?" Evelyn whispers to Zane. "Katie said it happens sometimes..."

"It'll be alright, sister. He'll stay with us. He's a Clan hunter, that's all. He's not used to indulgence, isn't that right Brian?"

I'm not too sure what he's talking about, but I nod to make him smile again. It works.

"How are you feeling? Is there anything you want to tell me?" he asks.

"I want to go outside."

It's odd to hear my voice. This is the third time. I have no trouble using it, the words and the meanings are clear, but it's just like Brian's in the dream, and that confuses me.

"Not tonight, sweetheart. The night is almost up. You're a dawn childe, which means you're going to be special and good."

"And troublesome to raise," Zane adds, leaning over the edge of the bed to get something off the ground. Duct tape, which he rips a strip from and presses onto his chest.

"Why bother?" Evelyn says, and she sounds depressed. "It won't bleed in five minutes anyway."

"So Darius won't worry."

"What about me? *I* worry."

"You worry too much." Zane tugs on my arm to get my attention. I am looking around, wondering what's on the other side of the door, wondering what's beyond these walls as well. Right now my world is small. But when I see the rest, I'll understand more about who, what, and where I am.

It is a strong pull on me.

"I want to go."

"What do you remember, Brian?"

Evelyn hisses. Though her expression is for Zane, it makes the nightmare seem more alive.

"Shh, sister, it's alright. He should share his memories with us. Trust me, I'll worry more if he chooses to hide them."

She settles down, crossing her legs, and I can't help admiring how lovely she is. She has long legs and plump hips, wearing a simple, straight cut dress that covers her chest but keeps her arms bare. Her modest clothes don't hide how gorgeous she is.

Zane, on the other hand, is perfect and flaunting it. He has simple dark jeans, a belt, and that's it. He bends an arm behind his head for a pillow to look at me. I am especially drawn to him. Though Evelyn is lovely, Zane is the one I want to touch.

And I do.

My hand starts on his stomach, lightly, and I'm afraid he'll hiss or yell at me. I'm not supposed to do this, I don't think.

But that makes no sense since I was just feeding from him moments ago.

“Well, Brian? Tell us. Who are you? What do you know?”

“I am with you. Aren't I? ” I reach his chest and must make a path around the tape. That is where he bled for me. “I'm... yours?”

“Yes. And you are Evelyn's too.”

She seems unhappy, and I didn't mean to do that to her.

“I am yours, too,” I correct, and I lean to her briefly to kiss her. She is very pleased when I'm done, though it is a small, intimate kiss. I look at Zane and wonder if he wants me to do the same. I wonder if he's jealous or disappointed. Or if I'm allowed to kiss him.

For some reason, I feel like I shouldn't.

“You seem troubled by something,” Evelyn tells me. “What are you thinking about, love. Don't be so quiet, we like to hear your voice.”

“You...” My fingers lift from Zane's chest like they themselves are recoiling in uncertainty.

“Yes?” he prompts, tilting his head.

“You were unhappy with me,” I say carefully.

Zane pushes himself up. “Yes, tell me about that. What was I unhappy about, little dove?”

“I was...” It’s all messed up. The dream doesn’t specifically include me, but I see him and her, and I remember the way they looked at me. Terrified. “I was bad, I think.”

I take my hand away from him, but he catches it.

“Are you sure, Brian? Think about it. Were you bad or was I bad?” he threads our fingers.

“It was me. You hurt me.”

“Oh, yes, dove, but I’m going to make it up to you. You’ll see.” Then he reaches for the back of my head, the same way Evelyn did before, and I go to him eagerly. I make a little noise in the back of my throat when he kisses me.

He’s different. He’s better.

When he leans back, I go with him, and I’m glad he doesn’t pull away completely, letting me extend the kiss. His tongue dabs between my lips. I wasn’t hungry before for the blood offered to me, but I’m hungry for this.

“Well, I know who’s going to be the favorite,” Evelyn says. She sounds indulgent rather than upset than before, but I pull away from Zane, guilty. She pats my arm. “It’s alright, lovely. It’s better, actually. You’ll make Zane so happy. I, as always, am happy taking care of you two.”

“My love is not exclusive,” Zane says, taking her hand and kissing it.

“But your body is. I understand.”

They both turn their heads at once towards the door, where there’s a small sound. Their eyes lock over me, then Evelyn straightens her dress. It’s a shame I prefer Zane so much, because I still think she’s just beautiful.

Zane pulls me close and says into my ear, his lips tickling me.

“Be a good babe for me and eat a little more. Even if you don’t want to. It’s your birthday, love, and not many live to see theirs. If you don’t drink, at least a little, I will feel like you’ve rejected me.”

The door opens. The face of the young man is gorgeous, his eyes large and entrancing.

“Is he awake?” he asks right away, though he can see me sitting here. Evelyn puts a protective arm around me as he strides quickly into the room. He has an exuberance that seems younger than the two taking care of me. He is unafraid, I note, which is good. My caretakers seem to be good, unlike how they were in the dream.

“Yes, Sam, but gentle around him. Newborns are a bit jumpy.”

He takes the hint and pauses short of the bed.

“Heh, yeah, I guess so. Remember how I crashed Darius’s car?” He scratches the back of his head.

“And then how you fussed over the woman trying to murder you? Yes, lovely, we all remember,” Evelyn says.

The young man dodges her eyes.

Another person appears from the doorway. I immediately know that this one is older. There’s a few red blotches like bruises on him and a strip of tape above his hip. Otherwise, he’s handsome with long dark hair, an open wine-colored shirt, and loose jeans that gather around his bare feet.

He smiles at me, but I see a hint of something less happy. It’s hard to place, in his eyes.

“Ah. How are you, Brian?”

His face is familiar to me, though he didn’t play a part in the dream overly much. I hunted him. I knew about him, and several others. I know that he likes to hunt near the university and he prefers kids that get high.

I knew him in the dream, but there is not an explanation for this odd pull I feel towards him. Like he has some significance specifically towards me.

“He’s just a sweet little chatterbox, isn’t he?” Evelyn says, playing with my hair. Her tone changes when I drop my head to my hands as I think,

trying to figure this out.

I hear it in Ray's voice.

If we stay out of his way, he doesn't come after us. He's what I call a 'bottom feeder'. Cause of death is always an overdose because he picks the kids that like to party.

"Oh no. Sweetie, look up at us," Evelyn says. Both her and Zane take away my hands. "There you go. See me? I love you. We love you."

She kisses my lips again, but I am bad at responding. I have the suspicion that none of this is real. The *dream* is real.

I'm very confused.

"What is happening?" asks Sam.

"He may suffer dissonance. He is weak and his sleep was interrupted," Darius says with a sigh. He comes close, bites into his hand, and offers it to me. "Drink, Brian."

Zane looks angry. "This is my childe. You cannot have two, are you crazy?"

"It may help. I believe my face has triggered this state. He remembers something of me. Drink, Brian."

Evelyn forces my head to his hand, and I hate it. I resist her.

"Zane, help me, he is sickly."

"He will live. He is *our* childe." He moves so now he is in front, blocking Darius from view. "Brian, listen to me. If you drink, sweetheart, we will go outside. How's that, hmm? Not for long, because dawn is coming and we must protect your skin. But for a little while, you can see the stars. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

I would. So I nod.

Evelyn stops Zane from biting into his own hand. “Let Darius do it. He’s the true sire. It might help him bond.”

He looks unhappy about it, but doesn’t do anything as Darius holds his hand close again. There is hardly any bleeding from it. It’s healing already. Since it’s so important to them, I fasten my lips over the wound.

“There, now, sweetheart,” Evelyn croons, “We love you, do you see?”

I think I do. The liquid that is hot and fills me up. He shares it freely with me. But I remember him better now. His face was not beautiful when I burned him from his nest.

There’s something in me trying to push out, and the pleasant feelings of feeding are keeping it in.

I let go so I can think.

Darius takes his hand back, saying gravely, “He is sick. I am sorry, Zane. I may be prolific, but I’ve messed up our only two babes.”

Evelyn says, “Yes, well we’re going to be more careful about that, aren’t we?”

“It will not help him.”

Why do I need help? I wonder. Then I remember the lashes across my back. I twist my head and find pink stripes that mar my skin. Proof that the dream is real.

“Well, Brian, I guess you want to go outside now.”

“Yes.”

I want to see where I am. It’s important to me.

Chapter 17



Leaving the dirty hovel, it's hard to see why we live here at all. Trailer homes with broken windows and rotted porches are lined up in a half circle, and beyond them, there's only a vast empty field. Beyond that, birch trees. We're in the countryside, and that goes against what Brian the hunter learned about vampires and their nests.

They like urban places. They're still living in the tunnels of Paris.

I take a few steps and Evelyn grabs my arm. "Don't try anything foolish, alright? You can't get lost."

As I process that I'm being restrained, she must see something in my expression. She gives a small, apologetic smile.

"You can explore tomorrow, love. It's too close too dawn right now."

Zane gently pries her fingers up. "Sister, he can't fly."

"He could figure it out in a heartbeat."

"We fly?" I ask. "How come I don't know?"

Vampires, nests, and all this aren't new to me, but hunter Brian never heard about vampires flying.

"Shh," Zane says. "You are only minutes old, dove. Look up at the stars."

"Oh."

The stars didn't have any notable happening in my dream. I know what stars are, of course, but in my memory, they were simple white dots on a dark sky. These are more than that. Sparkling, dimensional, and glinting off each other. The light creates a rippling illusion in the empty space, like a dark sea.

I'm slowly spinning, my neck craned back, and both Evelyn and Zane steady me when a small rock makes me misstep.

I feel a strong connection to them, more than simply from feeding. They want me to experience this. They keep me safe.

But I also hurt them, and they devoured me. I swore I would never fall for their allure again.

I examine the hovel, and I am not satisfied. I need to know more. Something about this place is important.

"Brian, where are you going?" Zane asks.

He lets me slip away, but they both keep up like we're walking together. Evelyn's fingers feel out my wrist and her grasp is gentle, but I know she's maintaining control. I suppose, as long as she does not stop me, I do not mind.

"We can't go far. What do you want to see, love?" she asks.

"I want to know where I am."

On the other side of the hovel, there's an old blue truck parked. *Sunshine Home Park* says a sign growing in the weeds, which doesn't tell me anything. There is a street number, but no street name. It seems important that I memorize the phone number fading off of the sign.

I stare at it awhile.

"What's wrong with him?" whispers the young one, Sam, not so quietly. He is hanging back with Darius.

“He is a babe seeing the world for the first time. As are you, technically. Surely you remember the times you would stare off into nothing? He has new eyes, everything is fascinating to him.”

He is correct, but he is also wrong. I remember my purpose now. I’m supposed to be one of them, but I’m not actually. I wasn’t made by Darius, I was made by a man in dark robes. The father. The church.

I’m horrified, but hiding it. I’m not supposed to be the ‘babe’ of Evelyn and Zane, wonderful though they seem. When I look at them, I see more clearly the monsters in the dream who attacked me. Their glowing blue eyes are not natural and neither are mine.

I look at my hands. They are pale.

Zane gets closer to me. “What’s the matter, Brian?”

I have to remember to breathe. And take a moment to realize that I can’t react like anything’s changed. This what I’m here to do. Become one of them, but not really.

“Brian?” Evelyn asks, her eyes scrutinizing.

“Hungry,” I say and smile tightly. They seem instantly relieved.

“Then let’s go back inside and feed, hm? It will be more comfortable in there. The sky is going to brighten up any minute now. Your skin is too soft for all these lights,” he says, petting my arm.

Slowly, it’s coming back to me. They must not know or they will dispose of me again.

* * *

This time it’s a nightmare. Our hovel, the administration building to what once a nice little trailer park, heats up during the day. Even in early morning, the place is like an oven just set to bake. Zane and Evelyn on either side of me are cool, but my thoughts are racing, and I begin to toss and turn.

“Hungry, babe?” Zane murmurs sleepily when I kick him.

Yes, but the blood is too hot. I shove him away, turning into Evelyn, and he’s too sleepy to force me, I guess. I bury my face into Evelyn’s chest, covered by her dress but cool just the same.

I’m awake but I’m in a nightmare.

This isn’t my family. I’m supposed to kill them. Not only that, but they’re monsters, unfeeling demons. The bodies are a host to a parasite.

Except there are no demons. There are no dreams, no nightmares, only reality. *Everything* is real. Including vampires, which kill without mercy but do not seem to be evil. And I am one of them.

I turn again and press my face into Zane’s chest. He has a gorgeous body. The face of a boy, but the hard muscle of a man. They’re all like that, both young and old, pleasing to the human eye like an oil painting.

They are asleep, their arms crossing over me and holding lightly onto each other. They haven’t let go, though I’ve been tossing without rest. What I am supposed to do on this mission is not clear to me, but they lie here asleep, unsuspecting. So if I was to hurt one of them, it would be now.

I form a flimsy plan. It requires a cover to keep myself from burning, the gasoline from the truck’s tank, and a flame. I’d burn the nest, doing my job as a hunter, and report back...

But I won’t do that. I won’t leave their arms. How can I when they are so... so...

Nice. Zane especially. He is without a shirt, and I can press my full body against him. How many times have I fantasized about this, sleeping in the barracks, just to wake up and uselessly pray?

I did that for the ‘family’ back then. Now I want to trade them for vampires, but of course, these lovely creatures aren’t what they seem. Their allure is deadly.

I sigh, confused. I want this to be okay. I want the whole concept of monsters and devils to go away and for Zane to kiss me and put his hands on my body again. I want to do the same with him.

There will be no redemption for me.

* * *

I open my eyes. I don't think I've been asleep long. I'm nestled against someone cool while the rest of me sweats. Of course, it's the male. Zane. And I'm packing wood.

I pull away as much as I can, but *she's* on the other side of me. Her arm reaches across me and rests on him. She's beautiful too.

Why is better to lust after her than the man? They are both demons—or monsters, at least. I've yet to get the sense that any of them harbor an astral evil. It could be that they're faking human thoughts, actions, and bonds for me, but that seems unnecessarily complicated. As does the notion that being straight in this situation is somehow better morally.

I sigh and shift in bed, lying on my back, unable to help my hands plunging into my pants for a little relief. Or perhaps, a little more torment, depending on what I do about this.

Is it evil that makes me weak?

Well, if it is, then it's been with me a long time. Since I was a kid. I knew what I was long before I knew it was a problem. I didn't have an awkward coming out phase. I had bigger things going on with my dad's drinking getting worse, me fighting back, and so much hate it was only a matter of time before I killed the man.

What a different life that would have been.

But Ray was always close. He was in the Clan a long time. He'd take me around when I was teenager, teach me some things about guns and knives and talk an awful lot about God. He pressured me to go to church. I

respected him like a father, and I thought he was trying to put me on a straight path.

So I went to confession. I started the prayers to fix me, so I could be a son Ray would be proud of.

Look how it turned out.

I sigh and look at his beautiful face. At his beautiful body.

She's murdered countless hundreds and so has he. That should make them equally terrible to lust after. If this is God's plan, I'm really fucking it up.

But even while I'm having the thought, I touch his stomach, glide my palm up over his abs, and I become aware it's not just the lust I have to deal with. My mouth is wet, my throat is dry, and my stomach is suddenly empty.

Like it or not, I have to feed again. When I hunger for innocent blood, how can I be pious about sexuality? It's ridiculous to think that God wants me to abstain when he let me become this thing in the first place. Ray is wrong. There are no good vampires.

And with that, my decision is made. It was only a matter of time. This hunger and thirstiness is mounting.

"Zane."

Neither of them stir, and for a while I lay there, frustrated, wondering how this works. When I was dreaming, the blood was offered to me. I never asked for it, they just knew. More likely, I suppose, they awoke and force fed it to me. I wouldn't be forced if they awoke now.

Longer still, and the pain of it has taken away my sexual urges. It comes on fast, this need does, like when you don't know you're hungry and you happen to walk by a restaurant. It's suddenly more than an urge, it's a need, I begin to shift and turn in the bed.

"Zane. Wake up. Please." I twist. "Evelyn. Please."

I'd be louder, but there's an instinct against it. Sitting up, I nudge them both. They are definitely vulnerable in the daytime, because I can't prod them awake.

I have no choice but to wait. I wrap my arms around my middle and hope they will wake soon.

They said they would take care of me.

The thought is not I, the hunter.

I am Brian, not baby Brian, as they say. I am not this thing.

I shake my head, trying to dispel this longing, weird feeling. It calls to mind the moment I woke up alone in the woods.

Pity, it is pity, says a loathing voice. My dad scolded me sternly about that, always.

But it is also sadness, and it is tempting and powerful.

“Brian?”

The door was always ajar, but now it is fully open, and the child Sam is looking at me.

“Do you need help?”

Thank God.

“I'm hungry,” I say, and for now, I won't feel guilty about it. I will take my fill if he offers it. I watch, hopeful as he approaches.

But I notice he doesn't have the talons, nor do I. He comes to the edge of the bed, kneels low, and in Zane's ear, he makes a sound like a bird, both a pip and a whine. Not loud. Quite short. And Zane's eyes open immediately. Evelyn seems disturbed in her sleep.

Zane blinks at Sam, and Sam points across at me. “He's hungry.” And to me, he says, “There you go. That's all you have to do.” He goes back to his

room then, while Zane is stretching and sitting up. After a moment, I hear the sound again.

By then, Zane is speaking to me.

“Are you hungry, dove?”

His dove and Evelyn’s love sound nearly alike. The nicknames are a matching set, and for once, I’m not bothered by either.

“Yes,” I admit. And though I am nervous to touch him, my mouth is wet and ready to latch on where ever he cuts. I won’t hesitate.

First, he takes the time to kiss me, which I suffer through. Anything to get to the moment when I can satisfy this parchedness.

“I will bleed you for you,” he says meaningfully. Then, thankfully, there is no more waiting. He cuts the same place, above the areola, and my complications with sexuality simply don’t exist. I put my mouth on his body, closing wetly over his nipple, and I make a noise of contentment in the back of my throat.

It’s soon swallowed, along with the pain, the sadness, the worries. I relax into him, and he cradles me.

“You are one of us. But you are especially mine.”

This is easy to believe. I’m certainly not Darius’s childe, but him... He found me.

I am going to betray you.

The thought is difficult when I feel so good. I bite the wound, blood hits the back of my throat, and waves of contentment rush over me. I am not falling asleep though. This is not that kind of feeling good. I’m becoming more alert. The refreshed energy makes me eager. I remember my lust once again.

I move, tugging on my jeans, trying to get comfortable. I turn to the side so he hopefully won’t see. His hands in my hair are quite nice, the talons

scratching through.

I've seen claws like these rend a man. But it seems impossible for how carefully I'm held in them.

His other hand on my waistband is cause for alarm though, making me open my eyes. I am reluctant to let go. The discomfort of going hungry fades in one swallow, but there is a long, lingering time of need. I don't want to let go to speak.

So I don't tell him no, as he patiently pops the button loose. His hand slides inside, the talon tips dragging down my very sensitive lower stomach, and I make the unique, pipping sound in startlement as he wraps around me.

There is the strong sense that I'm going to regret this later. But my common rationality is overcome by pulsing my cock, the good feelings of satisfaction pouring into me, and the knowledge that it's all from him.

"Do you want me to help you with this?" he asks, and I give no answer. But I don't give a no answer either, and when he starts working on me, my hips push slightly into it.

I move to give him better access.

"Do you want to finish this way?"

"Hm." It could be yes.

It is yes.

"Or do you want my mouth?"

The sound I make is need and want, but I move my head slightly side-to-side in denial.

"When you trust me, I'll let you into my body. I bet you'll prefer that," he says with a smile, but on this, I definitely have bad feelings.

I couldn't do that. I'm not that far gone into sin and madness.

You're suckling on a man.

I moan. I bite. I'm rewarded with a hearty gulp, and my climax comes over me. It isn't the rush it's supposed to be. I've been there all along, taking pleasure from him. This is a release of pressure, an outlet for the warmth in my belly. And not much at that.

I could do it again. And again, and again.

The image of us together is almost as good as the climax. I picture him lying down on the mattress, me on top. Pushing into him in a way I never have. I've imagined it plenty, sneaking porn onto the library computer in the corner. The nuns are thankfully not wise in technology matters and overly trusting toward their revered hunters.

I know what'd it sound like, him making those pretty noises as I pushed into him.

You'd be fucking a vampire.

It's surreal. It's funny.

Also, sick, gross, twisted, all kinds of fucked up. Would real Brian, the hunter, ever fantasize about...?

I can't even finish the thought. Human Brian was both afraid and respectful of his enemy. But he longed for every glimpse of his prey. Not just because it meant he was getting closer. He never envied the moments of capture. Their faces, however, were held carefully in his mind, as if dear memories to them.

I never jacked off to them. It wasn't that kind of desire, but there was something there, subtle, buried, hidden.

I think I wanted this all along.

But I am a soldier of the Lord.

He leans down to murmur in my ear. "My dove, my dove..."

With it, I can imagine Evelyn's crooning whisper, *My love, my love...*

Very well. I shall be one of them. Truly, not faking, not remaining a pure soul. The Lord will not take me into his arms, and I will not be purified. At least, not resulting in salvation.

I will revel in it for now. But I will kill us, when I can. The last good deed of a sinning man.

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Chapter 18



Evelyn gets up and stretches, her arms reaching for her flexing toes. She has pretty feet, and when she catches me staring, I quickly turn away. I am slightly worried she'll want to do the same things as Zane, and I will cause offense. I want her to like me.

“Are you hungry, little love?” she asks. “Do you want me to wake up, Zane? Or...?” She smiles shyly and shrugs.

“Um...”

I don't know what to tell her.

Then she falls back to the bed on her elbows.

“Do you prefer women too?”

Her ankles hang off the mattress and her feet kick like she's splashing them in water.

“Are you shy, baby dove?” She tilts her head like she's confused and her eyebrows come together in concern. “Why?”

She doesn't know that I haven't assimilated with them. I have an edge here if I can maintain it. I've never admitted my sexuality though. I don't even know how people find out, it just seems to get passed around without word from me. I've accepted it because it makes it easier. The men don't get so close, and I'm not so tempted. I was working on it, after all, and I needed the help.

Now, though, I must be without shame.

And perhaps... without preference?

“I don’t know.” I hope she’ll drop it. But instead she gives me a prospective glance that makes me wilt inside.

“Come here,” she says.

We are already on the bed together, so I only look at her, confused.

“Touch me.” The wiggle of her torso is not to find comfort. My hands suddenly find themselves buried in my armpits.

I turn my head and blush. “No, I... I...”

I must overcome this. I have to behave as they do.

Fortunately, she becomes distracted. “Oh, that’s beautiful.” Her fingers reach for my face. “My, Brian, you’re the prettiest thing...”

It’s a gushing but not a sexy compliment. Her sly look is gone. It’s replaced by awe, which I don’t understand. I turn my face a little bit, not refusing, but not playing her ‘baby’ very well either.

“Oh, that’s right. It happens when you’re embarrassed, doesn’t it?” She chuckles. “You know, I haven’t blushed since... since...” She pauses to think. “Huh. You know I can’t remember if I ever did at all!”

She cups my face. “Ooh, it’s warm.”

Our noses touch.

The sound of the door catches her attention, but her eyes only flit that way. I try to turn my face and discover her hold is firm when I resist it.

“Yes, Darius?” she says.

“Nothing.” He shrugs and smiles. “I just haven’t you heard you fall in love like that with anyone. Usually you’re so bossy, everybody runs from you.”

She rolls her eyes. Being this close, I can confess being enraptured myself. I feel sorry for when she lay in the purification circle. I am happy she escaped and I somehow found my way to her.

That's not vampire brainwashing. What does that say about me, the hunter?

"You must be careful to maintain some semblance of discipline and teach him well. You cannot let him get away with too much."

She lets me go, giving her brother a displeased look.

"That's rich coming from you, you know. What makes you so responsible this morning?"

"I am worried. We know they did not relinquish him for free. Our nest will be nearly empty while we hunt. And their difficult turning makes them prone to dissonance."

"Hm." She gives me a speculative look. "Why did they let you go, sweetheart?"

"Well, I..."

Why didn't I think to prepare a story to this?

Surely I do not think the vampires to be gullible, but it never occurred to me that they would want to know.

What I hunted, however, were creatures. Not humans, not people. We do not understand the vampire mind, nor did I expect them to be so friendly with each other. This is a family, not the 'nest' of an animal.

I rub my mouth and pretend to cough, stalling for time.

"We won't be mad, love," Evelyn says. "You can tell us what they have in store. Or, if you don't want to, that's alright."

Darius speaks. "The humans are lucky to have their babes come to them blank. Ours suffer dissonance when first sight is of a human. You're new in

the world, and you bond to whomever is there.”

Evelyn clucks her tongue. “You were starved out of sleep. Your first sight is unharmed, but you might experience it anyway.” She sighs and reaches for me, her fingers coming to play at the back of my neck. “Abandoned children aren’t any less, we love you just as much, but they can be the weakest and most vulnerable.”

