Blood Princess

Dennis Lee

Prologue

Soft snow trickles from the sky.

The rain of white slowly paints the deserted park, coating the swings and slides in a layer of cold.

The ground is as white as the sky is black. The stars are as numerous as the flakes spiraling down from the heavens.

The girl stands up from the carcass on the ground. Her face is as pale as the snow. Her silky fair hair dances around her shoulders, playing with the breeze. Her white gown reaches to her knees, shivering in the cold light.

She wipes the blood from her mouth. A red droplet trickles down her chin and falls onto the ground, staining it. Alone in the white park, the only colour to be seen is the red of her lips and the red of the corpse.

My breath catches in my throat. Despite her monstrous nature, she is beautiful, a princess of the night. I feel the grip on my sword loosen.

She notices me and turns around. Her eyes are also red, like the blood on her lips. They begin to form words.

“Have you come for me?”

Chapter One: Two Sides of the Coin

“Alright everyone, take your positions on the starting line!”

Mr. Croyal, our ironically overweight PE teacher ushers us towards the field.

“That includes you, Bran. Get off your lazy ass and hope you make the time.”

I sigh and stand up from my position on the sidelines. Every year, Fifth Hill High enforces a compulsory fitness test – to run a mile within six minutes. If you fail, you have to undergo a mandatory program after school to get you back in shape. It’s a reasonable test by all means – I’m just not in the mood to run.

“Gonna come last again, Bran?”

Leo shoots me a smirk. Every single year I’ve always barely made the cut, coming in just at five minutes fifty-nine. It’s not that I can’t go faster, I just can’t be bothered.

I wordlessly step up to the starting line, which is now crowded with the thirty-odd people in class 3-C. On the bright side, this’ll be the last time I ever have to do this - unless university decides to implement the same program.

“On your mark…”

The students around me are casually chattering as usual. No one’s ever failed the test before, so their lack of concern is understandable.

“Set…”

I take a deep breath.

“GO!”

The front liners immediately bolt off into the distance. I struggle to emerge from the back, which is crowded by the majority of the class. Something shoves into me from the side, pushing me with such force that I go sprawling into the cold dirt.

I slowly look up, seeing Leo’s grin before he disappears off into the distance. He must have deliberately started from the back to sabotage me, knowing he would easily come first. It wasn’t a race by any means, but some people just have to win.

“Bran! Get up; you’re going to fall behind!”

Dennis extends a hand towards me.

“It’s alright. I’ll make it.”

“Are you sure?”

He’s really concerned. The mile isn’t a problem for Dennis either; so he can afford to try and help me. That’s just the sort of friend he is.

“Yeah. Just go.”

Dennis gives one more worried look before racing off into the distance. The group is nearly a hundred metres away, and people have begun to drift apart according to their physical abilities. Despite his start Leo is already at the forefront, nearly a whole lap completed.

“Come on, Bran. Don’t be the first one to fail this course, you’ll make me look bad,” Croyal growls from the sidelines.

I guess it can’t be helped.

I pull myself up to my feet and take off. My back foot sinks a little in the dirt from the force of my kick-off.

The ground begins to blur into a mix of white snow and brown dirt as I pick up speed. Without even realizing it, the adrenaline has begun to kick in.

Ah, to hell with it. It’s my last year, anyway.

I feel my heart pumping in my veins, providing a constant source of blood to my limbs as the distance between me and the group up ahead lessens. Within seconds, I’ve passed them. I hear a few shouts of surprise, but they’re lost in the roar of the wind.

One lap down. I’ve successfully caught up to the pack – there’s no way I’ll fail now.

But that’s not my goal.

I continue to run, my feet moving like a blur across the field. There are three more laps to go, and I’ve nearly halved the distance between Leo and I. Leo is an experienced athlete, probably the best in the school – but he’s only ever run to win races. That’s where the difference between us lies.

I’ve run to escape death, and to seek it.

The field curves away from me as I round the bend to the final lap. I’ve caught up to him now, and he shoots me a look of surprise out of the corner of his eye. Both of us are breathing hard, our bodies reaching their limits. If I’d started at the same time as him, I would have easily overtaken him.

“How…?” he gasps between breaths.

I ignore him and focus on my breathing. The rhythmic thump of our legs striking the ground echoes in my ears. The pounding of my heart blocks out all sounds from the outside world.

Before I know it, I’ve passed the finish line, several metres ahead of Leo. We both collapse onto the ground, sucking in air as if our lives depend on it. I see small black spots dancing around my vision.

“F-Four minutes thirty seconds,” Croyal breathes. “No way…”

It wasn’t surprising for Leo – but I had started at least fifteen seconds behind everyone else. The current world record for something like this was about three minutes forty, and for mere high school students even breaking four minutes forty was a feat in itself.

Of course, I could have gone a lot faster if I borrowed Nightfall’s power, but then that would be cheating.

“Why aren’t you in the track team?” Croyal mutters. “With you, we’d probably be able to reach the nationals without a problem.”

I shrug. Sports never interested me that much – in fact, nothing really did.

Leo is still panting, although he’s regained some of his posture. He wordlessly stands up and hobbles back to the outskirts of the field, picking up his bottle of water. I head after him, just as the next batch of runners begin finishing up.

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“Amazing,” Dennis says. “I never would have thought you were so good at running.”

We’re at our lockers, changing shoes before we go home. Around us, students are eagerly discussing plans for the afternoon, the weekend, or club activities. I’m not part of any clubs, so I usually just go straight home.

“I run a little every so often,” I say. Which isn’t a complete lie.

I finish slipping on my sneakers. Dennis gives me a look full of admiration. “Are you sure you don’t want to try out track? We really could do with someone like you.”

I shake my head. “Thanks for the offer, but I’ll pass. I’m really tired, I just want to go home and get some shut-eye.”

“You’re always tired. And hungry, too.”

“Well, I am a growing boy after all.”

Dennis smiles and waves. “Alright then. Guess I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Yep. Later.”

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As usual, Mum isn’t home. She’s probably going to be working another late night shift at the hospital – it’s been like this ever since Dad was killed, for no other reason than bad luck. The world can be a cruel place – one simple action, like a truck driver falling asleep on the wheel can ruin a family’s life forever.

“I’m home,” I call out, as I take off my shoes. Tossing my bag to the side, I immediately collapse onto the floor and close my eyes.

It’s not long before I hear the sound of footsteps approaching. Something tickles my face; something that smells and feels familiar. I open one eye to find my little sister staring at me.

“Hungry?” she asks. I push her veil of black hair away from my face and sit up.

“Yeah. Very.”

“I cooked something for you. You’re working again tonight, aren’t you?”

I nod, following Judith into the kitchen.

“You really shouldn’t push yourself too much. It makes me feel terrible seeing both you and Mum like this.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I brush her off. “I’m just helping her lighten the load, that’s all.”

Judith places a plate of rice and boiled vegetables before me.

“Oh come on. Where’s the meat?” I grumble.

“Please, Bran. You eat enough of that for breakfast and lunch. You need some greens to stay healthy.”

I grumpily dig at the carrot slices. Vegetables aren’t at the top of my list of favorite foods – then again, that probably goes for most people my age.

Except Judith – but that’s because she *only* has vegetables on her list.

“Come on, eat up,” she said. “Carrots help your night vision, you know.”

I stick a piece in my mouth and immediately wash it down with plenty of rice and water.

“How do you stand this?” I ask. “It tastes terrible.”

“The things that taste worst are usually the best for you.”

“They’re sometimes the worst too.”

I continue to munch on the food. Judith just watches me from across the table.

“Aren’t you going to have some?” I offer a spoonful of the dreaded substance.

“I’m not hungry yet. I have a normal sleeping cycle, unlike you.”

Fair enough.

“So how was your day?” I ask, attempting to make conversation.

“Good.”

She’s looking at her phone screen, scrolling down her notifications. I guess she’s not in the mood to talk.

Ah well. At least I tried.

“Thanks for the meal,” I say, shoveling the rest of the meal down my throat. “Appreciate it.”

“Sleep well, bro.”