“Yes, and it always means the family wasn’t looking for a child. Abandoned children may become outsiders, like myself.”

“You were abandoned?”

I speak quietly, for I’m nervous to talk to them. It doesn’t seem natural anymore. I’ve remembered how fast they move, the fight it takes to bring *one* down, and the lives easily lost in doing so. Vampires feed during battle.

I do speak though, and I don’t stutter, which is a testament to my experience. Fear can be acted through.

I’m curious about this story, too. He was the one who abandoned me. I understand why, it wasn’t personal, but there are some... feelings there. Especially when I see how he looks at Sam.

“It’s not quite the same,” he says, “My sire was killed and my family did not know he was nesting in secret. I wandered, like you, but he had moved me some ways from my home. When I was very weak, I started to cry. Not human crying, but a sound only we make.”

Evelyn cuts in. “That you will *never* hear. Or make.” She finishes the story for him, giving him a stern look. “Fortunately, Darius was found and nursed, and adored by all, especially his older brother.”

She smirks. Then to me, she continues, “You, Brian, are dead. By which I mean that you have no ties to the Clan, nor duties, nor loyalty to them. In fact, you’ve never met them. Your fledging mind, however, is in a state of constant rewiring and development. You’ve got a new body and new senses to discover. You’re so overwhelmed by it, you don’t even know when you’re hungry.”

She makes it out like I am simply something new. I hate to think the word. The Church forbids it because of the controversy it stirs up between the old generations and the new. But I believe I'm evolved. Something made from a human, but a new, distinct species.

Brian was 29 years old. This *thing* I've become, however, has only just its eyes to the world, and I am helpless in their ways.

* * *

I am not on an assignment. I have no mission, no goal, and no clue how I'm even supposed to contact the Clan if I did have useful information. The Church has simply fucked up. They delivered a dying man to monsters, hoping it would make a difference, but he simply died and that was that.

Dissonance, I'm afraid, has some truth to it. The memories of my life are weak. I remember *what* happened more than I remember about how it happened. The images are vague. The pain can be imagined, but not remembered.

But I remember yesterday very well. The realness since I opened my eyes cannot be ignored.

I am stubborn, I guess. I am clinging to a purpose I no longer understand.

The memory of Ray talking to me is especially nagging. *If anyone can do it, it's you. That's why I ain't put a bullet in you.*

Guilt weighs heavily on me as they prepare to leave to hunt. Sam is disappointed that he can't go, but with Zane staying to watch over me, Darius refuses to take him.

"You have been good these past couple weeks. I would not like to see you relapse. Two babes suffering dissonance tend to fuel each other's sickness. You must stay here and make a good example for Brian."

Sam is unhappy, but he promises, "Alright. I can teach him to fly then."

Thus, our hunters, Darius and Evelyn, leave with well wishes. Evelyn kisses me.

“It’s alright that you prefer Zane. I’m going to be a good mommy hunter for you both.” She gives me a wink.

I guess the comment is supposed to be playful, but my stomach twists in knots. The terrible thing is that I suspect revulsion isn’t the only source of this feeling. After what she said about newborns not knowing if they’re hungry, this discomfort might actually be that.

It stays with me as we exit our hovel.

“We’re taking the truck tonight,” Evelyn says.

“It’ll be reported by now,” Darius replies.

“Yes, but we’ll be extra careful about the speed limit. We’re going on a special hunt, so it needs to be efficient.”

“Uh oh. You aren’t pinning your hopes on some specific profile, are you?” When she doesn’t answer but puts her nose higher in the air, he says, “Evelyn, you know that never works out.”

“And the truck is a liability,” Zane says, a bit of growl in his voice.

“It’s for Katie,” she explains. “She’s harboring a grudge against us, and you earned it.”

“It was Edmund’s decision.”

“Yeah, but you argued against her, and did it damn well. She might show up here and *steal* him...”

“She won’t. It’s Edmund’s orders.” But he says sympathetically, “Alright, you take the truck. Just don’t forget about our little ones.”

“Don’t worry. Our babes will be fat as pigs,” she says with a smile and kisses Zane before she leaves.

I am uncomfortably reminded of my human mother seeing my father off to work, though the specific memory does not come back to me. I could have said more about her before the turning, but she's gone now. I only have the knowledge that she was there and the heavy sensation that I've seen this before, in a different context.

"This is a wasted effort," Darius grumbles, opening the driver's door. "You really think I could turn another? If it was that easy, we'd have a child each, as many as we wanted! Besides, Edmund may not allow it. We're making too much noise as it is."

Evelyn and Zane share an exasperated look, but Darius is not answered. The truck starts with a screwdriver in the ignition, I see, then he shuts the front door.

The windows are rolled down, and Darius calls out, "Have fun babysitting, Sam!"

Then they're gone, but we hear the engine long after they've left the drive. It's a loud roar through the trees, and I wonder if the distant homes don't hear it and wake up, wondering what's going on.

Then again, my ears can pick up the sound of swaying grass from the field behind this place.

* * *

Sam scratches the back of his head in puzzlement. "He's either telling me I'm dually looking out for Brian... or he's implying that I'm a baby as well." He makes an unhappy face and glares after the truck. "That's why he won't let me go," he says to me. "Because they're hunting for two, and now there's no one extra to watch me."

"But I believe it's the first one," Zane says. "He hasn't been smug about it, but I bet he likes pointing out how self sufficient you are. I was the one who said babes shouldn't be hunting until long after their fangs grow in. But now I'm relying on you to help me with him."

“Well, I don’t really hunt,” Sam points out with a shrug.

“But you are there, learning. And you’re good at staying put, proving yourself responsible.” He turns his attention to me, and my shoulders a little hunch automatically. It’s shameful to admit, but my mouth salivates when I look at him.

There is still a red mark on his chest where I fed.

His gaze turns toward the trees.

“Watch him closely, Sam. Teach him some things, talk to him, but do not indulge his dissonance. It is very dangerous.”

“Are you going somewhere?”

“Just to check the area and make sure we’re alone.” He gives me a sly smile and a wink. “Brian is a Trojan horse.”

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Chapter 19



With everyone gone, Sam takes up teaching me how to ‘fly’, which is really just sprinting and jumping as far you can. It looks simple when he does it, though also incredible. As a human, we’d see only blurs of movement. Even catching the sound of a vampire in motion isn’t trustworthy, because you’ll hear them in one place and they’ll already be gone.

In close quarters at night, you basically have no hope. Unless you get lucky, as I have a couple times. The trick is to guess where they’re landing before they get there.

Now my eyes can track and follow the movement, enough so that I don’t lose his form.

Then he asks me to do it.

“Um, I...”

“It’s okay, we’ll start with running.”

Sam can cross this entire open field in moments. He can leap into trees and leap back. When he jumps with the wind, he seems to pitch his body forward and actually be flying.

“Just run as fast as you can,” he says.

I like watching him, but I have no heart for learning this. It is another testament to what I am and what I’ll never be again. I want to go back to the

conversation in the truck and explain to Ray how pointless this mission is.

My short jog has Sam busting up in stitches.

“What?” I ask, annoyed.

“Oh man...” He has to get his breath back. “It’s just... I said run, and you...”

He’s laughing again.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry... Let’s do it again, okay? But this time, actually run. Don’t think about it. Just go as fast you can. Like this.”

He runs, and I can tell that he’s slowed down a bit for me.

“Now you try!” he calls back, but I am looking away. My attention is caught by the sound of something metal and cacophonous.

“That’s the train! Don’t worry about it!”

I don’t understand what he means, and I wonder if I’ve misunderstood. I continue to stare after the sound, but Zane’s voice directly behind me causes me to whirl in surprise.

“The train tracks are hidden in the grass over there.”

I duck from his pointing hand and backpedal several steps. I did not hear him approach.

He lifts an eyebrow. “You are afraid of me? Why?”

“I-I’m not.” I draw myself up to my full height, but again, I find my gaze sliding to the ground, unable to stay on his face. His eyes are too intense, and without the primal need of his body to make me stupid, I’m all too aware that he once tried to kill me.

The man who may have wanted to fool around and sleep with him is long gone now that I’m no longer present in those physical feelings. But I am a brave man. When I flinch, it’s partially because I remember a big gash in his throat as his taloned hands are reaching for me.

“Sam, leave us alone a moment,” he says, and I discover that Sam is right next to me, having appeared silently.

“Alrighty.” He’s gone just as fast, to the trees.

“I hope we don’t put too much trust in him,” Zane mutters. “That could backfire spectacularly. But he is exceptional.”

I should not feel these strange stirrings of jealousy. Not intense, but prodding all the same, the hint of some subconscious emotion.

Zane returns his attention to me, and I have the urge to do something that proves I’m not afraid.

So I tell him the truth.

“I’m just thinking about that night, when we had you captured in the Church.”

“*You* did not have me in the Church. But go on.”

“Why did you try to kill... uh...” I come up with a phrase that will not cause him to correct me. “The hunter when he was trying to save you.”

His face lights up, pleased, and I feel those same subtle stirrings. Now stronger, and now of pride.

“He was trying to save me. And to do so, his life was necessary. We were in agony, and unable to fly or even to run as fast as a man. Without your blood, we could only have crawled away, and the others would have captured us easily before we could crawl to the front door.”

“I would have protected you,” I say, and inwardly, for the first time, I realize how true it is. I wonder if I might have loved them both before the option of turning could even be put in my head.

They had a pull on me, Zane more strongly so.

“But the hunter was the enemy and partially the cause of our near-deaths. Would you accept my protection if my family had done the same while I

watched?”

I do not like the sense he makes.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, noticing my expression. His talons are light on my arm, where his hand hovers.

“It’s just...” I don’t usually have a problem expressing myself. Even when I’m nervous, like now, I can contain it and get whatever needs saying done. I first confessed my attraction to men stoically, without preamble, despite shaking inside.

I assume the straight posture of a soldier and force myself not to shy away from his eyes.

“I hate it when you’re nice to me. I hate the nicknames, the affection, and I hate most of all that you...” I swallow, unable to maintain my momentum. But I do finish clearly. “...Seem to have stronger feelings for me. Or at least a willingness...” *For sex*, I would have added, but I leave it there.

I regain my breath, and continue, “When you would have killed me that night like I was nothing.”

“We’re back to dissonance, then,” he murmurs.

“I cannot forget it. How can you pretend all these things, when I was on your side that night?”

“Mm. Shall I tell you about the death of my sire? He was Evelyn’s favorite, and he wasn’t gentle, but he rarely hunted himself. Evelyn kept him fed. He was hers, you see. She likes the providing role.”

“And a sire is...?”

“The one who turned you. Darius is your sire, but you’ll be my childe, which is a new role for all of us. Edmund is your father, but he cannot see you, for your own safety. I guess, since we’re labeling roles, I am your acting sire.” He tilts his head thoughtfully. “Actually, I would like it more if you would claim as your real sire. Perhaps the definition should shift to be the one who raises you.”

He steps close, and I let him. I'm still tense, ready to jump at a moment's notice, but I do hold a trust that he won't hurt me. Not anymore, as I am.

“But the point I was making is that this happened long before you were born. For you to blame me for hurting you back then, would be the same for me to blame you my sire's death. By the way, you weren't there for *either* of the events.”

His arm comes around me slowly. It's different this time, though he's touched and claimed me before. Now it is light, like a nervous man on a first date, prepared for rejection.

“Our past is no past at all. You were never a Clan member. I have never harmed you. Do you understand?”

They divorce themselves from their identity. If I told Theresa, she wouldn't believe. She was too trusting, always counting on the best of people, to a naive degree.

I say, “I did those things. You did those things. You cannot pretend we don't have a history.”

He laughs lightly. “I have a history, baby Brian. Yes, I'm calling you that. So I can remind you. My history goes back to the Victorian Era. You're less than a day old. You were born a couple hours before dawn, so you may call yourself a day old when they've come back with their catch and you've fed.”

“I am 29 years old.”

He becomes firm. “This is dissonance. You are sick with it. It is a state of suffering, dove.” His arm coils tighter, pulling me into him, and I don't resist. He is shirtless, as always, and I'm secretly taking the forbidden satisfaction of having him close against me. While he touches my back.

“Look at what it drove you to do. You wandered into the church like a baby lamb for sacrifice to their priest.”

I look back over my shoulder. The pink lines are faint, but against the rest of my pale skin, they look like horrific scars.

“I do not have a silver tongue like Darius,” he sighs. “Sam suffers dissonance too, but you wouldn’t know it unless you were here for the first days. Somehow, Darius guides him so that it isn’t a problem.”

“What about God?” I ask quietly, and the question doesn’t cause me as much pain as it should. Despite my problems, I’ve always believed that he was with me. If I didn’t, I don’t think I could have done nearly as much as I have.

I would have succumbed to fear and depression for the violence I’ve seen.

“Oh. Is that what this is really about?” The seriousness disappears from his face and he looks mischievous. “Well, that is really a matter of perspective. Edmund, for instance, believes in God.”

Edmund? Their father, their king, the one who kills nightly and the one the Clan is so desperate to purify?

I once faced him, at a far distance, with Ray and others at my back. He didn’t speak, he only laughed, and we thought he might be possessed by the devil himself. He killed a girl that night, in front of us.

“No,” I whisper. “That’s not possible. How?”

“He didn’t used to. Then shortly after replacing the father before him, he brought home somebody’s Bible and started reading. We were being pushed out of our territory then, by a rival family and hunters alike. The deaths were too much for him, and he started seeking a meaning in it all.”

I shake my head. “But he can’t believe in God. Not the Christian God. I’ve met him, as a hunter, he’s...” *The devil himself*. But I now believe differently.

“He’s your father and he loves you very much. You and Sam both are his only purpose right now. I’ve actually never seen him this happy. He’s

usually brooding.”

“I’ve watched him kill. He snapped her neck like she was... nothing. He... he laughed.” Chuckled, more like. It wasn’t the maniacal laughter of a super villain on a kid’s show. It was a soft, *oh, hello there, I wasn’t expecting you* sort of laugh, then he dispatched her quickly and fled.

Well, we said ‘fled’ in our debriefing. The debriefings are permanent records, and for the future, when Edmund may still live, we echo the same false confidence of the hunters before us.

The truth, that everyone who hunts during Edmund's time will know, is that Edmund never engages without careful planning. When we meet, it’s always on his terms, and we are always outmatched, usually powerless.

I know the monster. But now Zane describes a man.

“He believes we are all made by God and we are all God’s children—humans too. See, humans are more or less the dominant predator of the planet. We cannot live without them, so annihilating humans is not our goal. They are a source of life, and a weakness, for they hunt us back. But Edmund believes it is our divine purpose to hunt humans. He says we are the check on human population and expansion.”

“That’s ridiculous. God protects us. God made us in his image. God is...” I pause here, perhaps sensing the words are false in my experience. “...He is loving, merciful, kind. You might not understand, but he isn’t cruel like that.”

“Shh. I believe in no God. Only evolution, science, and the fight to live another day. Edmund believes that God made us alongside the humans, the same way he made the rats and the snakes. Neither is more preferred or exalted. Both live in his garden, and both serve their purpose. It is a futile view of existence in my opinion.”

“It’s not right,” I whisper, but I do not mean Edmund’s beliefs directly. I am speaking of a God who creates things to apparently watch them kill each other. It is not the God we believe in, but then, our God allows the vampires to exist, which fits into Edmund’s view.

I cover my face with my hands. “How can this be? Both Edmund and the Clan serving the same God?”

“Shh. They would kill each other even without a God. It all beliefs, my dove, and I do not have much interest in arguing philosophy. None of it is really true, in my opinion.”

My stomach growls. I look down and realize I’ve become increasingly sick and uncomfortable while we talked. It wasn’t just my emotions. I am starving suddenly, and I’m confused about whether I should continue this masquerade of having a mission, or try to move as Sam does and escape to the Clan with what I’ve learned.

It would be a fitting end to my mission. *They serve God also.* I can imagine their reaction.

The moment Zane tosses his head, his hair brushing against my shoulder and his neck exposed to me, I change my mind. Another night. With him.

“Inside, dove. Sam will be alright. I may be able to show you the beauty of my simple beliefs, and perhaps cure your dissonance as well.”

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Chapter 20



“I’m just going to let Sam know where we’ll be here. Stay here, dove, I won’t be gone long.”

By the grip on my arm, he guides me to the bed, then leaves shutting both doors behind him. I know this is because he’ll hear if I open either one.

He is right, he isn’t gone long. I only have time to sit on the mattress, my legs stretched out across the dingy linoleum floor, and briefly contemplate what’s become of my life.

Brian’s life.

He murdered the father of his church. He saved two killers, who will go on to kill more, and will also become his family, his protectors. They will treat him like he’s precious. And here, in an abandoned building, on this nice, clean mattress thrown on the floor, he’ll taste the skin and blood of Zane, the most creature male on the Earth.

I am just contemplating if it is a sad story or a funny one, and musing about the possibility of an ironic God, when Zane returns.

“He will stay outside for us.” He has a talon held to his wrist. “Though, he was very hungry and trying to be good about it. Poor babe. Whether Darius likes it or not, he will be compelled to share nursing duties with the family very soon.”

The smell of blood hits me and reminds me what hunger truly is. Not an uncomfortable, slightly sick feeling that can be ignored. Not the tension and miserableness either.

No, those are manageable. The barracks aren't known for their feastly meal plan and over indulgence.

This is fire set to gasoline, and I gasp when it hits me, my mouth suddenly wet with a surge of saliva. I swallow it back, but the sensation of parchedness does not lessen. I think it is worse, my body insisting I get the right stuff.

You're hungry and you just don't know it.

In the future will I react to these discomforts sooner? Sam certainly eats a lot.

“It is alright. You're going to have a lot. First from me, then Evelyn when she gets here. Sam will have Darius, and then... We'll make due a few weeks. Until you get a handle on things. With dissonance, it is best to keep the family small and familiar, so you can form bonds.”

He leans back and undoes the button on his jeans, then grabs the waist and starts shimmying them down.

I want to attack him. Jump on him, hold him down, and...

The rest becomes murky. I can't think of what I want in words or images, but the emotion is there. I want to take from him and have from him, if that makes sense. It's the desire for a grand satisfaction and peace that only he can give me.

I'm so focused on his wrist, which is already healing, that I don't notice he's fully naked until he's undoing the zipper at my crotch and pulling my pants down.

“Whoa, whoa, what are you doing?!”

I grab the hem to keep them up and catch the pants at my thighs. I'm embarrassed to note that my hunger isn't just emptiness alone. I'm at half-

mast just knowing what comes next.

His mouth comes forward and too close, and I let go of the pants to hide myself frantically behind my hands.

He only kisses an exposed section of my leg, close to my hip. I'm braced as if he meant to blow, which would elicit a shriek and a struggle. Here, one hand fits over my hip, his finger straying dangerously into butt area, and he squeezes like he's testing me for plumpness. His mouth stays near my skin as he speaks.

"This is going to be my method of bonding. Not so different from the traditional way—but a sire typically lets the childe decide when they should divest clothes, and how far it should go."

By the tilt of his head and nudge of his nose against my lower stomach, I know he is smelling me.

"Not like this," I say, trying to hide with one hand and keep a firm grasp on my pants with the other. "I keep my clothes on."

He looks up at me from by my navel.

"Why? With touches, you are not confused or shy. You never avoid me, not even on your first night. We have already felt much of each other, dove."

I have to keep swallowing. I am hungry for him, and it's a lot stronger feeling than missing a meal. It's worse, actually. I had contemplated that the seduction of vampirism might be the perfect, long life making it worth the cost, but now I experience intense longing that makes me never want to be far from him again.

If I were to feel this, and he weren't here to satisfy me, I would be trapped in a hell truer than what I've read in the Book.

"I haven't..." This is embarrassing to admit, but the emotion is nothing compared to the rest of what I am. "I haven't been naked with anyone. Never."

He blinks. “Truly? That is rare, even in my human lifetime.” He smiles. “But I am naked with you now.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve been in locker rooms and stuff. I’ve seen men’s bodies, and I’ve changed clothes. I just can’t shower with them. Or piss next to them. They know, you know. And even the ones that didn’t, in school and stuff, I didn’t shower with them because...”

I shrug. “You know. It’s not right to them because of what I am.”

“It’s alright to me,” he says. “That’s the point of this.”

He stands, without the regular slowness of a typical man, and I am taken aback by having his groin at eye level for me. Not aroused yet, but as perfect as the rest of him. He’s like a demure sculpture of what a man should be, and not in the lewd, huge fashion of the porn clips I’ve sneaked.

His skin is slightly darker, pinker down there, but it matches the paleness of the rest of him. His form is soft, and as unobtrusive as any other part of his body.

I only see it for a second before I avert my eyes, but it is a long second in my mind, and my new eyes might as well have a zoom in camera lens. I am especially curious about his bareness. There is only a slight, wispy patch of hair, and it doesn’t have the usual wiry texture.

I want to touch. Even though I’m pitching my body away from him as if I’m repulsed.

Lying across the bed on his back, next to me, he says, “I believe you are more afraid of this than the possibility that your God might be dead.”

Those words are horrible to me. Who have we been fighting in the name of, if not our God, our shepherd?

But also, how can I worry about that, when I’ve got Zane here?

I am a sinner.

“You can decide when to remove your clothes,” he says, touching a talon to the base of his throat and letting it drag down. I watch raptly, wanting to see when the tip presses and draws a dark stripe.

“For now, you eat. Where shall I cut for you, dove?”

His hand hasn't stopped traveling lower, and now it's below his navel. I am staring where I shouldn't, dual desires of hunger and lust working on me. If there is a demon, he is in me now and his possession is not a suffering.

I hope he'll cut. Anywhere.

But in the end, I am a shy, hopeless man. Years of atonement must have been pre-payment for this.

I take his hand and put it just below his sternum. I say nothing so that he'll interpret for himself whether I want his neck or his chest. It's in the general vicinity of both.

I inwardly moan with relief when those talons travel south and to the nipple bud. My mouth parts, and body shyness is forgotten. Even my admiration for him is lost.

He makes a pained little sigh as the nail plunges deep, and the first spot of red ensnares me. I am so quick to give in to it, that I forget any thoughts about whether I'm truly doing this, the source of this gift being an innocent life, and I was once a human man.

I act on feeling alone, no thoughts or identity to obstruct me. My lips fall over his skin, my tongue pushes on his finger, and I start suckling before he's even finished the cut.

“Mmhm.” My eyes shut. I suck tightly around his digit, even as he removes it and I'm left with just his flesh. I want to bite, and that is frustrating to do when his skin is hard and smooth. When I affix myself more completely, the nipple in my mouth, the need is solved.

“Ah!”

I like so much when he squirms and I pin him with my hands. It satisfies another need in me. I don't just want the liquid itself, I want to feel him wriggle and squirm beneath me.

So I bite. And twist.

Lovely, red hot liquid hits the back of my throat and there's more than enough to quench me. I throw my leg over him, and straddle him fully. I did find time to pull up my pants when he took his hands away, but now I see what he means about the clothes.

It shall not take so long for me to be rid of them after all. They don't let me keep my legs as wide as I'd like. When I push into him, it's little different than having a pillow between my legs back home.

My only friction is when he slides enough against me to make the fabric rub.

So I have to grind into him harder. I have to chew into him, until he's gritting his teeth and cussing under his breath. This continues until I make the noise of a whimper, satisfaction making a mess in my pants, but I don't care. It feels good. I can relax again, settling in against him to suckle.

Zane breathes heavily and brings a hand up to pet my hair.

"This is the last time I let you be stubborn, little dove. I was trying my stupid brother's approach, trying to be your friend, trying to get you to come to me. It's right for you to be vicious with me."

Enough of my sense has returned to feel a little bad. But also very, very appreciative. If he had forced me away, punishing me, I don't know what I would have done. I think I would have tried to tear into him the way he did to me.

I understand, finally.

With that part no longer bothering me, the life and wants of Brian the hunter, seem far away. Zane loves me enough to bleed and hurt for me.

He's under me, cooing, saying things like, "It's all yours. Take it from me, dove. Grow up strong and healthy."

It is unfortunate for him that raising another requires literal pain and sacrifice. I, on the other hand, am I'm lazy. My belly is full. I'm rocking my hips against him, subtly, without need.

"I will tell you a story," he says, scratching the back of my neck. "About a human man who almost killed me. He had a handsome face—a lot of young ones do, but you could tell he was older than his years. Childhood had not been easy for him."

A memory of my father is just vague yelling and the sound of a scraping chair. Pain too, exploding across my face. That is remembered vividly. But the rest of it, my hate for the man, his face, the smell of booze and sensation of spit, is just a smear of awfulness. There's nothing distinguishable about the memory, except the pain. My sense of smell was not as good back then, so even that seems faint.