And just like that, the day passes.

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Sometime during the night, my alarm blares to life. I quickly stop it before I wake anyone up, and get dressed.

It’s exactly midnight – when my day begins.

I quietly head out into the dark living room, slipping on a warm winter jacket. It’s been snowing a lot recently, unfortunately for me. It’s incredibly hard to move with speed and agility on snow, especially when your feet sink with each step.

Judith is sprawled over the table, sleeping. Her textbooks and stationery are scattered around her – she must have been studying late into the night again.

“And you tell us to take it easy,” I murmur with a smile.

I take the coat from the back of her seat and gently drape it around her shoulders. The door to Mum’s room is still open, so she probably hasn’t returned yet. Taking one last look around the house, I make sure all the windows are locked, the taps closed and the stoves turned off before I leave.

The cold winter air hits me like a truck when I step outside. I only ever feel truly active at night – ironically enough, when my prey are also at their most active. Specks of white are lightly drifting down from the grey skies, covering the earth in a fresh layer of snow. I catch a flake on my tongue. It tastes sweet.

The neighborhood is quiet, as it should be at this time of the night. The streets are deserted, a frozen landscape of unmoving white. I slowly trudge through the snow towards the city, beginning my patrol.

We humans are not alone in this world. The very fact that people dismiss them as myths just shows how cunning and intelligent they are.

Vampires, werewolves, trolls, imps, goblins, gnomes… these monsters existed in real life and still exist now. They’ve just learned to conceal traces of their passing and live alongside us. Together, they are grouped under the umbrella term ‘demons’.

And I am a demon hunter.

I can already smell blood when I reach the city. Something has been on the hunt tonight. In fact, it’s been hunting for several days now.

Following my instincts, I stride into one of the numerous back alleys around Ashbrook. The stench grows stronger, permeating through the air and invading my senses. I wrap my jacket closer around me to ward from the cold and forge onward.

Upon turning the corner, I see them.

There are five of them – a pack no doubt. They are small beings, hunched over a carcass in the darkness. Small horns protrude from their scaly skin, and their lips are coated with blood. In the day, they would most likely take the form of young children. In the night, they would come out to feed.

The imps raise their heads towards me. I immediately know that they weren’t the ones who killed this person. Imps are scavengers, like vultures, and only eat leftovers. However when they feel threatened, they won’t hesitate to attack – especially when they have the advantage in numbers.

They must think I’m just an ordinary boy.

The lead imp makes the decision, removing itself from the mutilated corpse. Bits and pieces of flesh still line its lips as it snarls quietly. I face them head on in the lightless alleyway.

“Come to me, Nightfall,” I whisper.

I feel a tugging at my conscious as my Divine Edge flares to life in my right hand. This is the meaning of what it is to be a demon hunter. This is the power we possess, which allows us to fight, and become the hunters.

The black blade is cool to the touch. A black, misty aura surrounds it, singing of death and darkness. I feel its power coursing through me, a familiar presence in my body. It *is* a manifestation of my soul after all.

The imps seem taken aback by the summoning of Nightfall, but it’s too late for them to retreat. As one, the five shapes come flying towards me, fangs bared.

I take one step forward. I’ve fought countless demons, and these imps are small fry compared to what I’ve seen. Bringing Nightfall around I cleave effortlessly through the first one, twist to dodge the next two, and slam the pommel into the fourth one. The fifth imp manages to rake its claws across my cheek, but doesn’t do anything more than that.

Feeling the cold air biting in my wound, I lunge forward and stab into that imp’s head. Wrenching it out, I then whirl around to avoid two swipes before decapitating their owners in one swing. Heads fall onto the ground, landing in a bloody heap.

Only one imp remains, the one which I’d stunned with the pommel of my hilt. Fear lines its scaly face as it turns to flee, but I catch up to it in three quick strides and impale it.

The falling snow is already beginning to bury the dead bodies, but the red leaking from them won’t be hidden that easily. Wiping the blood from my cheek, I head over to where the dead body is.

It’s a man. His body has been torn apart, and I can see his lifeless innards inside his torso. Bits and pieces have been ripped out, no doubt by the imps, but I can tell that the majority of the damage was caused before they arrived. It looks to be the same work as the other murders – the telltale shredding of the torso tells me that much. The man is also missing a surprising amount of blood.

Nightfall shimmers and dissipates as I unsummon it. Turning back to the five imp corpses, I snap a photo with my smartphone before punching a number in. The tone rings for a bit before someone answers.

“I’ve got a mess that needs cleaning up,” I say. “Better hurry up, before anyone else comes.”

Chapter Two: Ten Thousand

“Bran!”

I shift around into a more comfortable position.

“Brannny!”

A hand gently rouses me from my slumber. I raise my head violently, a trail of drool dripping from my mouth.

Ah, crap.

“Come on, Branny. I know it makes my job easier and all, but I’d prefer it if you paid attention to my classes.”

My biology teacher, Mrs. Kuksal, glares disapprovingly over me. A small, middle-aged and chubby woman, she’s been calling me ‘Branny’ ever since I ended up in her class. She tends to pick on me quite often – if I didn’t know better, I’d swear she just enjoyed saying my name.

“Sorry, Miss.”

“See me after class. I want to have a little chat with you.”

I meekly nod as she goes back to explaining the steps of the practical.

“You reckon you’re going to get a detention?” Dennis whispers from out of the corner of his mouth.

I massage my eyelids, slowly regaining my senses. I didn’t get much sleep after taking care of those demons this morning, so I’m still a little tired. “Maybe. She hasn’t given me one yet, but there’s a first time for everything I suppose.”

We continue to listen as she describes the parts of the frog we’ll need to pay special attention to, and the specific parts we’ll need to cut. There’s a trolley with rows of frozen frog corpses, ready for us to dissect. I can already see some of the weak-hearted girls cringing at the thought of cutting into flesh.

“Alright, everyone. I want one person from each pair to now come up and take a sample. Don’t push, there’s enough for everyone. I don’t want anyone getting hurt.”

There’s a mass rustling of stools being dragged from their desks and people leaving them. Dennis nods at me and heads towards the equipment cabinet – I guess I’ll be in charge of picking up the specimen and the scalpels.

Instead of forming an orderly line everyone crowds around the trolley, eager to be the first to receive a dead frog. I find myself at the back alongside the slower and more reluctant people, waiting my turn. I end up picking up a scalpel and some of the other tools first while I wait.

When my turn finally arrives and I’ve gotten my frozen frog-on-a-plate, someone nudges my elbow from the side. The dead creature goes falling onto the floor, landing with a *splat*.

“Oops,” Leo says. “My bad. It was an accident.”

Before I can respond, he bends down and picks up the frog with a gloved hand. In the process, he makes a long gash along its belly with his other hand, which holds a scalpel.

That bastard.

“Sorry about that,” he apologizes, plopping the ruined frog on my plate.

*You’re not sorry at all.*

He returns to a few of his friends, who begin sniggering. I sigh and head back to Dennis with the corpse.

“What happened here?” he asks.

“Dropped it,” I reply. There’s no point getting him involved. Dennis seems to catch on, and dismisses the issue.

“Let’s get started then.”

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Almost an hour later, we finish up and throw out the remains of the bodies. I’ve seen plenty of blood and gore, but not everyone is like me. One boy fainted and had to be taken to the nurse’s office.

“I want everyone to write up this practical and hand it in tomorrow,” Kuksal’s voice rings out across the classroom.

“Yes Miss,” we respond in a monotonous chorus.

I finish rinsing the equipment we used and place it back on the trolley. The bin is already filling up with the bloodied corpses of frog bits and pieces. Some are still recognizable; others not so much. There’s always a few who get trigger-happy – or in this case, scalpel-happy and end up just stabbing randomly for fun.

The bell for the end of school rings, and we are dismissed. My classmates begin streaming out of the lab group by group. I wait patiently for everyone to leave.

“You can go,” I say to Dennis. “Don’t worry about me. You don’t want to be late for club activities, do you?”

Dennis nods. “Alright then. Good luck.”