"He was still a little too young, a little bit awkward. But he had a sense of power to him. You knew when you watched him that he would be the next great hunter. The current great hunter saw it too, and we were well aware of the apprenticeship. But humans replace each other so often, we had no specific target on his head. Back then, we were being as quiet as we could. Our strategy was to be so invisible, that we convinced you we were already dead."

"Didn't seem that way," I say. Of course, I have to let go of the nipple to say so, and he's quick to seize my head, putting me back to it.

"Shh. It is my story. It's your job to be fat and well fed."

I snort at that. And I am past the point of the fullness. But the wound does not spurt anymore for me, and the blood is little more than a taste for me now. Since it keeps us both happy, I continue to feed.

"Now then. I looked forward to taking this hunter when Evelyn caught him unaware. I had never made love to my meal as Edmund almost always does. But with him, I certainly would. It was the power I was attracted to.

And a bit of it, the awkwardness of youth changing to man, too. Oh, Evelyn and I would have made a lengthy celebration out of you. And I'd like to think, if we'd had the chance, we would have sired you ourselves. Darius simply can't be so special to be the only who sires children, though he has the family thinking so."

He strokes my cheek with a crooked finger, the talon curled away from me. Gentle, but deadly. Having his affection was not a safe prospect for me, but I know that I'd have gone quite willingly if he were the bait and not Evelyn.

That is how it works, I guess.

"That would be a better ending to the story."

"You think so?"

"Yes. Leave it there. The rest is depressing." Also, I want him to shut up. He talks a lot, and the tone of his voice is always soothing enough that I don't want to interrupt. But now, my stomach well and truly expanded, the buzz of good feelings making me light headed, and if I can get it up again, I might have another use for him.

Zane, on the other hand, keeps speaking as if he doesn't notice.

"I see it differently. I was dying, painfully, slowly. Little dove, if there is a god, I will pray every day that you never experience the same. Everywhere I looked, I saw only hate, cruelty, and some delighted faces. In your priest, especially."

He shudders. It is not the emotion I want when I'm petting up the side of him, silently asking him for something.

I frown, sensing this will not be the moment I get it. I wish I wasn't so wrapped in the past in the first place, and now it is Zane who reminisces in it.

"But my hunter came to me. My sister and I couldn't believe it. We've never seen a hunter come to our mercy. But you did, and when you knelt

before me...”

It is gone. The moment. My arousal. I can also see the memory with him, and unlike my childhood, this one is not faded. I can still see him stranded there in the blood. Beat to shreds. Told to ask a God for forgiveness who either may not exist or may not care.

“I wouldn’t say that I loved you then,” he says, tucking me into his shoulder when I settle into him. “I was overcome with loathing and hate. But I did survive, and I always knew your name after that. When I discovered you had lived, I... took note of that. I wish I could I say it was love, love, it’s different for us. I, especially, do not take to humans, not even pretty ones. But there was something there. Something notable.”

“What a pretty love story,” I say, and this makes him laugh a little bit. He shifts around, looking for the tape, then picks it up.

“You haven’t let me get to the ending.” He tears off a piece with his teeth and slaps it on his skin. An ironic God, has to be, I think. Otherwise this beautiful creature would not repair itself like a torn chair.

“When I saw you in the street, dove, Katie would have had to fight me for you. Edmund would have had to pull you from me, hissing and clawing. Oh, and he could have hobbled me, too. No doubt about that. Nobody fucks with Edmund. But for you, dove...”

He thinks about it, and I smile, not too bothered anymore for missing my moment of naked play. It’s nice having him like this too. This is really the first time I’ve been able to just look at a naked man, and not feel guilty about it. His form, all the way to that little patch of dark hair, is spread before me. And I am at peace.

“You were mine. There was the something notable about you that I didn’t understand. It wasn’t that I was in love with you at first, though attraction must have been part of it.”

He kisses my hair.

“But you were certainly mine. And whenever I saw you, even from a distance, I always noticed how you were. That you were alive, of course, and older. I saw you grow into a man recently, and I noticed enough to guess we had an attraction in common. You liked to watch that night club, didn’t you? The one with all the business men?”

“Yeah.” I wonder how many nights he might have been there. If he hunted me, I wonder if I would have fallen for it again. The allure, his voice...

Perhaps not. I was not the same, swayable man.

I don’t want to be him.

This is a perplexing realization for me. Brian never wanted to be himself, and I still don’t.

“It is a good story, isn’t it?” I murmur, glad to be where I am.

Then the sound of an approaching car engine hits my ears, and it is distant, but already I can pinpoint its direction and know it is headed for us.

“Ah. That is Evelyn.” Zane sits up and shakes out his pants. “I believe she will have a healthy catch for us. You, dove, will stay inside. Do not disobey me. I have neither Darius’s soft tongue, nor his soft touch.”

He kisses me. It is sudden, full, and passionate. He holds the back of my neck and keeps our faces close when he’s done, speaking while looking directly into me.

“You are mine. So you will let me concern myself with these things.”

There is a torrent of guilt, but it is pushed low, beneath my desire to be his. I nod, and he kisses me until the car pulls up.

Chapter 21



I am his.

And I am hers.

I think I felt a little bit of that on the day I saved them from execution. I can be honest with myself now and accept that there is no purification. Only a long, tortuous death.

Here I sit and wait, protected from my guilt by their claim, and I'm not comfortable with it necessarily, but it is easy. All I have to do is wait. Meanwhile, my ears give me hints of what's happening outside.

They put the truck tailgate down. Something is hefted from the back, but evidence of this is brief. A creak as they climb in the back. Then a brushing sound as they move the body. And a quiet, gasping moan from that person.

I will not lie to myself anymore about the nature of the world. And I will not keep my old beliefs, either about God or about what human Brian wanted from me. I am an observer and a child of the present only.

There may be more than one person, as all four vampires walk to one of the trailers in the back. If they can fly, there's little reason for them to go so slow unless they're carrying prey. Conversation is short.

"How is he?" Evelyn asks.

"Getting better, I hope. It is difficult to say how long it will last. His first sight is intact, but his trauma overrides it, I think. He is very confused."

“With good hunting, he shall be well fed,” Darius says. “I am glad we can do that much for him.”

“Yes. And he does eat. Voraciously. He may turn out healthy.”

“You should’ve seen him try to fly though,” Sam says with a snort. This is accompanied by the sound of a door opening. Nothing more is said until they return.

Evelyn rushes to me, and I smile for her since she is so worried about me. Her dress has a new spot on it that I notice right away. When she hugs me, I tilt my nose to it and inhale.

It smells heavenly, and I have the urge to bite her dress and suck it into my mouth.

I am not confused.

At least, not the physical part of me. I never was, not even as a human. Brian’s body always knew it wanted a man. It’s the self that was programmed to be confused and ashamed.

I put my arms around her, and don’t let myself ponder who she might have killed tonight.

“Oh, love, I’m so glad to see you looking healthy.” She pulls back and pinches one of my cheeks. “Oh! Your blush. So beautiful.” She bumps noses with me. “What have you and Zane been up to, hm?”

I tell her a little bit and Zane fills in the rest.

“Good. I worried the whole time we were gone. I almost ditched Darius and came right home. Hunting was terrible. Edmund’s latest attack has all the young, pretty ones staying inside. But Darius persisted, and we caught two of the most beautiful—”

“Evelyn!” Zane hisses, and grabs my arm like I might run or strike her or something.

“Oh. Oh, oops, I... I’m sorry, I got carried away. I was just excited.” She looks startled and worried. “Don’t think about that, love. They’re alive and safe, and we’ll keep them well in hopes that they turn. Darius’s luck just has to pay out one more time.” She crosses her fingers on both hands.

“It’s alright, Evelyn. I’m trying not to be sick with dissonance anymore.” And there is significant, unexpected relief in doing so. When I’m not against myself, I am not my enemy.

I have not decided where I sit on the fence of right or wrong, but I don’t have to. Evelyn and Zane are taking care of me. I’ve never felt such contentment, except for the time I attribute to when my mother was alive, which I can barely remember now.

“Oh. That is good, little love.”

And for a while she just cuddles me. She’s often touching her eyes, and I wonder how much she must have worried about me. My mother’s memory will not stay with me much longer, I think.

“What’s this?” Zane asks. He’s been going through a small black purse Evelyn brought with her. He holds up a flat white card with one corner cut.

“That’s my surprise for the little ones. It’s only good another night, I’m afraid, but it’s enough time to play in the water, and maybe watch some movies. Sam should be happy.”

* * *

I don’t wake that night—that day, technically, since my mind has yet to make the switch—on my own. The sleep I experience is better than any I’ve ever felt before. I cannot recall a time that sleep was as peaceful and as blank as this one.

I am awoken by Evelyn, who gives me her finger, and then her neck to feed. I do so, my arms around her, our bodies pressed together. It seems nothing much more than a dream.

Then I am blank again. Simply gone. It is a peace I only realize when I awake, and there is no lingering grogginess or the foul remnants of nightmare hanging over me. No dread, for once.

Not even my turning was this restful, for Brian's life and the confusion upon waking was there to bother me.

Everyone else is already up, and Sam seems exceptionally happy and fidgeting.

"We're taking a trip, Brian," Evelyn tells me, picking out a shirt that I put on for her. "We've got a night in a hotel, and I need you to be good, okay? We're going to do our part. Zane and I won't let you out of sight for a moment. There's going to be other people, and phones, and all sorts of ways for you to act sick again. But it'll be worth it to get you clean and find some fresh clothes too, don't you think?"

There is tug of old emotion when she says phones. I had a purpose to contact the Clan.

But I say, and mean it, "Don't worry."

There is a new car outside our hovel, something ears failed to pick up since the truck is loud in the first place. A gleaming silver SUV, a new model, waits for us. The beep of the door unlocking is deafening.

"Sorry," Evelyn says, covering my ears after I've reacted. "Baby ears can be quite sensitive."

"Maybe this isn't such a good idea," Darius says.

"He's filthy though. He needs a bath," Zane points out, putting his hand through my hair.

"It's a quiet place, off the highway, but too expensive to be used by most. The Motel 6 down the road has cheaper rooms. I think it'll be okay."

Darius nods, and we get in. The smell of fresh leather hits me harder than the sound did. I never noticed how unnatural and chemical the scent of it is. There's also flowers, but the stench of it is overwhelming.

Evelyn puts down the windows right away. “I already threw out the air freshener, but the woman driving this used to do her make up at the wheel.” She grabs body spray out of the center console. “She must have used this stuff every time she got out of the car. Now it’s coated in it.”

“Ugh. Why can’t people have better noses?” Sam complains, holding his pinched shut. I am leaning graciously toward the window to inhale some oxygen with the strong scent.

Evelyn chucks the body spray out the window. “Don’t worry, babies. Once we get going, the wind will clear out everything.”

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Chapter 22



Driving down the highway is both a liberating experience and giant-ass headache. On the one hand, Evelyn's right, the flowery chemical scent goes away and the car is filled with clean, amazing air. The scents of dirt, oil, wet, and all kinds of things almost make me want to stick my head out of the vehicle like a happy dog, taking it all in.

I've never experienced the world like this before. All of it is new, even if I'm technically not a few days old like the vampires believe.

On the other hand, every passing car makes me turn into Zane's shoulder and shut my eyes. Passing eighteen wheelers is the worse, the roar from their tires enough to make my head burst.

And even the street lamps are bright.

I didn't realize I haven't seen artificial light since my awakening, and now that I do, I appreciate the simple, quiet living of a hovel out in the middle of nowhere.

"Poor, baby," Evelyn comments, and passes back a woman's scarf, frilly and thin for summer.

This goes around my head, and I use the ends to stuff over my ears, helping considerably. I don't dare look at myself in the mirror, but nobody pokes fun at me for it either.

I do notice that Sam seems less affected, slouching in the middle with me, but not shading his eyes or covering his ears.

“How come this doesn’t bother you?” I ask, feeling a bit sulky and also jealous.

He seems confused and shrugs. Darius supplies my answer.

“Newborns have sensitive eyes and ears. You’re still adjusting. When you grow into yourself, you won’t find it so.”

“You are also a bit weak,” Zane whispers in my ear. “Because of your ordeal. You will have to be protected longer.”

He peppers this with a kiss, but I do not care for affection on top of his implication.

Brian is strong. Independent. Stubborn.

He could have used some help, actually.

I shift in the seat, uncomfortable with the realization. He wasn’t strong so much as he was desperate and fighting for a place in his family. Which, due to the loss of his mother, consisted of the Clan. It was no family at all, not like the adoring one I have now.

Yet, a small part of me laments the absence of payphones as we pull up to the hotel. A few decades ago, this place would have had at least two. Now, since I’m living in the cell phone age, I don’t even get the possibility of falling back into a man with a mission.

I might...

I want...

I don’t know if I would have called or not though. It’s so confusing, and some unhappiness must show on my face because Zane reminds me:

“You are mine, remember? Be the man or the fledging, whatever you wish. But you, Brian, are my responsibility, and I’m looking after you. I

will make sure you don't hurt yourself.”

“And that goes double for me,” Evelyn says, parking in the back by some swaying trees that offer additional darkness.

I blush. I did not expect her to be able to hear his whispered words. A quick glance to Sam and Darius shows that they either can't hear or they're ignoring us. I suppose it's the second.

But there is no disgust. There's no teasing either, or sly smirks.

Why, if one my Clan hunters bends over, I can't get away with facing anywhere in a 180 degree radius.

I'm still nervous, expecting the punishment or the playful prod, though they're perfectly relaxed like nothing has happened. The doors pop open, and I'm glad to get out of the vehicle.

Zane helps out and puts his arms over me immediately. They're more than affectionate, they're strong and permanent. He's protecting me. From myself, I guess.

It's what I need.

This is a different kind of inner voice than the one I'm used to, which always punishes me.

“Nice place!” Sam comments enthusiastically as we head for the stairs.

Everyone stops short when we catch sight of a man with a sweeper broom and a janitor's cart. He's frozen in place, staring at us with a shocked expression.

There are two reactions within me. The strongest is my sudden dread, realizing that I will see him killed. Vampires don't leave witnesses. They are heartless.

The second is subtler. I let it pass and never think on it again. But I will not lie. My tongue rolls around and I swallow back spit—because my mouth is wet. *Slightly*.

It is the thought of my sire feeding that does it. My imagination is more than image, it gives me the sensation of Zane biting into him and the rush of hot blood into his mouth.

That makes me hunger. Not in a starving sense, but it's a longing all the same.

The moment is over quickly, and without incident. Evelyn gives a small smile and waves at the man. Then she produces our room key and walks confidently to our door.

I am ashamed that I might be pushing for the death of the man, but unable to restrain my curiosity, I ask weakly, "Won't he tell somebody?"

"Unlikely, love," Evelyn says, letting us into the warm place that smells like cotton and glass cleaner. "He sees what he wants to see."

"We aren't wearing shoes."

"Once they see our eyes, they tend to forget everything else. In the old days, some families rejected human ways completely, and hunted naked, like animals. It was less convenient, since you had to pick off stragglers, but it worked."

The room is spacious and luxurious compared to my little place at the barracks. There's two queen beds, which Zane eyes with an arched brow.

"A family, a party or...?"

"Shh," Evelyn says.

"I'm just wondering where the rest are."

"Not in front of the little birds."

That's the end of that, but given the SUV's carrying capacity, I take the family option for my guess. I shake my head to clear the heavy, contradicting feelings, and settle onto the end of one bed. This room smells faintly of the same flowers, but it could be my grieved imagination. I

wonder if I'll get the same smell on the wind if I walk past one of the trailers in the back.

Zane passes me unaware of my emotions. Just the sight of him is enough to put me at ease a little bit. I lean closer toward the 'newborn' mode of thought with him looking so good and so right.

Sam comes in. "Alright! Hell, yes!" He hops on my bed and hauls a laptop bag up from the other side. He receives a stern warning from Darius.

"Remember what we talked about last time."

Sam looks avoids his gaze as he frees the laptop and opens the lid.

"It won't happen again."

"If it does, I'll destroy every electronic device before you ever get your hands on it."

"That goes for you too, Brian," Evelyn says, coming back from the bathroom, where the sound of water is running. "No facebook, no social media posts, no checking the news for your name, nothing of that sort. And Sam, you're responsible for him too. Either of you breaks the rules..."

"Yes, Mom," Sam says, and this makes Evelyn smile.

She holds a hand out to me, and my instinct is to come to her beckoning. Sam's exclamation distracts me first.

"Ah, shit. *Password*," he groans.

"Try 'password'," Evelyn says, still grinning, and she closes and opens her hand for me. I go to her. Sam's happy laugh sounds behind me as she leads me into the small bathroom. Zane is right behind, crowding in and closing the door.

"Bath or shower, lovely babe?" Evelyn asks me as she leans over the tub, putting her hand in the water. She makes some adjustments.

“Um...” I clear my throat. There’s no question that they’ll both be getting in with me. Zane is already whisking his shirt over his head.

I take peculiar notice of Evelyn bent over. I’m not ogling her out of lust, but it does make me nervous to think she’ll be taking off her dress. She’s modest. Or seems to be.

I may have to revisit that notion when she straightens up and reaches behind her back for her zipper. There’s no awkward fumbling, reaching, or grasping stretch. The thought to help her with her dress never occurs to me, and it doesn’t have to. The dress splits in a steady line.

I cough, swallow, and take a step back, hitting something hard.

It’s Zane. His arms come around me. I’m wearing fresh, thick jeans after yesterday. Thank God. Because I glance down and see that Zane has already stepped out of his. He’s naked, pressed against my back, leaning in with his nose to nuzzle my ear.

“Perhaps it is time for the talk...” Evelyn says, naked now, stepping into the tub where the shower is going. The curve of her hips is pleasant to look at even if she’s not to my taste specifically. There can be no argument that she’s alluring.

Zane says close to my ear, “Nakedness is nothing much. Humans are peculiar about it, but that’s a rather modern thing, you know, from the long-lived perspective like our past father had.”

“Right.”

It’s nothing much in the barracks either, among the men. But not for me. Women are a totally different story too. But I can see why it wouldn’t be with these creatures, who share their bodies with each other.

And, we do know something of vampire habits and customs. They have a lot of sex. With each other and with humans while they feed. They don’t care about gender. Their rape victims never show signs of struggling, but it’s disgusting all the same.

I can vividly remember Ray's face when we'd find a young man's body stranded somewhere. The glance he'd give me is brief, but it's been motivation for my prayers.

I agreed with him, too.

But these terrible memories don't seem to hold any sway here in the present. Not with Zane's naked form wrapped around me, and me noticing the graceful curves of Evelyn's breasts. I doubt any victim raped by her would be in much suffering until his death.

We never really considered that the victims might have enjoyed it, but it doesn't make it any better when they end up dead.

"It's perfect, love. Come in here with me, and don't be scared. You're going to feel so good with all the dirt and scum washed off you."

That is true.

There's just one problem though, and Zane's hands move to help me with it, undoing my jeans. I swell down there, noticing.

When did I become so indifferent to thoughts vampires' deeds? Lying awake at night, thinking about the things I've seen, used to have me simmering with hate and purpose.

It is because they're so beautiful. And lovely. And perfect, and let's face it—you love how they adore you.

I can't think of them as murderers and monsters.

I'm holding my breath as I step out of my jeans, and I seem to have a special area in my brain where I can accurately sense and track the distance from Zane's groin to my ass, and I move carefully but I'm secretly hoping I'll feel something.

The water is slightly above lukewarm, and refreshing to my skin. It's just cool enough to take the edge off the summer heat, though I'm not as uncomfortable with it as I used to be. I don't sweat as much. And before

this, I didn't stink terribly bad. A faint odor around my armpits maybe, but nothing else.

Dust and grime did collect though, and my hair grew oily. Zane steps in after me, cramping the space for us all, making me nearly step close enough to Evelyn to feel parts of her against me. But not even this new nervousness takes away how good it is to be in a shower again.

I wrap my arms around myself, keeping to the bubble of space between them that lets me exist here without touching, and try to just enjoy the spray. I shut my eyes so I won't be staring.

That would be completely new for me.

He wouldn't be against it either.

I could ask him to. He'd say yes, we'd fool around and probably do more stuff. We've already done a lot.

I won't lie, I'm thinking about it strongly. But Evelyn is here too, just as naked, and she might feel... I don't know. Disgusted? Left out?

He touches my waist and I've got about five milliseconds to tense up before he comes flush against my backside. His male anatomy—I'm too close to it to be thinking *cock* at this point—pushes right into the middle of my ass, my crevice making a warm place for him there.

I must shrink to the size of a pinhole. Every gay slur I heard out of my dad and my friends is hovering close, unspecific with words, but vivid in resentment.

I know I shouldn't be doing this.

A peculiar realization strikes me, and I laugh softly to myself, not intending it to be noticed, but Zane asks while Evelyn pops the shampoo bottle, "What is it, dove? You're frightened as a rabbit, you know. I can feel your heartbeat through your entire body."

And I can feel him everywhere, his hands crossing on my lower stomach, so close.

I press my lips together at first, but there's no harm in telling them. Being the creatures they are, knowing the things they do, I don't think they'll feel particularly much for any confession I have to make.

Which is another peculiar thought put alongside all the atonements I used to make.

"I was just thinking," I say. "I've been to every service since I left high school. I was working on reading the bible through on my own in my free time. I almost finished it too, and then I was going to read it again. Point is... I don't remember it saying much about homosexuality."

"It says next to nothing about it," he says, and his arms tighten around me, his hands starting to rub circles.

Evelyn stands on tip toe and puts shampoo in my hair. I raise my arms to scrub it in myself—the lean of her body puts her nipples against, and I'm suddenly struck by fear again, that she'll want to do something with me as well.

My hands cover hers, but she keeps rubbing soothing circles, her expression pleasant.

"They certainly didn't shy away from it in the covenant, but getting caught was another thing."

"You were in a covenant?" I say, shocked. "So you were...?"

"A nun, yes. And several of the women had dalliances off and on. We never repented them."

To see her now, her naked form bared shamelessly, I should weep for the sins afflicted on her soul.

But then I think about the nuns in the church with their whips and their stony expressions.

"There isn't much that's actually pure, is there?"

“Nothing, sweetheart. There is nothing. Even the caterpillar eats the leaf, which is living and does not want to be eaten.” She pulls me forward into the spray. Suds run down my body.

“What kind of God is this?”

“Shh. My poor childe.” She stops and grabs the sides of my head. “Don’t think so much. The burden of understanding existence cannot fall onto one meager mind alone.”

“Evelyn has a very... nihilistic point of view.”

“No, it is a logical point of view,” she corrects.

“What is it?” I ask, distracted enough that I’m not bothered while she adds conditioner now. She works efficiently and has little interest in adding to Zane’s massage that has me slacking against him.

“I believe it is pointless for us to talk religion. As pointless as it is for caterpillars to wonder why they must eat the leaf. I do not wish to spend my shower pondering Gods that can be neither proven, nor disproven. When one appears to me, I shall change my mind.”

“Practical,” I say, and she gives me a wry smile.

“It is a good thing you have someone as practical minded as me taking care of the two of you.”

Neither Zane nor I disagree.

Chapter 23



*F*orgive me, Father, for I have sinned. I have been naked with another man...

It is blazing. I wake up and put an arm over my head as if to block the sun, turning my face into Zane's shoulder for protection. I make a little involuntary pip, but not enough to wake him.

I contemplate the dry hotness of my throat and wonder if it's worth the trouble to wake him. I must be hungry, and I've reversed my original mission for a new goal. I want to be good for them.

This blazing heat though. Hot blood will quench the thirst, but it's not really what I want. Air conditioning would be better. A cool breeze.

I linger on the cusp of waking or slipping back into sleep. Even if I'm uncomfortable, I'd rather be in the world when it's cool and quiet and the moon softly lights the world. I can sense intense light obliterating the world in a searing heat outside our little coveted darkness.

Then I hear something. A pop like the cap off a shook-up soda bottle. A short, but abrasive sound follows, like a zip tie getting pulled, and I lift my head, rubbing my eyes to wake up, looking toward Darius and Sam's room, wondering what they could be up to.

They were under the covers when we got out of the shower. I didn't say anything, pretending this was normal, but Zane was quick to catch on and

usher me out of the room. I spent my night by the car, under the shady trees, talking philosophy with Zane and nothing much else.

Sam invited us in for a movie when they were done, but I didn't want to watch it. I could see every pixel on the HD TV, the light hurt my eyes, and the movie didn't seem right for some reason. It was day time in every scene. The plot wasn't relevant. Nobody knew about vampires, it was just people doing people stuff.

I yawn. Then my sleepy musings come to a halt when a strong, familiar smell hits my nose.

“No...”

My throat is too dry to say it loudly. I grab Zane and pull on his arm.

“No, no, no...”

I hear only the faintest crunch of dry gas. They're being careful. Just as I would be. They shut off the cars and either coast or push. Sometimes they leave the vehicles behind and hike for miles out, hauling the gasoline and all the supplies. They'll have shotguns, chains, and strait jackets.