With that, he leaves the lab, closing the door behind him. Only Mrs. Kuksal and I are left.

“You wanted to see me?” I ask, standing before her desk.

Kuksal finishes tidying up her folders and looks up. Her piggy eyes bore deep into me, but I hold her gaze. “Is everything alright, Branny?”

“What do you mean? I was just tired, that’s all. Sorry.”

She shakes her head. “You should sleep better then. Is there anything going on at home? Anything that I can help with? Is there a reason you’re not getting enough sleep?”

A silence drifts between us. For a moment, I’m tempted to tell her, if only for the comedic value.

*Yeah, I’m actually out placing my life on the line every night to hunt demons. I’m forced to get what little sleep I can in the afternoon and the few hours before school.*

“I’m fine,” I say instead, holding my tongue. “It’s just been a little hard at home lately. I’m working to try and help my Mum out with the bills.”

Mrs. Kuksal adjusts her reading glasses. I can almost see her thought process. She detects some of it as the truth – which it is – but she knows there’s something more I’m not telling her. It must be women’s intuition.

“If you ever need anything, don’t hesitate to talk to me,” she says. “Or any of the teachers, for that matter. We have a counsellor too, don’t forget about her. I’m just concerned for you, okay?”

“Yep. No problem.”

I nod and try a reassuring smile. It probably looks like I choked on something foul instead.

“Honestly… it’s not like your grades are bad or anything; I just think you have so much potential. If you weren’t always nodding off or spacing out, I think you could do quite well.”

‘Spacing out’… I guess she hasn’t completely seen through me yet then. Most of the times I ‘space out’ I’m actually half-asleep, with my eyes open too.

“Thanks,” I reply.

“Alright then. Please try not to lose focus again. I might have to have a chat with your mother if this keeps up.”

*Good luck with that,* I think. *She doesn’t even have time to spend talking with her family, let alone you.*

I bow my head before leaving the classroom. Before I do, I acknowledge all those poor frog souls who sacrificed their lives in the name of science to educate us.

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By the time I arrive at the school gates ready to leave, most people have either gone home or immersed themselves in their circle and club activities. Before I can step past the threshold, a voice calls out to me from the side.

“Bran! Did you get in trouble? You’re later than usual.”

A black ponytail blurs before my vision, shortly before something latches onto my arm. Something that’s too tall and well-developed to be Judith.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I say, gently shaking her off. I will never understand why this person insists on pursuing me.

“Are you heading home? Let’s go together!”

No matter how hard I try and turn her down, she doesn’t – or refuses to – take the hint. I don’t have the heart to tell her I’m not interested, either.

“Sorry, I’m going somewhere else. I have to take care of some personal business.”

A downcast look takes over her face.

“Maybe some other time,” I mutter. As usual, I just can’t force myself to be too cold.

“Aww… just when I was given a day off too…”

It’s not that she’s not attractive or anything; quite the contrary in fact. I just have too much going on to try and juggle a relationship – plus, I’m not quite sure how long I’d be able to keep my ‘part-time job’ a secret for. I wouldn’t want to drag her into the world of ANGEL for no good reason.

I awkwardly look around, trying to think of what to say next when I’m saved by the person I least expected.

“Ashley!”

I immediately try and turn away, but judging from the sharp intake of breath I know it’s too late.

Leo’s furious face has appeared in the distance, coming to a halt a few metres away from us.

“What are you doing here? You should be practicing; the tournament is in a little less than a week!”

He’s dressed in a white uniform – the uniform of the karate club. He sees me and his eyes immediately harden.

Another reason why I’d prefer not to get involved with Ashley – she’s Leo’s kid sister. They’re in the same grade, but were born on opposite ends of the year. Probably another reason why he always picks on me.

“I got a day off,” she complains. “I hate practicing all the time, sometimes I just want to have fun or relax. I’m not a machine, you know.”

Leo scowls. “Come on, Ashley. You have a bright future ahead of you, especially if you help us win this upcoming tournament. Don’t hang out with people like him; they’ll just drag you down with them.”

I hold myself back from launching a fist into his face. He doesn’t know it, but I’m probably just as capable, if not more, in a fight. I’d rather it stayed that way.

“He’s right,” I say. “Not about the dragging down part, but you should really get as much training in as possible. Give it your all, that way you won’t have any regrets at the end.”

Ashley looks between us before finally sighing. “All right, Leo. Let’s go.”

She reluctantly looks at the space beside me, as if she wanted to be there. Not that I’ve ever walked home or gone on a date with her, of course. I suppose she and Leo aren’t that different in that sense. If they want something, they’ll try their hardest to get it.

“You’d better make it up to me,” she mutters. “I swear you’re never available on the weekends… and I never see you at school either.”

Huh. Since when was I obliged to spend time with her? But before I can mention this, she’s already begun stalking back to the main building. Leo stares at me for a while longer, an unseen message passing between us.

“Alright, alright,” I say.

“You’re lucky she likes you, or I’d make your life even worse than it already is.”

That... would be troublesome.

“You’d better make sure she’s happy, or you’ll have me to deal with,” he continues, before turning to follow his sister back into the school.

I suppose if you look at it this way, Leo and I aren’t all that different either. It seems like we’re both similarly over-protective of our family.

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The previous diversion aside, I’m finally able to reach my destination without further trouble. The old apartment block towers above me, practically trembling in the wind. I climb the cracked steps to the fifth floor and stride down the corridor to a battered old door, the number ‘Five’ screwed above it. The other number fell off long ago, but the numbers ‘Fifty-Four’ and ‘Fifty-Six’ on the doors on either side of it mean it could only have been another five.

*Knock, Knock.*

I’m a little tentative with my knocking. Despite my common sense, it feels like simply tapping the door could bring it, along with the apartment, down on me.

“Come in.”

She’s home, as usual.

I gently push the door open and step inside, bracing myself for the wave of hot smoke that hits me. If I ever get lung cancer, I’m going to sue this woman for being the most likely cause behind it.

She sits in the middle of the room before her desk, poring over documents. A cigarette sticks out from her lips, almost like an extension of her body. In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever seen her without a cigarette to her lips; or even outside of this room for that matter. Sometimes I wonder if this woman ever leaves it. Does she have a family? Friends? Things she enjoys outside of work?

“Come here for your payment, have you?” she mutters without looking up.

“To the point as usual, Shizuka.”

The woman’s name is Hirano Shizuka, ANGEL’s Director of District Fifteen. A buxom Asian beauty of twenty-nine years, she handles all affairs that go on within Ashbrook and its surrounding cities – i.e. District Fifteen.

“Five lesser imps. Not bad, but not particularly spectacular either. At ANGEL’s standard rate, that warrants you a hundred dollars.”

I nod. That’s reasonable - ANGEL isn’t known for being particularly generous, even if it’s funded by the government. Shizuka quickly signs off a check and hands it to me, taking another long puff.

“You should stop smoking,” I say as I accept the slip of paper. “You’ll never find a decent guy if you smoke.”

Shizuka narrows her eyes. “What makes you think I haven’t found one already?”

I shrug. “Just a hunch.”

Judging by the furious look on her face, I’ve hit the bullseye. She quickly recomposes herself and clasps her hands together. “Stay out of adults’ business kid.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Despite the way she speaks and acts sometimes, she was actually quite a prestigious name back in the day. They still teach ANGEL recruits using some examples of situations she’s been in.

“So what’s the latest news on the block?”

“I’m pretty sure you already know, but there’s something out there killing people. From the limited information we have, our bets are on a feral demon that’s recently found its way to civilization.”

I nod. I’d already suspected as much, with the rather amateur way it had killed that man last night.

“How many has that been?” I ask.

Shizuka blows a puff of smoke to the side. “Three. It won’t be long before it makes the news. We’ve raised the bounty of this particular demon to ten thousand dollars.”

I nearly choke on my tongue. “*Ten* thousand? That’s a hundred times more than what I earned today!”

“It’s proven itself to be incredibly dangerous,” she says. “And we have to exterminate it before the general public gets wind of it. We’re lucky enough that we’ve reached most of these incidents before they have, but it’s only a matter of time. The Minister of Defense won’t be pleased if we cause a panic.”