“Zane! Zane! Wake up!”

I hear the gas can tip up, the shifting of feet, and the cocking of several guns. I've given up our element of surprise, but when they strike the match, we'll be helpless anyway.

“Zane... Evelyn!” Belatedly, I remember what Sam taught me. I make the bird-like cry, and their faces twitch at once, but not to full wakefulness. The heat of the day has them lost deeper in sleep.

I make several short calls. Until they come as a panicked yelp, like I'm in pain.

At last, they wake up at the same time, uncomprehending, but both moving to cover me with their bodies.

“They found us. The Clan is here....” I start to explain, but they put it together before I finish the words. The smell is strong and the subtle sounds are telling. I see the realization on their faces. Their brows draw low. Evelyn pulls her lips up and makes an ugly hiss at the wall.

“How did they find us?” she asks, and her expression lands on me, drawn in hate like that. It freezes me for a second. I only saw her once like that when I was human.

“No time,” Zane says. He and Evelyn look into each other’s eyes and seem to be communicating both feeling and words. He gets off the bed and moves to the door for Darius and Sam. Evelyn calls me, scooting off to go to the pile of clothes built in one corner of our hovel.

She begins ripping and tossing things. She’s pulling a t-shirt over my head so fast I can’t keep up when Darius comes into the room.

“I told you not to bring him here!” he hisses.

Evelyn puts her hands over my ears as I get my arms through the shirt. I’m dizzy and sick realizing they think this is my fault. I don’t blame them, but I can’t say anything that would make them believe me.

And even if I could, the thoughts of escaping and betraying them were there. All the time, except for yesterday.

“This is your childe too!” Zane says quietly behind him. But his eyes seek mine. “Brian... you didn’t...?”

“No, I swear. I... thought about doing something. But I wouldn’t! Not anymore This wasn’t me.”

Evelyn seems mostly sad. She focuses on her task, tearing a jean leg down the inner hem. It’s loud, messy work. The hunters know we’re here and they know we’ll be coming out prepared. In my head, I can see them making formations. They’ll be far away from the door, but they’ll be forming a net of gunshot to impede us.

Darius is unmoved. There's so much hate in his eyes. Zane, snarling, pulls Sam to the clothing pile while Darius shuts his eyes and holds still, attentive. He's sensing them.

Meanwhile, Evelyn tears a jean leg in half and covers my arm. Strips from a blouse become the ties to fasten it there.

"What are they waiting for?" Sam asks.

"They'll light the match when they're ready," I explain in a whisper. It won't be long.

"Let's survive this," Evelyn says, and at the same time I think I can sense the match being lit. Something is different outside. I hear a rush of wind and know it's the flame.

"We'll figure out how they found us," she continues, "and we'll learn to be more careful. Then you two can argue about who's wrong. And Darius... we'll go."

"Yes, okay." There is no hate and blame in him as he catches a shirt from her and pulls it over his head. He has the same outward, somber calm that Ray and I would get on a hunt. Silent, efficient, shutting down on fear.

I have to be the hunter again and get through this, but not to hurt my family. We can hear the weeds melt and the flames slick up the sides of the brick as Zane gives me my orders.

"You're going to run to the trees. Make a straight line and don't look back. You have to get there as fast as you can." To Sam, he says, "We need your help the most. You must get to one of the houses out here and break inside. You must kill. And then you have to survive the day."

Darius goes to his child at last, gathering Sam's hands. I feel out of place as his tone takes on emotion. "I know it's difficult, baby bird, but you have to do this. I will help you get through the rest afterward, I promise. Just be strong in this moment, okay?"

Despite how wrong I feel, like this is my fault even if I haven't done anything, I know that our moment has run to long. The heat is rising inside the room. They're waiting for us, and we can only burn in here or confront them.

"They're at the back door," Evelyn says. I am covered head to foot, but she is nothing but her usual dress. She snatches a long shirt, but this goes over Zane.

"Be strong for me," Darius says to Sam, his hand on the back of his neck, their foreheads touching.

Evelyn pulls on a pair of pants under her dress, and Zane tries to help her get her arms covered. I am the only one alone, but I am the most prepared.

"It must be now," I say. I can sense the orange light. Its ferocity and heat. How it crackles at the sides of our hovel like fingers squeezing, compressing us.

Zane comes at me, that fierce expression on his face. He spares no words of love, only, "Straight line. To woods. Fly, baby Brian. Be there for me."

He wants me still, I sense. These are hard, desperate words,

I nod. "Yes, sir."

Darius takes the front. Evelyn and Zane stand shoulder to shoulder at his back. They will absorb the first gunshots, I know, if they are hit. Sam and I will burst out after. The flames won't do much. That's only to rouse us out of the nest. The weapons, the metal nets, and the stakes, however, are what comes next.

It happens so fast, my ears catch more than my eyes.

Darius goes first into the flames and disappears into them. I throw up my arm against the blaze, the intense light searing my eyes through the thin material of the shirt. I cry in pain and cover my face with my hands. Sam takes my waist and pulls on me.

I look up just in time to see Zane, hissing. Gunshots go off, and he leaps through the door. I can't tell which happens first, and for a split second I'm too afraid to move.

I do move. I am accustomed to putting away the panic and acting through it.

But for a moment, it seems impossible. The heat and light off the flames is intense, bright red, and roaring in its consumption of everything. The light beyond it, however, is the real heat. I can't even see through it. It's just blinding, white hot light. The smear of colors, yellow for the grass, brown and green for the trees, so vivid it's impossible to make out shapes, much less the details my eyes should be capable of.

The world out there doesn't look like the world to me.

Sam helps me get past the panic moment, running into the flames, dragging me. I think for sure I am burning alive, but I have enough sense not to slow him down, straightening up and propelling myself through the fire. We make it out, and I go to the ground. This time I'm pulling him.

A small part of me must have been counting. The gunshots go off as we hit the grass. I'm kicking my feet, hoping they aren't caught in the fire. I can't see anything. Everything is burning. Me, the world, our hovel. I get a final glimpse of it before we leave, and it's white, just white, a good little shell that once kept us safe.

Without it, we are helpless. Sam and I haul each other up. We haven't let go of each other. And we start running, a straight line like Zane said. In front of us, however, there's the wavering, garish smear of red in the shape of a truck. And someone in front. I can hardly recognize the shape, but it's a man, and I'm pulling on Sam while Sam's pushing faster, dragging me with him.

We're going to collide.

"Fly!" I hear him shout, but in the moment, I just don't know what to do. My panic reaction is trained well, but not for this.

Sam leaves me, flying over.

Gunshots go off, but I'm still standing. The man in front hasn't fired though, his barrel is pointed up to follow Sam, but he doesn't take the shot. He's too slow. My eyes are a lot faster than theirs, I realize. I burst forward to jump, to fly, but I feel too slow, too clumsy. I'm not a blur of movement like Sam.

The man is Ray. His face is just a wobbling color of flesh, his eyes are two dark holes, and his mouth has a tinge of pink to it. Under the searing light, he's like a demon himself. But I recognize the smell of his cigarettes and his sweat. I come close enough to realize he'll have the fully loaded barrel on me in a second. I duck low and aiming to swerve instead of jump.

From the side, Evelyn runs in. She's on him. I go up over the hood of the truck, and a gunshot goes off. His.

I look back and see rags and cloth blown everywhere. They're dark scraps on the ground. I wouldn't be able to recognize them except for the smell they're accompanied with, which is blood. Lots of flowing, dark red blood, soaking the scorched ground. And I see her—my mother's figure—slump to join the rags.

“Brian, run!” I hear in a ragged voice. Zane, I assume, it's coming right for me. But I'm here already where she lays, and I can recognize now that in the back of the truck, there's piles of chains. Under the sun, in my vision, they look like curled snakes moving over each other.

There is no guilt. I do not reminisce on our friendship. If I had to contemplate the moment ahead of time, I probably would feel bad about turning on Ray and the humans I once called friends. But not if I knew the context. How it would smell, how she would groan and move along the ground like a weak kitten.

She's not dying. Vampires don't go down to mere mortal wounds, you'd have to remove her head. But the chains are for her, and that's just as bad.

Ray's barrel is swinging around to point at me. In my mind, I notice a hundred little things. My thoughts are a continuous stream, but steady, not

racing, moving without pause from one thing to the next.

Zane collides with another, who's shot fires at where his shadow used to be. I grab the barrel of Ray's shotgun before it can level at my face, pull it easily out of his hands, swing it and tuck the butt against my shoulder.

Shooting Ray is not a thought. I pump the shotgun and level the barrel. At this range, I don't actually have to aim. His form wavers in the heat, but he's big enough. Zane throws his target, launches himself atop Evelyn, shouting at me again to run.

He isn't finished when I swing the shotgun around, and instead shoot the hunter—the young man—about to get his shot off early, aiming right at my head. He's handsome and blond. I remember being extra careful to stay away from him to resist temptation.

He turns his face, but it's too late. Blood and flesh explode everywhere. There's screams, there's gunshots. None of them are aimed right, and I don't move. Ray stares at me. My face is covered, and I think my eyes might be burning out of their sockets. Keeping them open hurts like acid.

But he knows it's me and I know it's him. Neither of look the way we used to each other. I pump the shotgun, the empty shell flies, and I pivot my aim to meet his face.

I've got to give it to the old man. He knows vampires. He's good at what he does. The kid was still squeezing the trigger when I took him out. Ray drops to his belly and scrambles under the truck. Not even my fast reflexes can slow time enough to catch him. I could take the shot at his back, right through the middle into his intestines. I'd take two shots to finish him if that's what it takes.

But Zane's pulling Evelyn up, and this gun is full of buckshot. Ray's never had the aim I do, so he relies on spray. Evelyn would probably be safe, but with her so close and so hurt, I make a decision.

Zane is pulling her around the back end of the truck. Ray gets his legs out of danger. The others retake their aim, most for Darius, who rips the arm off his victim and vacates the air before the man drops—he moves so

fast I can hardly keep up, faster than Zane or Sam. But some aim for me, and the angles are correct this time. I shoot twice, at the hunters closest to Evelyn, who might redirect to her. The shots are too quick to be precise, but they strike their targets.

I pitch my body weight backwards to take cover behind the truck, and something solid crashes into me. The gunshots go off, but in my ear, Darius is growling, “Run now, babe.”

He throws me. I had no idea he was so strong. Running and stumbling, I’m heading toward the tree line, trying not to drop the shotgun. I don’t. Looking back, I see Darius crouched, lunging at the would-be attackers of Evelyn and Zane. She can hardly move, and Zane leaves her to help his brother.

It’s chaos. They are shot. Evelyn pulls a little along the ground and seems to be reaching for me.

I take a step toward her, but then I’m seized. This time by Sam, who snarls, “Come on!” and drags me. He’s not as strong as Darius, but I’m no match for him. I want to go back for Evelyn, but I have enough soldier mentality intact not to impede Sam. Sometimes, this is how it happens. But I’m scared. I don’t want to lose her, or Zane, or Darius.

I’ve come to love my family. Quite quickly, I realize, but Brian’s world drifts further away every day. Until now.

Ray is still under the truck. I see him as a dark shape, worming out from underneath the vehicle. Evelyn lays prone right next to him, and I know she is lost.

Chapter 24



To say the shade is a relief is to say a fire is refreshing after an inferno. But it is many degrees less intense and burning than out there, exposed in the open field, and I'm ashamed to admit it is part of what keeps me here.

I would come over my reluctance if Sam would let me go and rejoin the fight. I can operate according to need despite mortal fear and discomfort. But also, I wish to hide from this hazy fire and never see daylight again.

How could I ever think the sunlight was God's warmth? It is his wrath, his fire.

From the trees, I take aim. But Sam's pull is incessant, dragging me over rocks and uneven ground. I'm about to get a shot off anyways, when I remember that this is my shotgun and not my rifle.

Sam slings me into a tree and holds me against it.

"Stop being a pain in the ass!" he roars in my face. He doesn't have fangs, but I can see the same expression Evelyn wore when she hissed and his flat teeth are bared longer than usual.

"We should go back and help them." I'm shaking though, same as him. Terrified. Alone. Sam is strong, but I want my family here. Evelyn, especially, I want safe and protecting me. If it was her yelling at me, I'd listen.

"Look at you! You can't go out there, you're going to die."

“I have the shotgun.” I lift it as proof. The chamber isn’t loaded.

“Who cares?!” he shouts, and I can easily imagine the rows of teeth as points. He spits on me a little, and grabs me by the hair. His hold is not gentle. “You will die.”

His other hand pulls on my coverings, and I become aware of a specific pain. I lumped it in with the everlasting burn of the sun, but this is a place over my left eye that sings with fire.

I cry out, and he whispers, “Jesus, Brian, look at yourself.”

What is it? I wonder and block his touch with my own hands. I feel gingerly, but this is revoked by the pain. I touch above my eyelid to confirm. The skin is squishy and blooms in head-splitting agony at the slightest touch.

I now realize I’m covering one eye and my vision is no different. I’m half blind. The sunlight tore right through my eye.

“Shit.” I let the gun touch ground. Sam starts pulling on the covering, and I yell when the cloth hits my skin.

“You’ve got to leave it on. I’m sorry. Until we find somewhere dark, okay?”

“Shit, yes,” I say, accepting that she’s gone. It makes my heart ache. This is worse than thinking Theresa and Ray might be dead. But then, I didn’t see them be killed, so who’s to say it wouldn’t be the same?

She’s my family now though. Now is all I care about. I should be out there with Darius and Zane, protecting her, maybe dying for her. I’m weak though, and afraid. And with only one eye left, what’ll I do if I lose the good one and can’t aim?

Heroes die. That’s what Ray said. It’s not cowardice making me think that she’d want me to run and live over dying for her. Those were her last words in the grass.

Sam pulls me off the tree and keeps dragging. I resist and spit at him, just to pick up the shotgun. Then I let my good sense propel my feet to keep up with him while my heart and my head are back there with her, fighting.

“What’ll we do?” I ask in a moan.

“Fuck it, Brian. You’ve got to fly.” He stops and looks me in the eye. “Don’t think about it. Just feel it, alright. Keep up with me.”

I nod. Then he’s gone and I’m staring at the woods.

I hear a shriek of outrage and my name followed by a muttering of curses. That reminds me. I shake my head to dispel the trance, and lock the safety in place. After all this, I’m still good with my training. Then I set my feet in the ground and launch myself at the direction of Sam’s voice.

It works at first. I make a startling, long hop. I put a stop to it myself, afraid I’m going to smack into a tree.

“Brian, follow me.”

He’s up in the branches, like Peter Pan, and I wonder if the author might have been a victim. Maybe he had an inspirational ‘dream’. I shake my head again, realizing the panicked thoughts of frenzy are trying to pull me down, and force myself to stay present.

I run at him again. I make it a little further, but I catch myself on a bush that tears at the coverings on my arm, pinkening my flesh. It’s like touching a hot stove, but pulling away doesn’t do anything. I’ve still got the fire on one half of my face, and I didn’t know I could be aware of any additional pain.

“Brian, come on!”

I get the covering tied and spring after him. Like this we go, running and pausing, until I can’t hear the fight anymore. No gunfire. No screams, no pickup trucks, no flames. It’s just Sam and me, and even the birds are staying quiet.

“We should wait for them!” I call up to the tree tops, but what I really mean is we should wait for the hunters to come scouting for injured little newborns. I want to shoot this gun and get revenge for Evelyn’s upcoming purification. I want the tide to change, maybe creating a rescue.

“Brian...” He comes down right from overhead, falling farther than any man should survive. From the top of an old tree, right to the bottom, without striking a single branch on the way down. His landing is just a soft whump that scatters leaves and pine needles.

His voice is lot louder now, speaking right in front of me.

“You’re my responsibility. I have to take care of you.”

I snort. “I’m not some kid.”

Sam doesn’t have the same ageless sense of power that the others do. In vampire terms, I guess he’s older than me, but as a human he was a decade younger. As far as I’m concerned, I’m the adult and he’s the kid.

That concept is challenged when he takes the gun from me, and I can’t hold on.

“You’re our kid,” he says. “A baby, actually. And so am I, but you’re a lot... well...” He shrugs, checking out the gun. I can tell he’s never handled one before because he tucks it under his arm pit like a kid might do with a plastic toy.

“You’re inexperienced. Let’s leave it at that,” he says, and I grind my teeth.

I try to snatch the weapon from him, and dodges me easily. He is fucking fast and out matches me. I’ll give him that.

“There’s a house ahead,” he says, and my anger is forgotten. “I’m going to check it out. I want you to stay here and don’t move.” He sighs. I’m guessing he knows there’s no way to enforce this.

Remembering Evelyn crawling in the grass, reaching for me, telling me to run, I slump in the shaded part of the ground.

“I’ll be here.”

I think she would like that. I’m still shaking all over though, and I’m certain that if I tried to fly toward her right now I’d have it figured out.

“Alright,” he says, squaring up his shoulders. The kid’s nervous as hell.

“You don’t have to go alone,” I offer.

“No!” he says immediately, then explains quieter, “No... You don’t know how hard it is. You can be fine with it one second, and the next it’s... it’s horrible.”

He’s talking about killing, I assume. Empathy with the humans. That’s one thing I think I’m going to be better at than him. I already had my training, now the concepts are just reversed.

“Just do it fast and don’t stop to think,” I tell him. “You already know what you’re going to do, the decisions are made. So get it done. Feel bad about it later.”

I’ll hold you when you cry.

Ray did it for me my first time.

And now look, I learned my lesson too well.

I fold my arms over my knees. Sam promises me he’ll back. Ray was my friend, and in an old time, I’d never hurt him. We had each other’s backs.

But I can’t live in the past. I’m not the hunter anymore.

* * *

Sam is silent, but the hinges on the back door aren’t. He’s inside. And I’ve got nothing to do but pick at pine needles and hope he’s okay. The pain isn’t letting me alone, and I wonder if I’m going to see again. If Evelyn can heal from a shotgun blast, re-growing her brains and skull, I’d say it’s likely.

There is a trade off with immortality, I realize. I assume death is peaceful, like sleep. To continue living like this, means you have to experience life times of pain, heal from endless, sometimes severe injuries.

If I truly live forever, or half of forever, I'm going to burn again. That is doubtless.

I may lose an eye or both a hundred times. I may even die by purification eventually. In my lifespan, which is seemingly endless, I'm going to be in a lot of pain.

It makes this not seem so bad.

I haven't heard a fucking thing from the house in a while. The family Sam attacks is going to think they were invaded by a ghost. Or maybe he's having second thoughts.

I get up and shuffle after him. Atop a hill, I can see the backyard at the bottom, through the trees. The incline is challenge for me, but then I remember that I'm not limited anymore. I let my weight sink, my legs tense, and I spring for the backyard.

My foot catches on the wooden fence, and I make a bad landing. I over estimated it, then I stumble, and smack into the side of the house. I suppose it's good to remember that immortal vampires are not as infallible as they might seem.

I'm picking myself when Sam appears, gun pointed at me. My arm raises defensively. Fucking kid should learn to look first and not just point that thing. Fortunately, he doesn't have a finger on the trigger, or he might've blown my head off.

That's probably going to happen someday. Fuck, I bet it hurts.

"You were supposed to wait!" Sam yells, coming after me, pulling me up. He doesn't ask what happened. He drags me into the house with him, making a lot more noise.

It smells faintly like baked bread in here. The curtains are floral, the carpet is plush, and the house is neat.

“No one’s home,” Sam says and steers through the nearest doorway. The bed is made and the coverlet is new pattern of floral that goes well with everything else. He pulls open a closet with a folding door, and several old style dresses get pushed outside.

I push past him and curl into the dark space immediately. *Finally*, some peace. The world can go back to normal and stop being so bright. Sam takes some more time to settle in. He brings me the pillows and blankets from the bed, which I lay on top of once we’ve cleared out shoes from the floor. He disappears for awhile. Then I decide I like him a lot less when he comes back with a hammer.

“Sorry. It’ll only take a second.”

He helps me get a pillow over my head before he starts hammering on the lady’s dress, nailing it to the doors so it’ll cover the slats. It’s worth it when he’s done. *Complete* darkness.

“What’ll we do if she comes back and finds us?” I ask.

Sam tosses the hammer into the corner, and I scoot up to the wall to make room for him to lie beside me.

“Don’t worry, I’ll wake up. I propped some shit against both doors and jammed the windows.”

Heh. Maybe he’s not as new as I thought.

“Good thinking.”

There’s not a lot of room in here, and I curl into him, pressing the hurt side of my face into his neck. I cry out in pain. Instead of the cool, soothingness I was expecting, his skin is warm like mine. I whine, missing Evelyn and Zane.

Sam doesn’t ask any questions. He holds up something, and it takes my good awhile to focus. I smell it before I see the blade. Sam winces, holding

his hand over the cut on his arm, trying not to spill it.

“Here.”

“No. You shouldn’t.”

But arguing takes up precious time and neither of us can let the blood spill. We bump heads as we go to lick before a stream can trail off to the ground. Then Sam pulls back, giving me the space.

I didn’t realize that my hunger was part of the pain. It’s gnawing at me now, punishing me for neglecting it. But I meet Sam’s eyes and I know that he’s as hungry as I am. He eats more. He needs more.

I can’t take this him.

“Don’t.”

The cut is healing fast. He didn’t go deep. I stop him from remaking it, and clean what’s left of this one. I long for more, but I keep my face impassive.

“It won’t be good for both of us to be weak. You have to keep what’s yours and look after me.”

I knew playing the vulnerability card would get to him. He nods, and I take the blade, tucking it up by our heads. I make sure the chamber is empty on the shotgun and the safety turned on, then it goes against the wall at my back. If I have to use it, I’ll be ready.

Sam and I squirm around a bit until we settle in our positions. He’s on his back. I rest with my good eye against the pillows.

“Do you know how long it takes to heal?” I ask. The singing pain is getting stronger because it’s warm in here. There’s no air conditioner, and our breath fills the small space.

Sam shakes his head. “Your lashes were there for days. Darius got burned once. It healed pretty quick. Three nights, I think. But he’s special, or so I’ve heard. He’s supposed to be powerful.”

“He is,” I sigh. And now I’m jealous. If any of the three are going to make it, Darius will be the one.

Sam is pretty. He eats when he’s supposed to. He’s adored by his sire, the same one that flung me aside. The lovebirds could be reuniting come nightfall. And I could have lost both of mine.

I regret getting so stuck in my head. I wish I’d done more to make them happy.

My pain could just be getting started...

I didn’t consider this. Living for eternity means that much more opportunity to lose the ones you care about. When I was a hunter, I believed I’d move on with them eventually. I thought they were in heaven in the meantime, experiencing peace.

I do not believe that for Evelyn and Zane. And if they are gone, I have to remain here. I’m not so morbid that I would consider killing myself to join them, so that leaves persisting on, through the pain and all of it.

“Sam?” I have the sudden urge to be close with him, to hear him speak, and I feel for his hand. He’s already asleep. He breathes in slumber, and this makes him very different from our sires. I can see why they would find it child-like. Sam’s features look even younger in sleep.

I’m scared. I’m as young as him, starting a life I can’t fathom. I may have lost my mother for the second time. Assuming we don’t die prematurely, he and I will experience much of our lives together.

I keep his hand as I fall asleep. I don’t love Sam the way I love Evelyn and Zane, but it is a comfort knowing I won’t be alone.

Chapter 25



I wake up twice during the day, each time to an aching, empty belly, and each time to realize Sam is with me and be sick with fear. Actually, after the second time, I don't really fall back to sleep.

Sam is out, but when he eventually opens his eyes, it is with a soft whine resembling that pip he taught me.

"Brian?" he mutters, disappointed. Then he sits up.

"It's not night time yet."

He looks at our covered door. "How can you tell?"

"Light is my thing," I say with a shrug. I have no idea how I can tell, especially since this house is a lot sturdier than the little place we had. It's all the same I guess, regardless of the thickness of the walls. It's dusk, and the sun touches everything it can.

Sam doesn't seem to feel it the same way. I see his throat flex as he swallows. Our mouths are watering with venom now that we're hungry. I suspect I'm handling it better than him because he wraps his arms around his middle and looks forlornly through the slats.

The lady never came home, thank god, or we'd have another problem. Her curtains protect us from any sort of burn, but they're bright. We're not quite at sunset.

Sam holds his middle and looks at the floor. His eyes have a slight shine due to the shifting day, and he looks quite lovely. In a different way than Zane. It feels strange to think that I have a brother who not only accepts what I am, but shares the experience as well.

“We could cover ourselves and go looking,” I say, because he must be thinking it.

He gazes at the clothes and forms a feeble smirk. “Nah. Two vampire guys wandering around in dresses is a bit more than the world is ready to handle.”

“We could go back to the nest. We could see what’s there. The hunters won’t stay there, they’ll be long gone.”