“Ten thousand,” I mutter, her words falling on deaf ears.

“Hey, Bran. Don’t be rash, make sure you’re fully prepared before you try taking it on. The first rule we teach ANGEL recruits is that you never engage unless you have a ninety percent chance of survival. I know you don’t tend to follow our rules since you were an outsider and all, but please be careful.”

Even the government knows that asking for a hundred percent is too much. Fighting demons can be a dangerous task.

“Got it,” I say. That ten thousand is as good as mine.

“I’ve notified hunters in charge of the other regions of Fifteen, but the killer’s been turning up mostly around here. If you ever need backup, don’t hesitate to ask.”

I’m already standing up, getting ready to leave. I’ll finally be able to take a break if I kill this thing.

“Ten thousand,” I mutter again. I feel Shizuka’s eyes on me as I leave the room, already thinking of how I’ll spend the money.

Chapter Three: First Encounter

It’s snowing again.

I wearily slap my cheeks in the cold, trying to wake myself up. Writing up that dissection practical took longer than I expected. It wasn’t that I didn’t get enough sleep – I just wantedmore, as opposed to needed more.

Before I start walking anywhere I stare down the street-lit road, thinking. With a bounty of ten thousand placed on this demon’s head, I’ve decided to alter my usual patrol route. Instead of just walking a circle around the city I’m thinking about heading along the outskirts of the residential district, bordering the woods.

The demon is feral, and will thus probably stay in its old home in the wild until it attains a better grasp of how society works. Assuming it’s nocturnal due to biological reasons or convenience, I might be able to catch it as it leaves the woods in search of a target.

I may be reading too much into the situation, but better that than stabbing in the dark.

My gambit pays off when I hear a stifled choke in the distance, not too far from here. My feet are moving before my brain can even give the command.

*I hope I’m not too late.*

I’m running at full speed, gliding over the landscape. Flecks of snow whirl around me as I blast through, skimming across the powdery ground. I call out to Nightfall in my mind and feel it respond, its reassuring presence touching my right hand.

Over there.

I skid to a halt and make a sharp turn, leaping over a fallen branch. The snow-covered concrete gives way to dirt.

I’ve arrived.

Soft snow trickles from the sky.

The rain of white slowly paints the deserted park, coating the swings and slides in a layer of cold.

The ground is as white as the sky is black. The stars are as numerous as the flakes spiraling down from the heavens.

The girl stands up from the carcass on the ground. Her face is as pale as the snow. Her silky fair hair dances around her shoulders, playing with the breeze. Her white gown reaches to her knees, shivering in the cold light.

She wipes the blood from her mouth. A red droplet trickles down her chin and falls onto the ground, staining it. Alone in the white park, the only colour to be seen is the red of her lips and the red of the corpse.

My breath catches in my throat. Despite her monstrous nature, she is beautiful, a princess of the night. I feel the grip on my sword loosen.

She notices me and turns around. Her eyes are also red, like the blood on her lips. They begin to form words.

“Have you come for me?”

I’m frozen in awe for a moment, as frozen as the ground I’m standing on. Her words flew right past my ears.

“Have you come for me?” she asks again, licking the blood away from her mouth.

This time, I’m able to answer.

“Demon,” I say. “Get away from him.”

The girl takes a few steps away from the corpse. I can’t make it out clearly, but it’s probably in the same mangled state as the previous ones.

“This ends tonight,” I declare. “You’ve caused enough trouble as it is. As much as I’d like to, I’m not going to let you increase that bounty of yours any further.”

Her face is expressionless as she softly replies. “You are mistaken.”

For a second, the way she voices it almost makes me doubt myself. Then, as quickly as that thought flickers by, it’s gone.

She almost had me entranced with her appearance alone. I won’t let her do it again.

Without warning I leap forward, Nightfall’s power feeding strength into my limbs. With its aid, the several dozen metres between us are closed in a single bound, a feat incapable of any ordinary human. Now right up in her face, I realize just how beautiful she is.