They don’t stick around a burned nest, though we—*they*—know that others are bound to come investigate. *Don’t meet them on their terms*, is one of the phrases they teach.

“They’ll check in a few days to make sure we aren’t re-inhabiting the nest,” I say, “but it’s safe to visit at night. Or evening. Whatever.”

Sam shakes his head. “They won’t be there.” Quieter, hugging his knees, he says, “I don’t know where they’ll be.”

I put my arm around him. It feels weird. But in vampire families, there’s a lot of touching and intimacy. The frenzy we get into when we feed takes care of any physical borders we used to have. I’ve fed from Sam. Likely, it won’t be the last time if I continue my long-life view. So what’s a touch in comfort?

I do release a pent up breath I didn’t know I was holding. He doesn’t push me away, or give me a startled look and, *Whoa, man*, putting up his hands to fend me off.

I rub across his shoulders.

“Darius is fine.” Shit, he could take shotgun rounds like they were paint ball pellets. I don’t say that though. “Hopefully he saved us all. Hopefully,

Evelyn..." I shrug. "Makes it."

"Why?" Sam lifts his head up, interested. "What happened to Evelyn?"

I realize I haven't told him and he wasn't in position to see. Maybe. Technically I could see her from where he grabbed me, but I knew where to look in the grass. If he didn't, he might have been watching Darius or the flames or anything.

"Nothing. Well, I don't know. We'll find out when we go there tonight."

"Was she hurt?"

I don't answer at first. We both already feel terrible. There's no point in dragging him into worse misery with me.

"Brian, is she alive? Was Darius helping her? What about Zane, what did you see?"

"Shh." Great, now I'm doing it. I've picked up Evelyn's habit. "I don't know anything. Did it look bad? Yes, it looked very bad. They were burning. *I* was burning. But I can tell you that hunters are very unsuccessful at what they do. It doesn't seem that way because when one dies, they typically aren't replaced. We're the only new vampires I've heard of. In fact, our training specifically states that we're all centuries old, so newborns aren't taken into account."

This seems to be working. He loses the panicked look from his eyes and stares distantly instead, listening to me speak. So I rest my head against his shoulder. Staying awake so long that night is almost upon us has made me sleepy.

I continue telling him about hunters and their backwards beliefs.

"They don't know much about what they hunt, actually. Theresa was the smart one, and now she's dead, so they're pretty much helpless again. We had a philosophy. 'We only need to know how to kill them.' I had it too. So we accepted whatever old myths they told us, and we were specifically

trained *not* to ask captives questions or learn from them. Their pull is too powerful.”

I go on to tell him about my incident. The two in the middle have names now though, and I emphasize their pain over my own.

At the end, he asks, “Do you think there could be a world where the humans and the vampires coexist? I mean...” He drops to a whisper, as if there’s more than two of us here. “Don’t talk about it. But Darius told me we don’t have to drink directly from humans. We could drink donated blood and be perfectly fine that way.”

“No.”

“Why not?” he asks.

“Well, humans aren’t all that good at living with each other,” I point out. “Bad things tend to happen over power imbalance. Not only are we a completely different species, and therefore unlikely to achieve any progressive acceptance, we are also very powerful with one great, crippling weakness.”

The sunlight had faded fast while I told my story, and now it’s about time to leave. I don’t dare touch the hot, torched side of my face, but I think the moonlight’s tickling will be different. Cool and soothing.

“We can never live openly alongside humans. We also can’t live without them.” I open the door and stretch my legs into the spacious room. “We will always live like this.”

I pause. With Ray, I never spoke my thoughts about anything. You learn to keep contradicting opinions to yourself and mimic absolute unity in the Clan. But Sam is my brother, and he’s going to be a lot closer to me than the older ones like Darius.

“It’s a life of pain. We live forever, so we feel forever. We lose people. We get into battles and earn scars. Even our rest is painful and dangerous because we can’t run when we’re attacked.” I meet his eyes. “This won’t be the last time we burn. Or the last time we face off with the Clan.”

“That’s why we have each other,” he says, and I can hear the question at the end. *Right?*

“Yes,” I say. “That’s all we have.”

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Chapter 26



“Now?” Sam asks in a weak voice.

“Yes,” I tell him, getting up. He helps me, and I depend on him more than I would have thought. Pain has sapped the strength of my body, and I stagger despite my legs being unafflicted. Sam has dark shadows under his eyes, both hunger and lack of sleep affecting him.

He is better off than me, but we will make a miserable pair if the Clan has decided to change their hunting strategies and stake out this nest. If I was hunting us, I’d know the newborns would be coming back to check the nest.

I keep this from Sam because I’m so desperate to see what’s happened to makeshift family. Even Darius would be missed if I discover the worst.

Which would be nothing. That is my greatest fear, that we will get there and the scorched little hovel will simply be alone, empty and barren to us.

“Should we clean up?” Sam wonders, looking at the stripped bed and the closet door with a dress nailed to the inside. Whoever lives here is going to have a hell of a puzzle to put together. No valuables missing and a maniac who nested among her shoes.

Sam seems relieved to hear my answer. We must be thinking the same thing.

“No. Even if she calls the cops, they’ll just bother with the report and move on. They’re too busy to even remember a harmless break in.”

Part of that is the vampires’ fault. I’m beginning to see how bigger events could actually disguise our nesting activities.

We get out to the backyard, and I’m doing alright walking by myself. I get the hang of it now that my body’s moving upright. As long as I don’t fall down, I’ll be fine, but I let Sam continue to offer his arm for a time. He has it crooked and I hold to his elbow. It’s just comfortable. It seems fine.

Boy, if my church could see me now...

Yet, I’m strangely both sad and eager to be rid of them. There is a frightening aspect to rejecting my old life. Brian the vampire doesn’t come with a story. His identity is murky and uncertain. It’s almost like death.

I won’t change what I am, but the old memories do have their hooks in me. I think it’s going to take some time for me to truly accept this and not think about the hunter anymore.

“You want me to run ahead? It might be a good idea. That way if there’s trouble and it’s bad, they won’t get both of us.”

I’m holding the shotgun in one arm, angled at the ground. “Yeah, that might be good. You don’t need to spring any traps for us though. Just go, look at the place, come back and tell me how it is. And look careful, alright? Any kind of detail, noise, or anything could be important. Don’t approach the place without me unless you see Darius.”

He nods and leaves my side.

I’m right, the starlight doesn’t hurt my burns. It isn’t helping either. The light is cool on my skin, but that side of my face is just hot torture. I summon up some energy I don’t really have and test the spring in my step, grinding my heel into the dirt, testing it like a runner.

I do think I’ve got the hang of this flying thing. When I’m better, in an open field, I might be able to leap into trees the way Sam does. The city is

going to have a whole different dimension if I ever get to it.

For now, I take a steadying breath, look at my path ahead in the trees, and make myself go for it. Launching yourself at speed is kind of like diving from a really high height. There's all this preparation of nerves and skill, but at the end of it, you just have to fling yourself.

The speed is like falling. The world blurs and I lose control.

I can react in less than a second though. Thoughts and actions occur together instead of sequentially. My path is soon gone, and I have to navigate new ways around trees, over rocks, and I incorporate a leap into my stride to traverse these.

I am not as fast as I could be, but I am efficient. No wonder Sam doesn't take the ground, it takes a sharp eye and precise correction. I take the distance at speed though.

A sound overhead alerts me to Sam and I stop. He overshoots me at first, and I call out. Then he drops down.

"Shh!" he says, and by his widened eyes, I'm guessing the scouting didn't go so good.

"What did you see?"

"Someone's waiting for us."

Ray. That old bastard would have the balls.

Now what, then? I had no plan for if the hovel turned up empty or hunted. I was hoping for someone to be there, Zane maybe, Darius for sure though. He's killed a lot of hunters. He's old. The hunters don't know his name, but they know of him, and we are very careful in what we called his territory.

Now Sam and I are lost.

"I... I should've gone up to him, I guess," Sam says, "but I was scared." He shrugs. "I've never met anyone else before. Just you. And us. I always

knew there was more, but I haven't..."

He shrugs again and looks at me.

"Wait. You mean a hunter is waiting for us?"

I barely get to finish. He cuts in, "No! Someone else. A vampire, I mean."

"Oh." That makes my hopes sink. If it's not our sires, chances are good that they couldn't come.

I feel something collapsing in me. I didn't even know it was there. I thought I was dealing with the possibility of Zane and Evelyn's death fine. I'm logical about these things. But something's suddenly so painful inside, it could be killing me. I try to catch my breath, bewildered by it.

I try to speak, and my voice is so tight, it's like its closing up.

"That's good. I guess. Sam... they're here to help." *Us*, I would have added if I had the breath.

"Yeah," he says, and offers his arm again. I take it, though it isn't really walking I'm having trouble with.

He's gone. She's gone.

Oh god.

And the image in my mind isn't of lifeless bodies. That's how the hunters go, and it's too kind. I'm picturing a shrieking, shriveled thing, the smell of burning hair and the sizzle of fat.

It's early nightfall now, but in the morning...

They'll be truly gone.

I'd hurl if I had anything in my stomach. I wonder if I'm going to start puking bile as we make our way steadily through the trees.

"What'd they look like?" I ask, gasping a bit to keep my breath.

“It’s a man. He’s, uh, tall. Really big. For us, you know.”

I had noticed that I seemed to be losing inches in height shortly after my transformation.

“He looks older because of that,” Sam goes on, “And I don’t think he saw me. I was being really quiet. But he was watching the trees, so I’m pretty sure he’s expecting us.”

“And you’re sure he’s one of us?” I almost want to tell him to leave me, I’m done. Curiosity is helping to keep me in the game though.

I’m also confused. Grief has never affected me this way. I’ve always been able to carry on.

“Oh yeah. Definitely. He’s...” Sam’s voice gets really quiet. “I think he’s Edmund.”

Chapter 27



I don't know what to say at first. The grief, at least, quiets a little bit while I contemplate what this means. Our sires are dead, certainly. Now the king is here to find and rescue his little ones. This is almost more pain than I can take. The emotional agony overtakes the physical pain.

I'm no longer certain that this is the life I want. Without him... Neither life is appealing.

Also, I wonder what sort of purpose he has in mind for us. He's raising an army, maybe. Adding to his numbers. The king doesn't love us the way Zane did.

I've stopped walking, and Sam seems to be waiting for direction from me. Reluctantly, I pick up the trudge, though it's more effort now. I'm not so injured that it has to be this slow.

"What do you think?" Sam asks.

"Not much. We've got no options though."

"What if he isn't nice? The stuff Darius has told me is... is bad. Horrifying. He's, uh, he's killed a lot of people. *A lot.*"

I smile because he sounds so young. Our backgrounds are different. Sam is better at flying and finding places to sleep, but I've got the most experience in this area. He hasn't realized our sires are probably dead, and

I'm going to keep it that way a while longer. He also doesn't seem to acknowledge that we're all killers.

“Killing a lot of people doesn't make him dangerous, Sam. He's a vampire, same as all of us.”

We're very close now, and Sam is stepping carefully, speaking in a whisper.

“But he killed Darius' family. And he could kill mine if I show too much emotion. Darius told me, you can't be sympathetic with humans around him, or he'll go ballistic. He's heartless.”

Sam's words are hurting me more. Zane was my reason for choosing this life. What if he was the only one with emotion and the rest are killers the way the hunters think of them?

I might turn back. Who knows.

Sam is family now though. We're in this together, and he's hungry. He needs to be taken care of.

“We don't know that it's Edmund. You're just... guessing.”

The last word drifts off like I forgot what I started out saying. I know he's right. Edmund's children are very important to him. He said so. He'll be there waiting for us.

We come upon the trees of our home, big birches which thin the grass under their shade. The hovel is far off, sitting in a large black spot like it crash landed here. The mural of roses is black and peeling off the brick. There's a single vehicle parked in the front.

Everything else is gone, including our sires. I'm oddly attached to the spot, wondering if our stuff is inside. Probably not. The hunters claim all of that, looking for wallets to id victims. They're careful about who they approach, but the Clan likes to recruit from the victims' families. It makes believing easier for one thing, plus the motivation.

A lot of recruits find their faith this way.

The man atop the hovel, sitting on the roof with his knee bent and his elbow slung across it, like he's relaxing, is largely the source of all those recruits. He gets blamed all the deaths since we don't actually know how many vampires there are. He's their leader, their king.

I'm doing it again. I'm lumping myself into the wrong group. He's *my* leader and *my* king.

"Come on," I say, putting on a brave face for Sam. He needs to eat, and we won't make it alone. "He's not so tall. It'll be fine."

"He was standing before," Sam grumbles, and now he's grabbing my arm too. He's really nervous, and I'm starting to wonder if he has good reason. I might be turning myself into the church all over again, but now it'll be the vampire king for punishment.

I'm already stepping into his view when it occurs to me that I might be blamed for all of this. The words of Darius before the attack come back to me. I had forgotten them in the storm of everything else happening. Now I grimace and cuss under my breath. It makes Sam stop and I have to pull him forward.

It's too late now. Likely, it was too late anyway. *I'm* not going to be nursing Sam and myself. We need him. We are... helpless babes. Even if it feels strange to admit it.

We cross the field clinging to each other, Sam a bit more than me, dragging his feet. He's ready to panic and flee in an instant.

"Don't run," I say from the side of my mouth as we advance forward. "He'll be offended if we run. He wants us to like him."

I think. I'm doubting my memories of that pained, blind time. Who can say whose voice was whose? It could have been Zane speaking to me. Pre-sleep memories are just not very good.

"Why isn't he coming to us?" Sam asks. "Why does he want us to crawl to him?"

“No, I don’t think it’s that.” He hasn’t moved. He’s still in a lounging position. But it’s too still to be relaxed. His half-lidded eyes have turned to look any other way, locked in our direction with an expression like he’s bored with us. But his fingers don’t twitch. His lips don’t move. Nothing about him shifts, not even his hair on this windless night. You just don’t achieve that level utter stillness without some conscious effort.

“He doesn’t want us to be afraid of him. He might know that you ran away earlier.”

We come to the dark stained grass, and I start looking at the ground instead of him. I think I know the spot where Evelyn bled, and I stoop to touch the spot.

“Poor lovelies,” a familiar voice says. He’s scooting off the roof how a human might. Well, perhaps too assured and graceful, making an effortless landing from such a height, but certainly moving slower than he has to. His stride is easy, lazy even, and his gaze never seems to have much interest in us. Though, it never leaves us. His unbroken disinterest is most telling.

Sam holds tight to me, and I let him, my arm hanging a bit from his grasp. To make it more comfortable, we change positions a bit, and he’s holding my hand with both of his. I’m more interested in the ground. I start following blood. If the trail goes far enough away she might have escaped.

“Brian. Sam. We haven’t officially met. I am Edmund, your father.”

He slouches on purpose, I’m sure of it. He is tall, like Sam said. I sigh and straighten up, accepting that I can’t track a vampire very far anyways. If she did get away, the trail will be too scattered. And Edmund shouldn’t be ignored.

I don’t know what to do here, so I bow my head. “Father.”

I greeted our priest just the same.

He instantly looks cheerful. “Brian! You remember me?”

“Yes.”

He strides toward me, no laziness and slouching now, standing tall and intent with purpose. Both Sam and I shrink. He reaches for us, and we flinch. But he is not slowed by our reactions. I think he will touch my face, and I turn my body into Sam's. We make a pair, holding each other like a couple babies.

His arms encircle us, across the backs of our shoulders. Like our sires, he smells of nothing but the cotton he wears. His touch is firm and heavy, but not warm. It's comforting and a little piece of my fear breaks away. My good eye closes and I find myself accepting the embrace.

It wasn't just Sam. I needed him too.

"My babies..." he says affectionately and squeezes us in tight. His forehead comes down to touch with ours. I'm shocked to open my eye a little and see an expression of pure joy on his face. Not a greedy, malicious joy. Not the way our priest would smile eagerly when we brought in a soul for saving.

He has the teary-eyed joy of a mother, and it makes him look as young as us. He kisses Sam's head fervently, and me with more careful slowness. I tilt for him so he can reach uninjured spot.

"I'm so happy you made it back to me."

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Chapter 28



I'm surprised by how much he sounds like Evelyn, calling us babies and cooing at us. He takes Sam's chin and comments on how beautiful he is, sighing happily. He seems more like a little boy now than a very tall, dangerous man. I find myself sulking. Partly because I'm aware that *I'm* not beautiful. I must look like the Terminator when his skin burns off. And partly because, contrary to that feeling, I don't want to be cooed at.

It's not manly to be cooed at.

"And Brian..."

I cringe, knowing it's my turn. His fingers on my good cheek are cool though, and I miss that kind of touch. I myself leaning into it regardless.

"Sweet Brian."

His gaze roves over the damage. I haven't seen it myself. I purposely skipped the opportunity to check in the lady's bathroom mirror. I was right in assuming that the mess gets more painful the more you pay attention to it. His gaze makes me flinch visibly.

I'm unprepared when he leans in and kisses me on the lips. Chastely, and I don't react to it. Next he brings up his wrist and bites into. I hear the flesh tear and my mouth floods at once. Sam and I share equal looks of longing, and we crowd him, leaning toward it.

We meet each other's eyes. There's competition there. But we wait to see who he will choose.

"Your's will be next baby," he says, offering me his wrist. "This one is weak."

Sam nods, seeming mature and accepting, but he clenches his jaw. It hasn't been easy on him either.

Oh, but I've needed this. I thought I would be resistant feeding from him. I knew he'd probably do this as we approached, and I was sure I missed Evelyn and Zane too much to ever feed again. Especially not from a stranger. But the smell is too good, and the taste is better.

My stomach isn't so empty. The pain is much less. More than that, there's emotion with the feeding. He *wants* me. He tore himself open for me.

His affection is more than just pretty words. I can feel it coursing through me, healing me. He smiles, pets my hair on the uninjured side, and shows no change in expression though I bite him harshly. I'm gnawing, needing more, wanting everything he'll give me. A feeding like this would have Zane wincing in pain. I usually don't do this to him.

There doesn't seem to be anything I can do to hurt Edmund though. He keeps smiling and begins to coo little sweet nothings at me.

Like, "Don't worry, babies, father's here." And, "I missed you. I'm so happy you're okay."

He says another thing that may either be an endearment or a threat. "Your father won't leave you again. You're mine, babies. I'll always be here."

Sam steps away a bit, but he hasn't been forgotten. Edmund stops petting me and snatches him right back, all with a loving smile and no change in tone.

With effort, I become more careful in my feeding. I *am* his. More than I am Zane's. He is the one who permits all of us to live and join his family.

"Eat up, baby," he urges when I try to slow down. I'm taking so long and Sam needs help. He looks miserable, his head on Edmund's shoulder as he watches me. I force myself to break away.

"Sweetheart, you will stay at the table until your father dismisses you." He is smiling, but there is a hardness behind his eyes.

He is not my first father, and thanks to my human childhood, he is so far not the worst. I shake my head.

"I don't want it as much as Sam." I gesture to him, while covering my nose to help block the scent. My stomach churns and a hole seems to be hollowing through my intestines. But Sam needs it more. It's even worse for him.

"I beg to differ," he says with a low growling voice. "Eat, baby."

Blood runs down his arm, and Sam makes an expression of anguish.

I'm aware that I might be making a mistake of finding down exactly what kind of father this Edmund is. Neither my human father nor the fathers of the church took well to disobedience. But I care about Sam. He needs help too.

"He's starving, same as me. Let him eat, please." I also think I see some of the same envious emotion in Sam that I felt when Edmund called him beautiful. Now the blood is running down Edmund's arm and freely spills to the ground. Sam makes a stifled little pip and turns away, holding himself to be small. Edmund ignores him and grabs the back of my neck. I can see how this is going to go.

If I want him to take us in, I must fold. A son behaves.

"Please, he's suffering to,," I say. This my final protest. Already I latch back onto the wound and let him feed me.

He murmurs my name, strokes my hair, and nuzzles the side of my face.

“Brian, Brian...” He looks at me in wonderment. “How you’ve changed, beautiful child. From a hunter who wanted to destroy us, to a protector. Watching over your brother...” He smiles. “Mm. I knew you would be just lovely. And to think, they just *gave* you to us, my loyal, sweet soldier.”

Like my other fathers, he is preoccupied with the war. I do not care about sides at the moment. I only care that Sam will be okay and Evelyn isn’t in the church bleeding and crying for us.

Determination takes over me. Edmund or no Edmund, I’m going after her tonight.

I bite down hard on the wound and twist the flesh in my mouth, forcing it to give more. Incredibly, Edmund is unaffected.

This goes on until my belly is full and heavy. Like Zane, he never turns me away. There is simply a point where I know I’ve taken enough. My bite slacks because another mouthful is too much to take. His wound does not bleed heavily anymore anyways.

And Sam’s feeding is long overdue. He’s moved away, put his back to us, and is so quiet he seems sick.

“Come, babe,” Edmund calls to him. “I did not forget you. This one was in more peril than you might think. Ill fed newborns can pass out and never wake. Your changing bodies are hard on you. We call it fading. He was already a weak, sickly thing, and he is very important to me. Both of you are, immeasurably. But soldiers tend to become the great protectors of the family.”

The proud way he says it makes me think he might be referring to himself as well. Initially I think this means he served in an army. I would like to hear more about his life and his time. Now is the moment, with him cutting a fresh place on his neck and Sam feeding. I know that normally Sam only takes the wrist of any caregiver besides Darius.

I wonder if he wants Sam pressed up against him. I couldn’t blame him, I guess, but I am worried that he might not respect the bond that Sam and Darius share.

Then it hits me out of the blue. I look at Edmund with renewed interest.

Does he mean a soldier of *our* war?

He pets Sam's hair and tells him how beautiful he is. And for me, his smile becomes a slight, knowing smirk.

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Chapter 29



“Where are you going?”

His sharp tone stops me on my very first step. I did not think he was paying attention to me much as Sam continued to feed and he encouraged him. They look almost two lovers embracing, if not for the wet smell of blood and Sam’s occasional suckle. His little whimpers and sounds here and there make it sound like they’re up to something dirty indeed, though both are clothed and Edmund only has his arms around Sam’s back.

I did not think he noticed me staring off towards the road. Our cars are gone. The new car I assume is Edmund’s, but I wasn’t going to ask to borrow it. I was thinking I might try out Sam’s flying thing. If I’m good at it like him, a car wouldn’t be necessary.

There is nothing about Edmund that makes me think it would be okay to disobey. And I disobeyed my first father plenty. I cannot describe what about him makes him so powerful. Fear, maybe. Sure. I know the stories of what he is.

But he speaks those overly loving words and they don’t seem insincere or facetious. Vampires tend to get mushy, I’ve noticed. I think they just don’t erect the barriers with each other that humans use constantly. He can say Sam is beautiful, and no other vampire is going to jump out and call him a faggot. Even if he happens to be one.

His intimidating aura comes from this openness, perhaps.

“Come to me.”

I do, and he takes my hand. He squeezes it, but adds, “Freedom is a perilous privilege to give to the young. Vampires typically keep their young underground, in caverns, old wine cellars, and even dungeons, if they can afford one. However, I have heard that you two are not rebellious babes.”

I shake my head, agreeing with him I suppose. I’m not sure what he wants me to do.

“Tell me where you wish to go, and I will decide if it is acceptable.”

“I’m going to the church.”

Sam is quiet, fixed on his meal. His eyes slant toward me.

“And since you’ve admitted it, I assume you’re not there to babble our secrets to your kooky priests.”

My brows draw together as I realize he didn’t *entirely* trust me this whole time. There was a part of him wondering if I was responsible. He fed me anyway. He didn’t ask questions.

“No! I’m going to save her.”

“Good. Good, sweet soldier. But when I said that you would become a protector, I really meant far off, like in another turn of the century or so. Babes are not to see any fighting in my flock.”

That’s right. They don’t rescue each other from purification. The father said it was because the vampires can’t enter the house of God. They still call in all the hunters to play guard duty though. In case the devil utilizes any tricks, he said.

I may be in trouble. I may have to disobey.

“I’m not leaving her there.”

“Your sires are already on it. They may be rescuing her as I speak. I should be there, but unfortunately, finding you was the most precious

mission. Had you not appeared, I would be returning to them with a very different objective.”

I think.

“But why now? When she and Zane were taken before you never...?”

“It is a different mindset.” He sighs and pets Sam’s hair. His feeding has lost the frenzy of suckling sounds, but he does not look ready to quit. “Let me see if I can explain. When you’re as old as me... and you’ve lost so many—a hundred at least—you realize the pointlessness of the constant fight. So we had a rule. Don’t get caught. It’s working, for the most part, but I turn others away from my flock to keep our actions inconspicuous, and I don’t engage in open battles.” He noses Sam’s hair. “Until this one. I was... displeased with Darius, let’s say. I thought I was going to run him out of the city and let him suffer alone. To feed a babe is *very* conspicuous. But I meditated on it. A new idea came to me.”

I think I know. But I ask, “Which is?”

“We are humanity’s last natural predator. They need us.”

He is evil.

Or, he would be if I was a human still. Yes, to any human, the black and white sides are clearly drawn. But he holds Sam so lovingly. His flesh will hold deep purple bruises for a night or two after the rough feeding Sam and I gave him. We are usually more careful.

And he does love, no matter what his heartless nature.

In Sam’s ear, but loud enough for me, he says, “A surviving species adapts. We have children. We grow stronger. We must change for our survival. Inconspicuous is the last stage before extinction.”

“So you will save her?”

I’m sorry to say it, but his talk of mass killings, open predation, and making the vampire situation worse is not as important to me as his answer. I have many fathers, but she was only my second—and my last—mother.

“Yes. I think we will. Laying low has given power to your priests’ paranoid beliefs. They didn’t start purifying souls until our numbers had thinned and the great battles had all but disappeared. We’ve let them feel safe, and that makes them temporarily weak.”

Sam pulls away at last, licking his lips, then wiping his mouth. “Why did let them feel safe?”

“The idea was that they would stop attacking us.” He gets a little spot off Sam’s chin with his thumb. “There now, my lovelies. We must move from here. You’ve both had a traumatic experience, and as far as I’m concerned, childhood should be idyllic and carefree, don’t you agree?”

Sam nods, but wears a worried frown.

“If Sam and I stay here, will you help save her?”

“I am saving her, sweet soldier. Do you think she wants to survive her ordeal, come home and discover that I left her children unattended? Yes, Sam, she considers you to be hers as well. As do all of the family, whom are dying to meet you. Come. I think you will like your new home.”

He lets go of Sam and me and leads us to the car. Perhaps it is another test to see if I’m worthy of freedom. If I thought the vampires couldn’t rescue her, I’d run for it anyway. But the fact is, I believe everything he says. Something about him seems old and powerful.

If he so casually says she’ll be okay, she probably will be. I can’t say that I like how powerless I feel, but it is an odd sensation to fall in line behind him and just *trust* others are working on it. It did not feel like this with my father or with the church. I was blamed for problems. Tasked to fix them. I’ve always relied on myself.

But Edmund seems capable. This is scary too.

“You never told me Evelyn needed rescuing,” Sam mutters as we follow.

“She was captured,” I say back. Hopefully he hears what’s happened to her after it’s already resolved into a happy story of the four us together

again.

“Darius is okay, right?”

Edmund hears him and answers as he opens the backseat to the car. “Nobody crosses swords with Darius, sweetheart. Remember how he ran after you in broad daylight? He’s the one that insisted that *I* be here to collect when Katie was more than willing to do it.”

Sam tries not to smile. For me and Evelyn, I suppose. It’s alright, I don’t resent him for being happy that Darius is okay.

We get in the car, both of us in the backseat and Edmund shuts us in.

“And Zane?” I ask when he opens the driver side.

“Hm. That was going to be a little surprise, but it would be wrong not to tell you, I guess. He’s watching the nest, waiting for us at the house.”

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Chapter 30



We hit the highway and drive for some time, back into the city. I see the exit for Ray's place go by, and I feel a little stab of hate. I understand that he's doing his thing, and I'm doing mine. We used to be on the same side. But we're not now, and I'm not guilty over it.

He took my mother. Someday I might visit him for it, assuming Edmund isn't good for his word.

I think he is. He's been around a long time, and I can sense the inherent ease and confidence he has over her fate. I just have to get used to trusting someone older for once.

We cross the city and I begin to wonder just how far this move is. The exit we take isn't familiar, but the general vicinity is. The Clan had a big gathering out here once, on the property of the father I killed. This is where people build their big homes and McMansions. A lot of the land is undeveloped and neighbors are spaced far about. The homes go up into the hills, which are speckled with yellow lights.

We don't go up there. We pull up to a lavish home which looks like a real mansion to me. The door is as tall as the hovel we were staying in, with big pillars on either side supporting a balcony.

Sam and I glance at each other. Edmund opens the gate with a passcode. He drives up the rounded driveway to the front door. He turns off the car, but Sam and I don't get out though, uncertain.

Edmund seems very happy.

“What do you think? Not inconspicuous at all, is it?”

A certain priest somewhere will be shitting his pants if he finds out how close we might be living to his home.

Sam speaks first. “Um... Who lives here?”

“We do!”

“But who—you know—who...?”

“You let me worry about the details. I understand that Darius has been teaching you to survive on your own, but that ends today. My babes deserve better. And *this* is better.”

He gets out of the car and opens our door. Sam is hesitant to get out. He’s looking at all the windows and rooms, perhaps thinking the same thing I am. This house will serve a lot of vampires.

“It’s a fortress,” says a female voice, and we turn to see a woman running her hand along the parked car. She’s a vampire with blue eyes and curly, golden hair. She has the same plump body that makes Evelyn so attractive, and she’s noticeably more voluptuous.

I’m not familiar with this one, but she must catch men easily. Her blouse seems too small to fit, and she’s given up on the middle button. A black bra shows underneath.

She’s small, but *she* doesn’t look like a child the way Evelyn does. Nobody could think that.

“Katie,” Edmund says, and goes to her. They kiss, both intimate and on each other’s cheeks. She has less patience for it though, pulling back from him.

“You gather us in one place so they can torch it just the same.”

“It’s a new world, Katie dear. Homes don’t burn to the ground anymore.”

“They do, and they attract a lot of attention. We’ll never be able to escape unseen.”

“Well, *they* will never get away with setting our home on fire. It’s dual annihilation. They’re own systems to protect themselves will protect us too.”

She scoffs, turning away. When she sees Sam and I though, her expression changes. First wonderment, her mouth dropping a bit. Then, when she examines me, horror takes over. Sam is permanently the pretty one. Right now I look like his Hyde twin.

Edmund puts his hands in his pockets, watching us and standing back as she comes to me and starts fussing. I wince. Her touch is light and careful, but her voice isn’t as melodic and smooth as Evelyn’s. Her front presses into me as she whispers, “Oh my, our poor baby,” and she kisses my closed lips.

It is not supposed to be sexy though. I am coming to understand that about them. Physical love is not exclusive to sex, nor is it restrained. She’s after Sam next, but she keeps an arm around me and only takes his hand.

Sam looks as bewildered as I.

“What are your names, baby birds?”

“I’m Brian.” After a bit, because Sam seems lost somewhere between the house and her, I say for him, “He’s Sam.”

“Aw. Brian and Sam. Twins!” She’s euphoric at first. Then the expression quickly fades. “Oh, Edmund, this is bad.”

She rounds on him, tilting her head to the side. I’ve seen them do this when they’re about to fight.

Edmund takes his hands out of his pockets, not looking so nonchalant anymore.

“You’re playing with fire, little brother.”

This surprises me. I would have guessed that she was the younger one, by a lot.

“It already happened, Katie,” he says. “Everything you fear... The babes caught in a fire. The Clan finding out nest. Your siblings caught in peril, and yes, next time it might mean death. Maybe for several of us.”

“For *all* of us,” she says. “Look at this place! People are going to wonder why we don’t go out! They’ll want to invite us to dinners! They’ll knock on the door—or ‘buzz’ at the gate—whatever! They will come to see us, and they will notice.”

“Not as soon as you think.”

Behind me, the front door opens and Zane steps out as Edmund continues to speak.

“They aren’t as social as they once were, Katie. You’ll see. People leave their neighbors alone, mostly. And yes, someone will come. Eventually. They will notice. And when that happens, we will move on.”

“Brian...” Zane says softly. This is an embrace I’m glad to receive. I shut my eyes and lean into him, while his hand brushes carefully at my hair, inspecting the damage.

“And the disappearances?” Katie shouts at her brother. “You think that will have no affect on how interested they are in each other? They will band together like cattle, it is their greatest strength. Then they will burn us, they’ll surround our home *chanting* and *holding hands*, just like...”

Last time.

She breaks off though and takes a minute to come back to herself.

Zane grabs Sam’s chin and tilts his face to check for scars. Sam hasn’t been saying much during all this, and now I know why. When Zane is satisfied, he stoops to the ground and picks up a sign. God only knows why it’s here and not on the gate, where it must belong.

The Taylors.

“We must hide better,” Edmund is saying to Katie. “Not like rats, which, if you haven’t noticed, aren’t doing so well in the modern world either. We must hide *even better*. Like one of them. Right under their noses.”

“It won’t work forever.”

“Come on,” Zane says. He grabs the sign out of Sam’s hand, chucks it a short ways away from us, and pulls us both toward the door. “Let them fight it out. They’re both stubborn. I want to talk to you.”

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Chapter 31



The foyer is big with a marble floor, a chandelier overhead, and a staircase curving down to meet us. An artsy vase with flowers sits on an end table before an abstract that looks like a smear of colors. This is a step up from the hovel. The term coming to mind is *den* over *nest*.

The creatures I hunted lived under rags and dirt. They were animals with demonic intelligence and beautiful features. This is too human for them.

Zane looks right at home in it. He's wearing slacks that pool around his feet because they don't fit him and a loose silk shirt. He's clean and healthy, unlike us.

He rounds on me and pulls me close. We're kissing before I know it, and not the usual kind. Both he and Evelyn lavish me in affectionate little pecks, but this is deep, lustful kiss like we sometimes share when I eat.

I become hard because of it. Though, my body's interest is acting on its own. My mind is anxious to find out what will happen to Evelyn, if she will come home or not.

It is good to have Zane though. His body feels familiar and pleasant. I find myself leaning into him, letting him take over the weight, as his tongue goes deep. I can breathe easily and steadily through my nose, giving myself over to his manipulation.

Except when fingers stray to a small part of burned flesh by my eye. His touch is cool, but any kind of pressure makes it hurt worse, and I whimper.

It is over instantly. Vampire reflexes. He ends the kiss, and I can see the grief in his eyes.

Then he blinks. His brows draw low and anger over comes his features.

“You didn’t listen to me.”

I’m confused, but in a low voice, he explains, “You were told to run, *little chick*. And you persisted in standing atop that car, for all the hunters to see, making a *perfect fucking bullseye*.”

He hisses, and he’s angry enough that I begin to wonder if I’m standing too close and I should move back.

“She needed my help,” I defend. “He was going to take her to the church and ‘purify’ her.”

“And he did anyway. And you burned for it.”

He reaches for me, and I turn my head away. Old instincts. But he doesn’t hit me, he lays his palm lightly on the tortured side of my face, and it hurts even worse.

“Ah!”

I grit my teeth but I don’t run.

“No. Baby bird, do not flinch,” he hisses. “This is only a fraction of the pain you caused me—and heaven knows, only a drop of what you’ve caused Evelyn.”

I hunch over, turning my head, but I do not run, with standing the punishment.

“I was helping her.”

“Hopefully she’s unconscious now, but her last memory is of you staying for her, burning in the sun and refusing to save your own life.”

“You can hurt me, but I’m not sorry.” The singing pain is absorbed by something deep, made powerful by the image of Evelyn crawling in the

sun. “She was burning too.”

I can’t even think of the sounds of bubbling and sizzle. Her brain turned black. It’s impossible to believe that she’ll come back to me and heal, but I know that vampires don’t die to guns. Not without a lot of ammo, anyway.

Zane removes his hand. “If she dies, she will be thinking that it was all for nothing and she failed to protect you.”

The throbbing is slow to fade, so this isn’t much better.

“When I tell you to flee, you flee,” he says.

I love him, but a familiar old resentment flares up in me. Disobedience by silence.

She is my family.

But standing beyond Zane is Sam. He’s family too, and without me he faces an eternity of life a little more alone.

I think about this. Self sacrifice among hunters is encouraged. One man succumbing to be fed upon can save the rest.

Edmund used to see it that way, letting the captured ones be ‘purified’.

But that is not the family I want for Sam and me. They’re rescuing Evelyn now, and if I want this culture to persist, Edmund’s new vision must work. And he holds Sam and I, his offspring, as his proof of the future. We have to survive.

“Yes. I’m sorry.”

Zane puts his arms over me.

“My dove. I am so glad you’re alive. Edmund would not let me go to you. It was my punishment to wait. A well deserved one at that.”

I look up at him and we kiss.

When we part, I notice that Sam was wandered off to peek at the living room and keeps his back to us. I think he's a little jealous and unhappy. How the tables have turned since I thought Sam was the favored and pampered one. I feel bad for how neglected he must feel.

"Zane..." I use my eyes to direct him.

"Sam, come," he calls. "I will show you the rooms."

* * *

We go to the second floor and to another staircase, small with a little door at the top.

"It's the attic," Zane says, starting up. "Darius picked it out himself. He's always preferred to be on the outskirts of the family. Having him under the roof is going to be a huge a pain in the ass if you ask me."

Opening the little door, he revises, "But maybe you'll keep him happy here, Sam. He was always... alone. All the time. And seemed to prefer it that way before you."

There's boxes of stuff up here, a few marked Christmas, and one marked Baby. Sam touches this one, and Zane plucks it right up from under his hand, slinging the thing on his hip.

"I'm still clearing out all the shit you don't need. I'm not as 'homey' as Evelyn, but look, I got you a bed and some clothes and things."

The bed is a mattress on the floor with a pile of blankets and pillows on top. The clothes are stacked in a slightly neater pile to one side, the hangers still on them.

"More importantly, I fixed the window for ya. But come on, I'll show you a trick. This is pretty neat."

Some curtains have been nailed into place along the far wall. Zane pulls them back and reveals a large window, through which the night sky shines.

"Tie this off like this..."

I believe the hook he uses to hold the curtain to one side was actually supposed to hold the curtain rod where this thing came from. It's metal shaped like decorative foliage.

"And voila!" There's a latch he undoes and the window swings open. "Pretty neat, huh?"

Sam and I go to the window, looking down. The backyard is big and has a lighted pool.

"This is like your own front door," Zane says proudly. "You can jump out, right? This isn't too much higher than a tree."

"Oh yeah," Sam says enthusiastically, grabbing the outer ledge. I can tell by the placement of his feet that he's imagining jumping out now.

"Just don't aim for the pool," I say because I see his gaze seems to be pointed there. "It's not deep enough. You'll break your legs. ...I think."

We look to Zane for confirmation. Vampires can certainly fall long distances, but we land on our feet.

"Well, it wouldn't *kill you*... But you would smack concrete," Zane says. "A leaping bound would be best."

"Cool," Sam says, and he wears a small smile but the enthusiasm seems lost. He sighs and his shoulders sag a little as he looks around the room.

"He'll come back." Zane pats his shoulder. "Very soon now, I think. Do you want to feed?"

"No, I'll wait for him." He goes to the mattress and sits down.

"You can leave the room, of course. This is your house. But don't stray too far so he doesn't have to look for you, alright? Darius is under a lot of stress." Zane smiles. "Which is bad for hunters, and good for Evelyn. But let's not test him, okay? The first thing he wants to see when he gets home is you happy and safe."

“I’ll be here.” Sam unwads a sheet from the tangle of blankets and pushes the rest off.

* * *

“I feel bad for him,” I whisper when we’re down the small set of stairs.

“Separation is hard. We spend so much time with our bonded ones that losing them is like losing half of yourself. It is the same for some humans... But not many.”

I keep my head down as I muse aloud, “It must be bad for you. With Evelyn gone.”

If she dies will it be my fault?

No, not technically. I’m not self piteous enough to take the blame for Ray and the other hunters, but I used to be one of them. I have to imagine that they had some sort of tracking device on me, or perhaps they kept a close eye.

“They didn’t give me over for free,” I say. “They must have had a back up plan.”

Zane nods, leading me to a large door. Here he pauses with a hand on the knob, looking back at me.

“Not just Evelyn, Brian.”

I don’t know what he means. I’m thinking about the hunter’s strategy and how it could have played out. I’m remembering Ray’s promise to hunt me, and I know he’s going to make good on that.

I should share this with Zane. But it seems implied whole ordeal, and I’m distracted by the room.

“Wow.”

“I insisted on the master bedroom. Since it’ll be the three of us.”

Floor to ceiling windows. I touch the curtains. They're heavy enough to keep out sunlight, but the glass behind seems weak. I put my hand to the window. The coolness could make me swear I was feeling the outside breeze.

The back of the room is better though, thick walls and a big sturdy bed with carved posts. The bathroom has a tub set into the corner with jets and high windows.

“What do you think?”

I answer honestly. “It's fragile.” I go again to the windows which face the street and take up that wall.

“Do not be afraid, dove. The entire family is here to protect you.”

“We need more,” I say, thinking.

Zane seems disappointed. “Well, we could take the cellar. Would you feel better there? I thought...” He shrugs. “There's three of us. So there's plenty of space. And Evelyn would like decorating it like a little home.”

I shake my head. “Not that. I mean, we need tech. Cameras. Motion sensors. It's not enough to hide anymore. We have to make fortresses.”

“Huh.” Zane considers. “We don't know anything about that stuff.”

“I do. We need money, and we need someone to interact with the company. Or we could order off ebay and figure it out ourselves. But yeah...” I touch the glass again, imagine how it would shatter with a barrage of bullets, the back wall scattered with holes. “This won't suffice. It's too weak.”

“I will tell Edmund then. You can advise him on it, and he will decide what to do. That's important, Brian. Edmund is your father.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know.”

“Not me.” Zane puts his hands in his pockets and shrugs. “Though... I want to be, you know.”

“You are my sire,” I say, leaving the window. It can be left alone for now. The Clan never moves too fast after an attack, successful or not. They are always cautious to use surprise and attack on their terms.

“Not really,” Zane points. “That’s Darius. I am your brother though.”

“And my lover,” I say. Because he seems to be seeking something from me, and I think I know now what he means about Evelyn. It’s not just her missing that causes him pain.

His darting glance seems hopeful. Boyish.

It is not like him.

“Yeah. I’d like that. Though we haven’t... You know.”

“Sorry. It’s just not a normal, uh... *activity* for me.” I shrug too. “I’m better at the war stuff. Surviving. It’s all I do. And now I have this...”

I wave a hand over the burned part of my face. “I must look like Frankenstein’s monster.”

“Oh, no. You are more beautiful now, actually.”

I know he’s full of shit, so I scoff. Zane does not let me pull away and brings me in for a kiss.

“It’s true. It is your proof of your love for Evelyn. And your loyalty to the family. Darius remembers what you did during that gunfight. He feels bad for accusing you.”

We kiss. But I wish I could say it is pleasant. I do a good job of hiding my pain, but the burns are alive with agony, always.

“How long will this last?” I ask.

“The pain will take weeks to disappear. Newborns are fragile, and you most of all.” His eyes are sympathetic as he pulls me to the bed. “You will be with the scar for another year, I bet. The eye will grow back about the same time.”

This is longer than I was hoping and my posture sags. I sit with him and cuddle my good side into his shoulder. He wants to feed me, I know, by how he cradles my head. There's change in his tone too. It goes deeper and softer when he feeds me.

“Healing is hard work. It makes one ravenous, and you can go into hibernation if you don't get enough.” He touches my jaw. “Promise you will eat?”

“As much as I can.” I need to get better for him so I can see about that security. So I can help protect Sam. So I can keep Evelyn safe.

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Chapter 32



They come late at night, when Zane and I have begun to silently fester in our fears. The curtains become bright with their headlights and I pick my head up from Zane's chest, wondering about the sound of multiple engines and their tires pulling into the drive. I'm not immediately alarmed. They need the passcode to get in.

But then I hear the familiar high-pitched squeak of worn out truck brakes, and I realize Ray's outside.

"Brian!" Zane calls, as I'm out of the bed quick, pulling back the curtain from the window.

The lights burn my eyes, even the damaged socket of the blind one, and I lift my hands for protection. But I squint through. I can make out the shape of the truck in front and one of the Clan's white vans behind. They're parked bumper to bumper in a line behind Edmund's car.

"They've found us," I say, and my mind is working on two things at once. The story of how they got here and what we're going to do about it.

It must have gone bad at the church. Ray is making good on his promise to hunt me. I might be his only target, but likely he's here to kill whatever he can before he goes out. He's in a rage. And if he's *here*, then Evelyn's rescue went bad for us too. She's dead. That causes a sharp pang.

She's the first one. I have to live a long life without her now, and I'm going to miss her.

“Shh. Dove, it’s not the hunters,” Zane says, rubbing my shoulders.

It is occurring to me second-handedly that Ray wouldn’t show up in the middle of the night, not while the vampires are strongest. He seems impulsive and angry, but he’s a lot different than my dad. In rage, he’d still wait and do it right, coming in the day while we’re sleeping. You can hunt a lone vampire at night, but a nest is a suicidal task.

And Zane is both soothing me and keeping me steady, standing at my back so I don’t run. “It’s our family. See?”

The man getting out the truck isn’t Ray. He has long hair, a muscled, slim body, and a hoop earring that glints as the headlights shut off. He’s pale and fairly small, wearing a sleeveless vest. Now that it’s dark, I can see that his shoulder is a wrangled mess of red. I’d say it got caught in something and then shot at close range. There’s a dripping, circular gouge. Shotgun, probably.

He goes to the back of the van, where others are already hopping out. An impossible many of them, some with visible wounds. One of them seems to be holding his jaw in place, and I feel sympathy pain. I’m not the only one torn up by this war. And it isn’t going to end.

No one is overly bleeding though, which is a sign that the healing has already begun.

Someone is lifted out of the back. I see her legs first, then her torso comes out with everyone around her helping. Zane undoes the window latch and lifts the frame.

“Go get Sam,” he says as he’s crawling out. “Meet us down in the living room.” Before he leaves, he takes a moment to meet my eyes. “She’s okay, Brian. She just needs to heal.”

I nod. Then he’s out the window and walks right off the eave, landing so silently a human could believe he floated down.

When Zane gets there, they let him take her in his arms. Someone helps hold her head, others set her arms on her chest so they don’t dangle, and

many touch her legs or her shoulders in reverence, staying with her as she's carried in. I spot Darius close behind, having come from Ray's truck. Edmund appears from the front of the house, and everyone makes room so he can approach her.

Zane pauses a moment, and they exchange words, but I can't hear them. They seem to be inspecting her head, and Edmund nuzzles her hair as a lover might.

Or a father, I suppose. Though everyone appears the same age, the way they all wait and stay quiet marks Edmund as different. Older and in charge. He pries gently at her hair, where I can't see the wound because it's positioned against Zane's chest. She looks sadly perfect to me, but lifeless.

Edmund begins to lead the procession into the house, and I remember Sam. I go to get him, thinking he should have already heard the engines and come out of his room himself, but I find him sitting on the bed with an open box and a pile of books at his feet. They're children's books.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Um..." He startles and tucks the book under the pillow next to him.

"Evelyn is back. Darius is back. Didn't you hear them pull up?"

He stands quickly. "No. I got lost reading, I guess."

"*The Velveteen Rabbit?*"

He couldn't hide the book fast enough for me not to read the title. I'm not going to make fun of him, but I do find this a little strange.

He avoids my eyes and scratches the back of his head. "It was my sisters favorite."

I nod, understanding. But I also get the feeling that Sam shouldn't be talking about some sister from his previous life. It's odd to discover him this way, given that Sam is always better at the vampire stuff than me. He certainly makes flying look natural, and I hear he got the basics in a night. I

might be more inclined to this life than him after all, if he's reminiscing over a human sister.

"Come on. We're supposed to go down to the living room."

He folds his arms over his stomach. "We have to go meet everyone?"

"Darius will be there," I remind him to make him feel better, and it seems to do the trick. He follows me out of the room, and we go quickly downstairs, but slow considerably when we get to the railing overlooking the foyer.

There's a mess of strangers below, all looking hard and haggard, with Evelyn in the center, carried by Zane still.

Darius looks up and sees us first. His eyes widen, then he makes an expression of pain. It is not the way I imagined he would react to see Sam again. Then others look up, and their expressions become aghast. That is when I remember the bad side of my face. The nerves have dulled considerably since I fed from Edmund, and with Evelyn's arrival, I just forgot.

Sam was keeping two steps behind me, and now I hunch my shoulders and slink back to join him. There's no hiding from vampire eyes though. Every face turns up to us, their blue eyes bright. The man with the busted shoulder brushes by someone and comes to the bottom of the staircase, his eyes intense.

Intense. Not friendly. Nobody looks happy to see us.

I lift my hand to hide the damage instinctively, but touching it is impossible, and it's too late anyway. I force it down, leaving me bare, and find Sam's hand ready to grasp.

The oddness of holding his hand is nearly equal to the discomfort of the room. We're two grown men. Except he looks more like a boy to me, and neither of us feel like adults as we face the strangers.

I try to steady myself with a breath. I guess I am the brave one since Sam uses me as a partial shield. They are strangers, but they are also my brothers. Truthfully, right now, I wish it was just the four of us again, but Zane wouldn't bring me here if there was any danger. The strange faces too. *They are all my brothers.*

"Come on," I tell Sam, and lead him by going first, moving his cover. I wonder if it's allowed to speak right now or if we're waiting for Edmund to go first. At Clan meetings, you only speak when spoken to. But Katie certainly didn't seem afraid of arguing with him, and I decide to test the waters.

"Is she going to be okay?" I ask as we descend the stairs.

My old hunter panic is niggling at me. A vampire's gaze is a terrible thing to behold. Because it's beauty and death all in one. They catch humans so easily. But I am not going to let nerves get to me. I always fight when necessary.

"She is not fine, little birds," Edmund answers. "But she will sleep it off. Give her a couple weeks, maybe a month."

Zane brings her to the end of the stairs for me. Darius comes with him too, looking eager for Sam. I think I see some relief in his eyes that he has not turned out like me. But suppose he's just glad to have Sam back, which I don't blame him for.

"I bet she wakes up at the end of September," Zane says, "when summer is over and we've had our first rain. Fall is her favorite season, you know."

That's more than a couple weeks away, but she'll be alright and that's enough for me.

Sam and I stop to look at her. I touch her hair, but Darius reaches over and blocks me from turning her head. He says nothing, but the implication is *don't*. I've already seen the open side of her head in the battle. The way they've positioned her though is like she's tilted her head against Zane in sleep. She looks peaceful.

Automatically, I seek out her wrist. It's an old habit. Of course it's useless to check for a pulse.

"I'm going to set her in bed," Zane says. "I'll be right back."

Sam and I stand against the wall so he can carry her past.

"Is she in pain?" I ask Darius. I think he's moving for Sam, but he surprises me by taking my hand as well, and pulling us both into a hug.

"No," he answers by cheek, nuzzling where it doesn't hurt. "She's in a sleep. When we're torn, we can be like that for decades. We miss each other when that happens, but she's not hurting. She's not with us either. It is a deep sleep."

"Have you experienced it?" I ask as he lets us go. He touches Sam and I both like he's checking for additional injuries, his fingers going over the back of my head.

Behind him, the man with the hurt shoulder answers. "We all have."

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Chapter 33



“Children... Sons, daughters...” Edmund says, once Zane has returned is by my side. He joins us on the third where we are slightly elevated above everyone else. “These are our newborns. This is Sam.”

Sam gets a kiss on the cheek and Darius holds him visibly tighter.

“This is Brian.”

I brace myself. Zane has his arm around me. Already, I’ve experienced more public affection from a man than I ever got in private during my human life. Holding Sam’s hand and letting Darius hug me would be huge ‘incidents’ at my church. They’d have a meeting over it. Chaste love is not expressed with touch in my old religion.

It is the first time I’ve thought it that way, as something that’s past me.

Edmund’s kiss passes without commotion.

“I know you are scared,” he says to the room, “But maybe now that you’ve seen them you can understand. They’ll never have memories of the old days. They’ll never know security... unless we build it for them.”

There is a noticeable change in those solemn faces. Several glance to each other, then back to Edmund. A few look at us and tilt their heads with considering interest.

It seems Edmund was mostly alone in his plan. Katie still frowns deeply. The others must have shared the same opinion as her, that taking up a house

is too dangerous. Perhaps they didn't want to save Evelyn either.

I suddenly like Edmund a lot more, and I sense that he really will become part of my family, as more than a technical addition.

“We have kept them secret their protection,” he says. “And also yours. Both of our newborns have come out of enemy hands. Sam narrowly survived. Brian we didn't even know existed. We found him in the streets, lashed and nearly starved to death. I will always remember that as a hard night.”

He glances over his shoulder at me as he says the words, his eyes taking on sadness as he remembers. This not just a speech. His words are honest.

“But also,” he says with a sigh, addressing the others again, “It was a good night. Seeing the damage done to him made me have epiphany. I want to be clear—our actions prior to this were not wrong. We had a plan to stop the war through pacifist inaction. I have let those who refused to be careful be taken and put to death. I knew not all of us could stay out of quiet, but I thought those who did would live forever.”

He pauses, looking downward, then says quietly, “Self preservation is putting it kindly. Cowardice is another way. But I am going to use the term extinction. We abandoned brothers and sisters who could not keep the secret. We have chased out loners who might draw attention. We have acted like starving rats turning on each other.”

Katie speaks out. “It wasn't for nothing! We are supposed to be forgotten like ghosts!” Everyone looks to her corner where she stands. “It was not *cowardice*. It was a long term plan to end the war, and it was a smart one.”

Edmund does not blink at the disruption.

“Daughter, you are right. But is this the life you wish for the newborns? To be ghosts? To be too scared to fly or hunt? To be persecuted by their own family for making a pip that gets noticed? Do you want them to feel hungry because we can—but won't—bring them enough to eat?”

No one answers, but there is a new mood to the room. Their blue eyes are slightly narrowed and the set of their mouths is grim. The one with the hurt jaw should be too distracted with his own pain, but he is solely focused on Sam and I, with the straight back of soldier listening to orders. He is not forgotten by his brothers. Two others that help look after him, but for the moment, they look ready to fight.

They've all felt it, the suffering of an impossibly long life. Sam hasn't realized it yet, and I haven't truly experienced it. We are truly babes in their eyes. But they will fight for our survival and happiness, and I'm beginning to see that this *is* my family. Not a technical definition.

"There are few hours left in the night," Edmund says. "We all need rest and to heal. But we will do the born ritual. It is a special kind. The blood of our enemies is in all of you, and you will nourish our fledglings with it." He looks at Katie. "We will all partake."

Smiles and ease comes over the room, but I'm very aware of my stomach at the moment. If there is a test to my choosing this life, this is it. Sam looks uncomfortable too, but he doesn't know the possible names, the possible faces, families, and stories that could make up our meal tonight.

"This is how it should be," says the vampire with the injured shoulder. "The blood of our enemies should feed the young. It keeps them safe. We should see that this becomes common occurrence."

There is a murmur of approval.

I do not let myself flinch or express my doubt. There is no right path. As a hunter, I was miserable. I had no family and I didn't even understand what love was to have it for someone else. I was starving, in a nonphysical way. Friends died and I scarcely mourned, because they didn't care for me either. They couldn't accept what I was.

But I have not chosen the right path. There isn't one.

"Come. The living room," Edmund says, and leads us off the stairs.

“Do not worry. No one will do anything you don’t like,” Darius tells us, but he seems to be clinging to Sam a bit tight.

“Only if you like it,” Zane says with a grin, and his humor gives me some ease.

“I’m Timothy, by the way,” says a man who seems especially young thanks to his oversized coat and innocent cowlick in his hair.

He is lovely, but I hold tighter to Zane.

“And I’m Rolland,” says the one with long hair and the injured shoulder.

The names become many. Some bow and others shake our hands.

“You know me,” Katie says with a little smile and shrugs her shoulders. “I’m Katie.” She doesn’t seem angry anymore, but I don’t think she’s in full agreement with Edmund either. It seems too early for her to change her mind, and I wonder what it says about Edmund that his family falls in line so easily once he’s made a decision.

There could be another part to him. There could be punishments.

We enter the living room, and he’s seated in an armchair with a man kneeling at his feet. Edmund lifts his chin all the way up. It’s the man with a broken jaw, and Edmund seems to carefully look over him the way he did me.

“You will likely sleep once you’ve had enough,” he says, and brings up his wrist to bite. His helpers wipe spilled blood off his lips and chin and clean their fingers in his mouth as Edmund feeds him from up high, blood dribbling from the bite.

He can’t open his mouth very well, but he’s swallowing. He’s getting better.

My stomach burns with familiar hunger, and I look to Zane, but he turns me toward Rolland, who is smiling.

“Him first. He fed at the battle, so it’s necessary,” he whispers, “But don’t worry. I’ll be your favorite.”

He’ll be my only. Someday I’ll tell him that.

The End

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Also by Eileen Glass

Backwoods Bear: Stranded (M/M Bear Shifter Romance)



Chapter 1

I'm going to die here.

But not yet. There's still hope yet.

Owen presses the gas, *gently, nudgingly*, urging his car forward despite the snow and ice. With much regret, he's remembering himself three hours ago, all the warnings so plain to him now. The snow was getting deeper. The sky was getting darker. In the daylight, the old highway hadn't seemed so sinister. The snow was nostalgic and the occasional slide was fun. He had turned up the tunes and plowed forward. He even inched his truck around a tree that had collapsed across the road, a sure sign from fate to turn back if he ever had one.

He was having *fun*. And GPS said to go this way.

So that's why he's going to die.

It's not fun anymore.

The night is pitch black and the snow is so thick he can hardly see the ground in front of his hood. The little light telling him he's using the emergency reserve fuel has been glowing for at least an hour, maybe more. The best he can hope for is to roll far enough to get out of the trees and into a place with a cell phone signal. He's got a full charge and a brand new travel playlist, but not a single bar.

He checks it again, just in case.

I'm fucked.

Deep breath. Staying so calm. Going forward. It's all he *can* do.

He pushes his glasses up his nose. He looks at his supplies in the passenger seat. He's an accounting major, and having just finished his finals for the freshman fall term, he has T accounts and columns fresh in his head.

Coat, one unit. Credit forty-five bucks to *Cash* and debit forty-five to the *Survival Gear* account. Woohoo. It's something. He can put his boots in there too, because while he happened to be buying a coat, he thought of that. His hometown sometimes gets a heavy snow before Christmas. But never on Christmas. Only before and after.

So gloves? Nope. Owen enjoys his snow from behind glass. He likes looking at it with a hot cup of cocoa in his hand, but that's it. So snowsuit? Double nope. Even if it snowed six inches on Christmas day for once, he couldn't be dragged into building a snowman or making angels.

Hat? Okay, he has that one. It's a floppy beanie gifted to him by his now ex-boyfriend. Super cheap, thin, bought at a department store on a whim. It's not snow gear.

I'm so fucked.

He pretends he doesn't notice when he presses the gas and the engine doesn't seem to be pulling the tires. He pretends it's all A-OK while the car is still rolling and heater is still hot. Nothing's changed, he's fine.

He checks the phone again. He wishes that little *you're gonna die* symbol over the network icon would fix itself.

Owen clutches the steering wheel tight and stares straight ahead into the darkness. The snowflakes are coming at him, making him think he's going fast. And when the wheels stop turning, he sits there pretending he still is.

Marty, his ex, would've been in the passenger seat with him if Owen hadn't decided to call it quits. They didn't break up for any reason much, just that they both seemed annoyed with each other all the time and taking off for two weeks was an opportunity.

Owen didn't tell him in person. He just sent him a text three days before he was on the interstate. He ignored his phone after that.

But Marty could've been right there, in that dim space across the seat. If he was, Owen might put on blusterous hope for getting out of here. But no, Owen knows what kind of predicament he's in and he has no one to fake it to. His parents won't be worried until tomorrow. There's no one else.

He pushes his glasses up to rub at his eyes.

He has to hope that it looks better in the morning. Or that someone else is using the same shitty GPS. Why, oh why, did he let himself turn onto a forest service road?

For dinner tonight, he's got stale, cold fries. For fluids, he's got the snow outside and a watery soda. He cracks the windows for air flow and turns the key all the way to off. The headlights will take a couple minutes to shut off themselves, yet he can barely see the dark shapes of the trees outside his window.

He's eager to sleep. *It'll all look better in the morning*, he tells himself. He stretches out across the seat, curling onto his side and using his own arm as a pillow. *Maybe the snow won't be that bad*. Maybe he'll hike to some

small town diner tomorrow, telling his story to a concerned waitress, using her phone with many humble thanks, asking to wait while Triple A fetches him.

He hears the lights click off. It's that much darker. But inside his truck, he's got his own warm bubble of safety. Tomorrow's another fight.

He won't think about what happens if the snow is too deep. Or if it's *still snowing*. Or if it doesn't stop until the truck is buried and he passes out and suffocates. Nope, not thinking about that.

He puts his glasses on the dashboard, shuts his eyes, and listens to the wind. It's actually kind of nice.

Until somewhere out there, he hears a rustle. Not like the wind, which is a spooky, quiet wail. This is different. Snow crunching, but not so loud, just...movement.

Don't get paranoid.

He's not getting up to check. It's probably nothing, just some snow falling off a branch, or something like that. A limb snapping, perhaps, that could be it.

Nothing else makes a sound, so he must have imagined it. Or it was a fluffy rabbit. Something harmless. A deer perhaps. Though, he's been on this road all day and he hasn't seen anything but trees and snow. The animals should be hibernating or hiding right now.

His mind drifts.

He hears a grunt from somewhere by his feet.

He startles from a daze, blinking several times before realizing he must've imagined it, his mind sinking into nonsensical thoughts that don't quite make a dream. It's dark. And only quiet. But because he's paranoid, he sits up and looks around just to be safe. He fills his lungs several times and wonders if he should crack the windows some more. It'd sure suck to

die in his sleep, but he also doesn't want to lose the last of the heater heat to the cold. He was stingy with the gap, leaving just a sliver for air.

He turns the keys one notch and all the lights on the dash come on to cast an eerie glow.

There's something odd.

He looks around, but he can't say what it might be. It's just a feeling that something bad is about to happen. Like...*maybe*...something might be staring at him.

He looks at the dark window glass. *Wouldn't it be scary if a face appeared?* He shivers and tells himself to stop freaking out. Now is not the time to remember scenes from scary movies. He snatches up his phone just to check the screen and see the familiar icons. All reminding him that he's not in some nightmare.

Well, he might die.

But there's nothing he can do about that now. He has to wait until morning. The best he can do now is to stop thinking and sleep. Before he lays back down, he adjusts the windows.

Then, in the windshield, a flickering yellow glint appears, round like an eye. He picks up his glasses.

It seems distant. It seems not to be a reflection inside his truck. He squints into the night, and in a moment, the spot disappears.

There's nothing now. Which means something must have changed, and it couldn't be him, his dash, or his phone. Nothing has moved. Nothing can account for the shape or gold color.

Could there be a house or something ahead? Maybe some yellow lit window is casting the light from far off. But he frowns, knowing that's wishful thinking. But maybe. In any case, there's nothing to see now so he can't strap on his boots and go walking. He'd never find his truck again. He'd die for sure.

So all he can do is sleep and hope and stop freaking out. *There's nothing out there*, he tells himself firmly.

Except...*that*.

He hunches over the steering wheel, peering through the falling snow.

There's something blocking the road. Something he swears wasn't there before. In this darkness, there's only shades of black to delineate the world, but he remembers an open road. He's somewhere near the peak of the mountain, he'd been climbing straight up for awhile. As he recalls, the white road lay straight ahead when the truck stopped rolling.

What's out there now is all darkness. But between the pitch black of the sky and the dim black of the snow, there's something inbetween. Something blocking the road.

And...

It moves?

Owen fiddles with his glasses, but there's no switch for night vision. Unfortunately.

The stretch of snow disappears under the indefinite shape out there. The shape seems to loom. It seems to get bigger. Is it coming closer?

His stomach begins to squirm. *Gotta be cabin fever*. His own paranoia must be getting to him.

There's a way to find out. He grabs the keys and turns them one more notch, fully expecting the shape to be nothing. Fog gathering over the open road. A switchback he misplaced in memory. His own imagination darkening the night.

The brights switch on and blast the darkened shape.

Fur, eyes, and teeth. An angry roar blasts through him, telling his bladder it's time to go. He manages to squeeze it in, while he's hitting the deck, yelling something or other, turning the keys back, hiding from the beast.

But the lights don't go off right away, and standing on hind legs out there, so big he can see it through the windshield even from the angle where he lies on the seat, is a giant *bear*.

He doesn't like the lights.

He says so.

Owen winces, putting his hands over his ears.

He can make out the yellow glinting eyes and two small ears on either side of its massive head. And the teeth. And the tongue. God, the tongue, steamy with breath and curling with the force of his roar.

Though, once he's roared a second time, the creature just sort of stands there and looks at him.

"Shit, fuck," Owen whispers in his quietest breath. It's too late to hide, but he doesn't want the beast to hear him. It's probably hungry.

What is it doing out here in the middle of the winter?!

He thought bears slept through this season. But he's not going to go outside and tell him that.

He shrinks towards the floor of his truck. It's uncomfortably tight, but he can fit. He's never heard of a bear that can open a car door, but just in case, he gets the locks too.

The bear seems to dislike the sound, making a grunt and biting at the air.

Then it dips to all fours and starts climbing his bumper, and his truck makes a sound like it's breaking. Soon Owen can't see its face anymore, only its massive chest and body filling up the windshield. Owen discovers that he can, in fact, fit under the steering wheel. It's cramped, but at least he can hide.

Owen is from a small country town, and though he's not exactly a country boy himself, living in the well-to-do neighborhood of the quaint

town, he's seen bears. Black ones, who's heads probably come up to the top of his window when standing on all fours.

This *thing* out there is towering over his *truck*. His truck isn't the gas guzzling monstrosity his dad drives around town, but it's got four wheel drive and big-ass tires. When those front paws sink into the hood and that snout comes sniffing near his wipers, his truck *snaps*, the hood denting under the weight of the giant bear.

Grizzly. Got to be.

He's never seen one, but he did a report on them in fifth grade. He wrote about the town history and how grizzly maulings used to be common.

He thought a lot about violent grizzlies while writing that. And one story in particular about sixteen-year-old Rebecca who was mauled to death while her three-year-old sister ran home. They were out picking berries in July, 1898. He's never remembered a single date from history class, but he's never forgotten that one.

Grizzly bears used to be common in this state, but hunting and logging and building interstates drove them off ages ago. They're not supposed to exist around here anymore.

Countering that fact, the bear above him makes a loud grunt. It's so close overhead, Owen could almost believe the creature was breathing in his ear. The truck might have cocooned him from the chill, but it offers no buffer to the bear's panting breath. He has to hope the glass and metal surrounding him won't be as flimsy to claws.

He listens to him huffing, and otherwise the night is so quiet, Owen's own breathing is loud. He's sure the grizzly can hear it.

He can probably smell me too, he thinks, remembering that he cracked the windows. It's too little too late, but he reaches out to put the glass back up. He fumbles. And hits the wrong button.

"*Shit, shit, shit,*" he cusses under his breath as the glass goes *down* instead.

The bear hops off the hood to investigate.

“Shit!”

He forgets all about the grizzly hearing him or anything else, he just has to get the window *up* as a dark shape comes looming around the side of his truck, casting a long shadow from the light of his beams. The monster is huge, yet his movement causes almost no sound at all.

Owen hears the window winding, but the glass isn't moving. Instead, it's the passenger window going down, and Owen bangs his head smartly on the steering wheel as he comes up.

“*Shit, shit, shit!*”

It's all he's thinking, all he's saying, all he's doing as his fist slams the control panel on his door. He's trying to think. His side view mirror whirs as it changes angles. The world gets darker. Two eyes look directly into his window, steam filling up the glass, and Owen snatches his hand back.

The top of the window glass forms a thin silver line where *out there* and *in here* stop being separate. The beast blinks. Once. Slowly. It is far calmer than he is. Certain. And looking right at him, never losing that stare, as a giant snout lifts over that glass edge and comes pushing into the heated, safe space of the truck. Owen can see wetness glisten off the big black nose as the nostrils flare, breathing in, huffing, scenting him out.

He slaps his palm on the center of the steering wheel. He has to arch his arm to press hard enough, and then—

The horn.

The eyes flick away from him for a second.

That's the only reaction he gets.

Owen keeps it going, then lets up and presses again. Then again and again, but the creature isn't scared in the slightest. He angles his head one way, then the other, fitting his snout through the space, trying to get his whole head through.

Owen takes his hand back when one massive paw hits the glass and claws come prying over the window's edge. Owen never wanted to know what the underside of a bear's paw looks like, but now he sees it in detail, the pads flexing and squishing against the glass, the digits reaching in like thick fingers. And *pulling*. Not just digging or pressing there like a dog's paw might be, but actually working on the window and trying to figure out if it *opens*. And how.

Claws scrape the glass. A bit of snow falls off the thick fur and dusts his seat. The bear gives a frustrated roar, not loud, just annoyed, and Owen hears the meaning of it inside his head.

The bear wants in. And it wants *him*.

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Also by Eileen Glass

Omega: Liam & Skye (M/M Wolf Shifter Romance)



Chapter 1

Skye hooks his thumbs in his backpack's straps. At least he got through the summer in an air conditioned apartment before reality kicked him back to the road. That was nice. If he times it right, maybe he can hide out for the winter too. Fall and spring aren't so bad for hitchhiking.

A big truck passes, roaring, kicking up a whirlwind. Skye drifts further off the road, into the dirt and weeds. A little later toward the evening he'll stick his thumb out, and likely one of those truckers will stop for him. Skinny boys like him get rides pretty easy. They don't find out until the end that Skye isn't their kind of pleasure. Too many teeth.

He smirks, remembering such a run in. But not for long. In his mind, the trucker transforms into an alpha, and suddenly the tables have turned.

No human could ever rape him unless he was mightily drugged first. Not so for the assortment of rogue wolves on his tail.

Each new home holds new acquaintances and friendships, and for awhile, safety. The chance to live like a stranger with a normal life. He really liked this place, but he's already stayed about six weeks too long. That's when the wolf attacks started showing up on the news.

He's sorry about that. As an omega, violence doesn't come naturally to him the way it seems to do for the others of his kind.

The unranked aren't too bad. They're typical, generally easygoing. All want to impress the alpha, of course, but that's just normal for wolves.

Betas are pretty bad, the second in command, always sucking up while looking for an opportunity to take the lead.

But alphas? They're ruthless. Just thinking about it creates a painful pulse in his chest, makes a tightness like tears form around his eyes.

His mother was the alpha female of their pack. She went through three males, each more vicious than the last. He can't remember much about the first, his father, except that he missed him when he was killed and replaced. It doesn't matter. Likely, his father would have abhorred and exiled him just the same.

Omeegas are a sin. Irresistible yet always male, meaning they're a genetic dead end. There's nothing his people revere more than their pups, few as they are, so nobody wants an omega in their pack. He's useless, except for rutting.

It's not his fault. He can't exactly change the way he smells. Hiding out in the city worked for awhile, keeping the other wolves at bay, but it was only a matter of time before they became impatient. Once they realized he wasn't leaving, they started creeping in. And sure enough, mangled, half-eaten pets began showing up on the news, along with the occasional midnight mauling.

Blood thirsty, violent, wild. Alphas just can't help themselves.

The actual sky, the blue for which he's named thanks to his eyes, is vast and cloudless in all directions. No place to hide.

Eventually, they're gonna catch him.

Skye looks back at the interstate, all the cars flying at him.

It was nice to walk for awhile, but it's time to find a new place. Maybe *the* place for once, if the rogues decide he isn't worth it.

They'll know which way to look.

He's thinking he should stick his thumb out now, best to get up the road, get a few towns between him and the mutts gunning for him...while a sight as terrible and inescapable as the grim reaper rides up over the crest of the hill.

Not that one, he thinks, but he knows it is. The one who found him in the first place, who went right into the heart of the city and staked out where he worked downtown. The one that got too close. He rides a big black motorcycle, a cruiser, wears a leather coat and sunglasses. Skye remembers how his body bulges with muscles that could break him in half.

There's nowhere to go, nowhere to hide. He can't shift and run in broad daylight, not with this traffic. Some small hope sparks when the bike rides on past him, but of course, that's stupid, it's already showing brake lights, already slowing down, and it pulls off the side, kicking up a cloud of dust and gravel.

He comes to a stop, boots landing down to steady the machine.

He stares at Skye hard in the review mirror, eyes hiding behind sunglasses. His hair is just long enough to reach the tie at the base of his neck, several dark strands loose and wild from the wind.

He'll smile any second now. Smug prick.

I got you, say the eyes behind the sunglasses. Skye can sense the words even if the distance prevents them from speaking just yet.

The dust settles.

The alpha doesn't smile, doesn't speak, doesn't change expression really, his face worn in a permanent frown. Doesn't take his eyes off Skye either. The wind pushes lightly at Skye's back, and though his nostrils don't flare and he doesn't tilt his head back, the way alphas do when they sense a bitch in heat, he *has* to smell it. It's been getting worse lately. All the alphas coming around probably have something to do with it.

Though Skye has a fully functional human mind, his biology is built for a creature far more primitive and cutthroat.

His legs want to run. And boy, can they. He could be across the field and out of sight in about fifteen seconds, and that's saying something in this treeless landscape.

God, what a mistake it was to pay his rent instead of getting a bus ticket. Stupid, stupid move, a decision made by his soft heart. Ruth, his generous old landlady, relies on social security and his rent check each month, so he couldn't leave her in a lurch like that, especially when she took a chance on him with no references, no credit, no nothing except a job and a promise.

Idiot. Self preservation should have taken priority. He should have bought the bus ticket.

Unbidden, a thought comes.

He'd just follow the bus.

The alpha shuts off the machine and sits there, watching while Skye stands still and thinks.

His silent gaze seems to say, *Well what's it gonna be?*

The alpha's hands leave the throttle and clutch to fish some chew out of his jacket. Disgusting habit.

Though he seems relaxed and patient, waiting him out, Skye knows an alpha doesn't put up with much, and he's pushing it already. There really

was never a choice to run to begin with. He should have known the second this alpha showed up at his work that he was done.

The constant moving was wearing on him, and he'd met good people this time around. He'd wanted so badly to stay. He blew it.

A dragging step carries him forward. There's no choice. The alpha knows it, that's why he hasn't bothered to even give the order. It's a done deal. The only question is whether Skye will refuse. The alpha might want him to run just for the sport.

Small, shuffling steps carry him forward unwillingly. He's a chained dog and that blank gaze reels him in link by link. Better to show obedience and wait for escape than to get a vicious beating for being stupid. Skye can't fight, and he can't run fast enough. So forward is the only way.

Thoughts fly by faster than the cars, asking if he's nice, asking if he drinks, if he'll have a pack, what they'll think of him.

He knows the answer to all of that, and none of it means anything good. Humans have it so easy, their minds completely obliterating whatever animal instinct they might have possessed once. Skye is a sex slave thanks to a goddamned pheromone and a glitch in the programming.

He hesitates. He doesn't want to get so close.

Yet, he already accepts his fate. His arms shake, and he's too aware of each step to balance naturally, but a tiny unknown part of him relaxes with relief as his toes touch the alpha's shadow. *Finally*, that part of him thinks and regards the bigger man with hope.

Through all this, the alpha just sits, chews, puts the tobacco back in his jacket pocket. Even when Skye gets very close, he doesn't react much. Now it's Skye's turn to wait.

A blue sedan comes coasting by, not in any hurry apparently, a couple of young twenty-something girls peering as they pass. Wondering what's up, Skye thinks at first, until he notices that the alpha is stretching and reaching

around to get an itch on his back shoulder. His t-shirt can't hide the six pack. What they find so alluring makes Skye cringe in fear.

Will he be nice?

He hopes so, but it's too good to be true.

The alpha settles. Looks forward at the interstate going north, then back at Skye.

“You ever been on a bike before?”

“Yeah.”

The only vague memory of his father he has is of a motorcycle, sitting on the front with his little hands braced on the gas tank while the engine rattled his joints and sockets. They rolled around the camp where they were staying while the pack cheered for him. He'd grinned ear to ear, full of love and admiration for his daddy.

It's almost impossible to believe, but once he was precious. Something happened around the age of eleven and that all changed. He was on Dad Two at the time, and he went from being ignored to being punished.

Skye hugs himself. Motorcycles and werewolves go hand in hand. The feeling of flying down the road is as close as it gets to running. Definitely beats the sweaty, smelly bus any old day, but there's nowhere else Skye would rather be.

“You're a lot of trouble, you know that?” The alpha leans forward on the bike, showing off his abs without really trying to. “You put us at risk, playing human when you're reeking of heat. And each time you jump ship, you cross another territory and get another sonofabitch after your ass.”

He smirks like this is funny.

“I bet it was just a matter of time before the ladies came after you too. You're depriving a lot of good women of some good men right now, ya know that?”

Yeah, as a matter of fact, he does.

Skye turns his angry glare on the ground before it gets him hit.

“Well...” The alpha puts his hands on the bars and rests his boot toe atop the gear shifter. “Get on, Trouble. You’re mine now. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

All of Skye’s muscles are painfully tight. *Move*, he urges his limbs and gets only trembling for a response. He realizes he’ll have to touch the alpha to get on, and suddenly his brain forgets how. Which leg to put over? What to grab onto?

It’s a small relief that the alpha doesn’t seem to be in a hurry, sloshing the chew, scratching the back of his hand. Then twisting around to pull out the pedals for him on each side.

His only sign of impatience is a simple, “C’mon. Let’s go.”

So maybe he’s nice. For an alpha that doesn’t mean much.

Skye’s ass clenches tight to think of what’s in store for him now. A barren bitch. A cum receptacle. A pleasure fuck and never anything more.

Hate for himself is marginally easier to deal with than fear. He gets his right leg over the seat, slides into place. Jostling the bike, but the alpha steadies them easily. With a timid, hovering hold, he rests his hands on the alpha’s waist, the thick coat preventing them from touching overly much. He has to keep his mind on the pleasant smell of leather. Otherwise it’ll go to his thighs, which can’t opt for a less intimate position.

The alpha leans over to spit, taking the center of gravity with him, and Skye’s whole world shifts from the simple action. It’s an uncomfortable foretelling of the future to be. Skye swallows, tries to scoot back, but the alpha grabs his hands and pulls him forward, wrapping them in place like he’s putting on a seatbelt.

“Hold tight,” he says, and Skye can feel the words reverberate in his stomach. “Don’t go thinking stupid on me, alright? You think I won’t shift

and run you down in broad daylight, you're very mistaken. I'll take you right there in the field with the humans watching and all, understand? I don't care if our mating ends up on the six o'clock news."

That would be bad. Murder and rape for his kind are a part of survival, but exposing oneself to humans brings the death penalty. Some packs go on great hunts to bring down an offender, no matter how small the infringement. Fear takes root in Skye's spine, makes all his nerves come alive while his body goes very still, his gaze dodging the alpha's as he utters a submissive whine, nearly inaudible to humans but not to them.

The alpha reaches back and pats his thigh, twice, and gives him a squeeze too. Like praising a good horse, a beast of burden but not without its uses.

"Nah, I probably wouldn't. But you ain't gonna test me, right?"

Skye wants to whine again, but this time he forces himself to clear his throat and speak. "No."

"That's good."

The bike comes on with a loud roar, the alpha twisting on the throttle to rev her up the instant the engine catches. That's all the warning Skye gets. For all his patient sitting and waiting, the alpha takes off like a bat out of hell, only checking the road once before peeling out, leaving their dust behind and flying down the lane.

It's been a long time since Skye was allowed on a bike. He forgot how scary free they feel, like he could blow away and go rolling back in a bloody mess, road kill for the next car to swerve around.

What'll happen to him now?

Skye clings tight and hunches into the alpha's back. Closeness be damned, the alpha's makes a good shield from the brunt of the wind. Unfortunately, he can't stop his crotch from pressing into the guy's butt, like a coy female playing scared.

Pain awaits in his future. But right now isn't so bad if he stops thinking for awhile.

The alpha doesn't look back, doesn't grab his hands or make any other gesture of comfort, just rides on like Skye might be an extra saddlebag on the back. He's so big that Skye is willing to bet the alpha can hardly feel the smaller boy behind him, clutching to him like a frightened pup.

They come up on a big truck, and he swerves into the passing lane. Skye ducks his ear to the leather, shutting his eyes against the imagined sensation of getting crushed under the wheels. He holds tight and lets the alpha guide him ahead of the danger, until the monstrous machine is behind them and harmless.

It's relatively quiet, easy cruising.

Skye looks back at the city.

How did he let this happen?

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Also by Eileen Glass

Fox Furry (M/M Fantasy Romance)



Chapter 1

Something's wrong, but I can't see what. I can't see anything. They put this blindfold on me and tied it tight. My hands are cuffed and chained to the front of my prison. A few times I tried to rub the blindfold against my arm and get it worked up enough to peek, but they shock me when I do that. It comes from this collar around my neck, and it hurts enough to make me howl.

Howling is something I do now. I try not to think about it. There's things about me that don't make sense anymore. Like how I can pick everyone out by their scents and how my ears can move and fold back, and there's that *thing* behind me...

There's an extra appendage I don't think about. Because panic isn't productive.

Panicking is what they're doing now though. First there was a sharp knock at the door and the buzz of the doorbell.

“*Finally,*” the crone said and went to let them in. But whoever’s out there isn’t who she was expecting.

“We have an order to inspect the premises,” a deep voice says, and the old crone squawks.

“*Inspect?! Let me see that.*”

There’s arguing back and forth. But she’s not alone, this crone. Her smelly workers come for me and the others. Our prisons are stacked—cages actually, for we can’t even stand up in them. I twist and turn at night, my back aching. I’ve been in here for days. They said not to cry, someone was coming to get me today. Whatever that means.

Now I hold the bars as gravity goes wobbly, the cage lifted and set on another surface. They’re moving us onto carts again. We’ll probably go on the truck, where it’s dark and cold and smells like manure.

One of the girls whines. She’s told to shut up, and I guess maybe she’s wearing a shock collar too, because that’s all it takes.

I lick my lips nervously. They don’t like this inspection. The crone doesn’t like the man with the growly voice forcing his way into the shop. It *is* a shop, I know, because I’ve recognized the sounds of the cash register and listened to the customers.

“Quiet! Get down!” one of the smelly men tells the other. They hunker right outside my bars.

I can smell their pits and their bad breath. My nose wrinkles and my ears flatten back. I have the urge to bare my teeth too, like a dog, but that’s another of those sensations I don’t care much to think about.

What they’ve done to me is permanent. I heard them say so.

I shouldn’t be thinking about it. What’s important is that they don’t want growly guy to find us, and they’re starting to wheel the cart away with us on it.

I should call out. But it’ll hurt so much.

“We run a respectable establishment,” the crone says, presumably to the deep-voiced guy. “Nothing but licensed, ethical breeders and we provide free housing to shelter pets when there’s overflow. We’re a community pet shop, and I don’t know what—don’t do that! *Don’t* tap on the glass, the fish don’t like that!”

Pet shop. I’m in a pet shop, though I kind of already knew that. There’s the smell of pet food and the squeaks of mice running on wheels. There’s dogs and cats, but they’ve always been distant, through a wall until today. They keep us in the back, where it’s cold.

I touch my tongue to the front of my teeth and wonder at what I feel there. Points. *Why* am I in a pet shop? What did they do? Is it really permanent?

And can this guy help me?

I’m scared to find out. The shock collar *hurts*. Should I just wait? Surely the guy can find us on his own. These two goons keep hissing at each other to shut up, making more noise by doing so.

“Is that all you sell here?” the growly guy asks.

“What do you mean?” Her voice just got a pitch higher.

“No illegal stuff? I’m not gonna find corgis and tortoises in the back, am I?”

“What? No! Nothing like that.”

I wonder why corgis and tortoises would be such a big deal. Is it a joke? I don’t get it.

“How about humans? You sell humans, altered or otherwise?”

Now my stomach sinks, my ears droop, and my hope is replaced with dread. *Why does he say it like that?* Humans. Like he’s not one.

Memories are welling up but I can’t bear them. There’s a big gap in my timeline that I don’t think about. First I’m kicking back in my apartment,

playing video games and applying for work on my crappy laptop. Then there's a garbled mess that hurts worse than the shock collar when I try to remember it. My whole body flinches and twists in reaction to it.

There's the crone's face. Her eyes are bulging, every small wrinkle around her eyelids visible in detail as she's chanting, her teeth gnashing. It's only a second, a snapshot in my mind that's alive with terror. Like it's still happening somewhere to a part of me.

But I'm here, I remind myself. In a cage. Where it's metal and cold, but it's still safer than there.

"Why's that a hard question?" growly guy asks. "You got 'em or don't you?"

"No! That's preposterous!"

"Well, I'm a buyer."

"Of humans?"

"Yeah. And I got a hook up who says this is the place. Says you're the woman to talk to."

"I-I don't know what you're talking about, sir." Her voice goes up another notch. "We're just a small local pet shop. And we love our animals. I've got papers for everything here. Breeders—and satisfied customers! They'll tell you."

We go over a bump. The temperature changes and this room smells different. I can't describe the scent exactly, but I know what it is even if I'm not used to it. Things die in here. *That's* the scent.

And without choosing to, without acknowledging that I'm about to get shocked and possibly electrocuted to death, I let out a keen.

It's a sound I'd never make, especially when I should be calling for help, shouting like a man. A *hu*-man. Because that's what I am, I'm pretty sure. That's what I remember being. Until the smear of terror and chanting and the crone's crazy eyes.

The shock is sudden and rips through me. There's no pain to compare it to. There's no escaping it. I've broken my arm and sprained my ankle before, and I never did more than clench my teeth and deal with it.

But this *hurts*. It's nothing like that. And it doesn't stop.

Scraping might be the best way to put it. Scraping and rattling through my bones and my teeth. But I can't move, I'm completely paralyzed.

The first few times this happened one of the goons would squat in front of my prison and say, "It doesn't stop until you stop screaming."

It was a while before I understood. Even then, it takes a while to stop screaming.

A presence inside me is listening to things other than myself, taking note of what's happening.

"Shit! *Run!*"

The cages bump and sway as the goons push us over the dip and outside where the air is fresh and the wheels rattle on pavement.

"Get it activated, *fucking get it activated!*" one shouts while the other yells back, "*I'm trying!*"

I hear a hum I recognize, but I'm way too exhausted to think of what it is. I stop screaming. I'm panting, face pressed against the bars, my body bent toward the front of the cage so my cramped legs can stretch toward the back. Something soft brushes the back of my thighs. It's the appendage I don't think about.

I think it's a tail.

I start to cry.

From inside the shop, there's things falling, things breaking, and the old crone screaming like she's going to die.

Heh. Maybe she has a shock collar too, I think, and I'm darkly pleased by the fantasy of seeing her fall. I'd like it if she was in pain, though I don't think that's the case.

I hear a door smash open. The growly guy has found us. That's what she's wailing about.

“Police! On the ground!”

My ears swivel to catch the sounds of many boots running at us from both sides. A gunshot going off makes my whole body jerk like I'm the one hit.

The goons yell, “We give up! We surrender!”

I hear the thud of their knees hitting the ground as the crone, somewhere distant, is pleading, “Please, you don't understand, I have contracts! They're not abducted, they're *saved!*”

It's all jumbled and confusing, and I can't move my limbs. I'm halfway certain I've been shot. Maybe I'm dying, but I don't feel blood. Something tells me I'd know what that feels like—blood pouring out of me. I've been in that state before. I mewl weakly and move my fingers to grasp the bars. I move my toes too. Anything I can do to prove that I'm alive.

“Holy shit.”

Growly guy is close now. I call to him in my mind. I'm not sure if he's here to rescue me or what, but I need help. I know that. The front of my cage door opens and my hands go with it.

There's more yelling. Other people are here too, and the growly guy shouts, “Scout the area for anyone who's fled! Get these assholes to separate cars.”

The goons are cussing at each other. I hear a pained grunt from one as he's hauled off his feet.

A *flick* close to my face makes me quiver. A hand grabs my collar. I hold very still as steel slides across my neck, easing underneath. I breathe slowly

and carefully as he makes slight sawing motions, then pulls hard and the collar snaps apart.

He works on the binding on my wrists next. “Don’t be afraid. I’ve got you. You’re safe now.”

Someone else asks, “What is he?”

Terrible words. I knew it. They did something and changed me. But I can’t speak.

Thick fingers come and lift up the black cloth covering my eyes. I blink fast, the colors too vivid, but thankfully the light is elsewhere. It’s dark here. The silhouette of a man kneels over me and it takes my eyes a moment to adjust.

He isn’t pleased. He’s blond with messy curls and rough stubble. He wears a white shirt and a gun holster. I’m spilled over his lap, making meager movements to get out of the cage even while I’m still mostly paralyzed. He reaches in and pulls my legs out for me.

“Get the others,” he says to someone over his shoulder.

I lay here, looking up at him, just so, so grateful. And wondering.

There’s an appendage of silky fluff that belongs to me and my hands have pointed tips where my fingernails should be. The cage I came out of is a metal crate with food and water bowls attached at the front. For a dog.

* * *

I should back up. To what I do remember, which is me staring at an underwear mannequin with more attraction and longing than I care to admit. I’m waiting for a manager to see me about an interview.

I’m excited and nervous.

Excited because they’re going to interview me right away, which is what I need. And nervous because they always ask the questions the same way.

So I always answer the same way. But for whatever reason, I get the standard line about them calling me for a second interview.

This is to be polite and let me leave happy with false hope. But I don't wait for their call because I already know I didn't get the job. I don't know why. I'm as happy and friendly as I can possibly be. I'm fucking ecstatic with charm and eagerness to be 'on the Team.' I'm the goddamn epitome of their company values, whatever they are, yet I still can't get a job.

And I need one. Badly. My preferred starting date is three months ago when my rent was late the first time.

This mannequin has no junk, and I sigh with disappointment. Loneliness is a separate issue. Right now, I've just got to keep myself off the street.

Coming at me through the racks of shirts and whatnot is a tall guy with frosted hair and smart, square-rimmed glasses. I immediately stand a little straighter. He's softer than the mannequin, but still on the lean side, wearing well-fit slacks and the red company vest.

When he speaks, my stomach flutters. *He's gay.* Or metrosexual, I guess, but that's the more rare option. He has that certain tone that isn't an over-the-top lisp, but I know by listening. I look at him with pleading puppy eyes.

I want you.

Or rather, I want him to want me. I'm not creepy, it's just that I'd like to be wanted for once, you know? I mean it. Literally, *just once.* I'm gay too, but I must be bad at it because I don't know how to meet people like us. I'm too shy. I'm the exact opposite of everything that I'll pretend to be in this interview.

He asks the first question, which everyone asks, but it isn't the important stuff. It isn't: *Do you have a drug problem? Will you show up on time? Are you desperate enough to stay? Can you handle being overworked and mistreated?*

I'd say YES to all of those and, *Can I get an advance on my first check?*

But no. After shaking my hand, he says, “So, Collin, tell me what you’re looking for in this position.”

Behind my smile, I’m thinking, *Food. Shelter. My own bathroom.*

But I give him my usual spiel about how I love working around people and helping customers. Company values and whatnot. Corporations don’t want people, they want robots, and I’m a willing one.

I’m smiling but he’s not, and as I answer through another question as smoothly as I’ve rehearsed (because talking naturally makes me freeze and mess up) I’m remembering what I’ve read about interviewers mimicking your body language if they like you enough.

I like him. I’d like to work with him, though I’d never let on to my secret hopes, not in a million years. Maybe he’d come onto *me* and then I’d have something.

But he doesn’t smile. The way he adjusts his glasses reminds me of a teacher who’d frown every time I got an answer wrong. *The rest of the class gets it, so why don’t you?*

My anxiety is overcoming my survival needs and I start to trip on my words. I’m answering a question about conflict in the workplace. I’m saying that if a coworker and I had a disagreement, I would try to resolve it with the person first before involving management.

But my cheeks, my chest, and even the top of my head are heating up. I’m like the soda can that was shook too much, but instead of getting to let go in a burst, the lid stays shut and I’m just stuck like this, the pressure expanding.

I have to answer, but I’m out of breath. I have to find places to pause and breathe, but I don’t know how. I’m mucking this all up.

If I was busy and a customer asked me for help finding an item...

“I would give the customer directions.” Pause. “And I would ask if they’d like someone to meet...” Pause, inhale like I’m drowning. “...them

there. And I'd call for someone to meet them..."

I sound like I'm slow, but I'm not, I'm just nervous and out of breath.

"...if I could. If there was no one else, I'd..."

Jesus help me.

"...walk them to the item real quick. And resume my task."

Seriously, does anybody ever answer this wrong? Like, *I'd tell them I'm fucking busy so look up and read the signs.*

I go through a few more like this, trying to be eager and charming but talking too fast for the amount of oxygen I require to keep speaking. I talk all the time without noticing my breathing. But now it's like I haven't figured it out, and I see the manager frowning slightly to one side. He shifts his weight and his gaze goes to someplace above my head.

I know how it's going. I'm relieved anyway when it's over because I can regain my breath without panting in front of him. I keep my perky smile in place, and he gives me the news.

You didn't pass. Go somewhere else.

"Okay, Collin, well, I've got your application here and I'll give it to the store manager. We're doing second interviews on Tuesday, and if you're selected, you'll hear from us soon, alright?"

Bullshit. If they wanted me for a second interview, he'd be giving me the time to show up.

My smile falters as I nod and tell him, "Thank you. I hope I get a call."

He says, "I hope so too."

Then he's gone and off doing busy that he hates, but at least he's getting paid. I'm not.

I sigh at the junkless mannequin. I didn't actually want him. The manager guy, I mean, not the plastic underwear model. He was only a

notion, a fantasy, a sign of how alone I've been. I could have never come out to my parents and stayed at home with them.

My dad...

I don't think about that. Not ever.

That was a year ago.

I turn to leave the clothing store. I've interviewed at six other places in this mall, and I wonder if the store managers know me. I wonder if they discuss my answers, maybe in the food court at lunch, and if they joke about how red I get.

I know it isn't true. I know they don't think of me once they've gone home for the day. I might as well not exist. But in my paranoid thoughts, they analyze every tick and stray comment.

Maybe, I think, they don't hire me because I don't look like 'real' man. I'm not the guy you call to help move furniture. I'm not someone you'd put in the stockroom.

That's probably what they thought. They saw I was a guy applying and they needed someone to move boxes. I can't imagine it'd be hard work in a clothing store, but maybe their shelves are high or something.

I'm short. Super short. I have a friend who found out that I'm legally a dwarf. Or as he put it, *a midget*. I'm also on the skinny side, which means I look like a kid, and that manager guy might've thought I was lying about my age on the application. Maybe I should work that into my introduction.

Hi, I'm Collin. I'm legally a midget.

Heh. It might get a laugh.

But I'm not the happy, funny guy I pretend to be. I get along in customer service pretty well because I can force down my insecurities for a few hours a day. But in real life?

I'm shy. Painfully shy. I don't talk much and I barely know how to say hello to people I don't know. The workplace makes it easy because they give you the steps.

Hi. How are you? Would you like to sign up for our special loyalty program?

I can do that. But they'll never know, and as I walk out, I pretend I don't notice that every single person on a register is female. Most companies seem to want pretty, chatty girls in the checkout.

All of that is gone as the doors close behind me. I've left the super cool, stylish environment and stepped back into the real world, which is gray and ugly and has no place for me in it.

What am I going to do?

I pleaded and made excuses and stalled with my apartment manager as long as I could. Even if I got the job, I'd still be up shit creek. She's bringing the sheriff tomorrow to get me out of my place. That's what she said, banging on my door, shouting at me through it while I pretended not to be home.

So, what if I did the job? And got kicked out. What would I do then? Where would I rent with only that one place for rental history and no credit?

I've been researching homelessness a lot lately. There's places I can get food. There's resources to help me get a job, eventually. But there's nothing for what matters most, which is: *Where am I going to sleep? Where am I going to put my stuff? How do I get a shower?*

I chew my bottom lip as I walk through the parking lot. I'm going to live out here. But the question is, where exactly?

I look around for a dumpster. There isn't one in sight. Just the pretty glass storefront and the giant company sign, looking sophisticated and nice. *There's no homelessness here*, their storefront seems to say.

I'm in pretty low spirits, needless to say, as I start to wander. Nowhere really, just anywhere, looking around for a sign or help. I don't have a car, so I just start walking without a direction, sticking to the busy streets because neighborhoods won't do me any good. I walk into a few places and ask about hiring. I go into the sleazy places because they're the ones with paper applications and online takes too much time. I need a job today. I need a break.

And even that won't fix anything. I don't know what to do, and I do a lot of looking up, swirling around in my thoughts, wondering about myself as an organic entity, a thing on this planet that has to find a place and a purpose.

I fiddle with the pocket that has my cheap phone in it. I don't think about calling my parents, but I'm very aware of the object as I move around. There's the notion that I *could*. They've probably missed me. Maybe they've had a change of heart.

I think I could be calling them tomorrow when I'm kicked out of my place. But today I resolve that it'll never happen, I'll stick it out no matter what. I'll figure out how the bums live. I see them, so they must get by somehow. But maybe not here on the nicer side of town.

I change the direction of my steps. I'll get on the bus when I'm ready to go home and sleep under a roof for one last night, but right now, I just want to see. Maybe something will come to me out there.

The walk takes a long time, but it's my new mission for the day. I go for miles. I cross the bridge separating the prosperous side of town from the slums. Not that the difference is so stark, There's rich and poor places on both sides, but there's a noticeable change over here. It's crowded. People are more tired.

I get off the main road because I'm not even paying attention anymore. I get to someplace that has a lot of pawnshops. I've already pawned everything but my cheap-ass phone and my shitty laptop. I keep going.

It's between two of these WE BUY GOLD AND JEWELRY places that I find the little shop. It's squished in there, no space between the buildings on either side, and it's got no sign for its name nor advertisements for deals. But the door is open.

Now, I should have noticed something was wrong. The pawnshops on either side look like prisons with iron over every window and glass door, but this place is unprotected. There's a giant display window with no decals or lettering or anything. I could *almost* see through the lacy curtain.

I should've known something was up. In the nice part of town, sure, I can see a little gift shop like this. But out here? Man, I should've known.

But the funny thing is that I didn't think of it. The sun was setting and I knew it was getting time for me to get on that bus before this place became dangerous. And sitting in the window was a red sign with white letters read, *Help Wanted*. Underneath were the less-than-normal words in cursive lettering: *Will Pay Your Rent*.

I should've known. But I went right in.

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