No. That’s just another of their tools, making them the ultimate predators. It’s exactly the sort of self-defense something like a succubus would use to deter her prey. If I can just bypass this, Nightfall will handle the rest-

*Clang.*

Moonlight comes and parries my blow.

For a moment, confusion takes over my mind. What just happened?

I look at where Nightfall has stopped, inches away from her body. I thought it was a beam of moonlight, but now I that I’m able to catch a closer glimpse I realize it’s a weapon; a longsword to be precise. Whereas Nightfall is as black as the night, this blade looks as pure and silver as the moon. A shimmering aura of the same colour drifts from it, interweaving with Nightfall’s own blackness.

“A Divine Edge,” I whisper.

It’s not unheard of for a demon to possess such a weapon. After all, they possess souls too – as black as they are. However, this is the first time I’ve ever come across such a pure Edge.

Recovering from my shock, I quickly launch another series of attacks. Each swing cuts swiftly and efficiently towards her, aiming to surpass her guard, but each is blocked effortlessly. The sound of our blades meeting rings across the playground like bells.

This is bad. I’ve already given it everything I’ve got and she’s swatted it aside without batting an eye. It’s not that I’m incompetent – she is just on a completely different level.

I immediately disengage, leaping back a fair distance. This calls for a regrouping and change of plans.

She’s a demon for sure, there’s no doubt about it. No ordinary human could stand in the cold in only a white frock, not to mention the fact that I caught her red-handed – or rather, red-mouthed.

“I’m not your enemy,” she says, still holding the sword before her. “As to whether or not I’m your ally, that remains to be seen.”

Damnit. What do I do? This could all be a trick…

“Take a closer look at him,” she says, interrupting my thoughts. “Do I look like I killed him?”

She steps back, beckoning for me to come closer. After noticing my wary eyes on her sword, she immediately dismisses it and raises her palms, a gesture of good will. I tentatively take one step, and then another forward, until the dead man’s body is right before my shoes.

His chest has been ripped apart as usual, but this time his innards aren’t spilling everywhere. I don’t know if it’s because there weren’t imps around this time, or if the killer is getting smarter.

“It doesn’t look like my work, does it?” she asks. “If I’d killed him, my hands would be stained red.”

She’s got a point. The way the wound was opened looks like it was wrenched open by vicious claws, or extremely long nails. The way her nails are so shortly cut, a wound opened up by those fingers would look completely different.

“Then why?” I ask. “You had his blood on your lips. Are you a scavenger?”

I haven’t completely lowered my guard as I watch her out of the corner of my eye. Even if she most likely outclasses me, I won’t go down without a fight.

“I was trying to determine the time and cause of death,” she explains.

A frown creases my forehead. “From his blood alone?”

It hits me before she can answer.

“You’re a vampire.”

She nods. “I have reason to believe that one of my own is doing the killing. Feral vampires are victim to their instincts, and will viciously attack the source of the prey’s blood without restraint. As a result, the prey is usually killed outright; their hearts ripped out of their chests much like in this case.”

“What’s a normal vampire attack like then? Do you kill them in a more elegant fashion or something?”

Her lips curl in distaste as she shakes her head. “If that were the case, you humans would have wiped us out a long time ago. No, we modern vampires have mostly chosen to integrate with society and become vegetarians – that is, drinking only animal blood, and usually just enough so they don’t die.”

“Vegetarian vampires?” I scoff. “That’s the stupidest thing I’ve heard.”

“Then you clearly haven’t heard enough,” she snaps. “Just as some humans are vegetarians, some vampires also prefer not to kill living animals. Even if we wanted to, the only way we can survive is by adhering to your rules. Despite our power, humans have proven time and time again that their strength in numbers is not to be underestimated.”

At this rate, I think she would have attacked me by now if she were out to kill me. Dismissing Nightfall, I grab my phone and take aim at the corpse.

“What makes you so sure it’s the work of a feral vampire?” I ask, touching the screen. A bright flash lights up the park. The girl winces at the light.

“All the blood types of the victims have been O type. To a vampire nothing provides more power and is more delicious than O type blood, so it makes sense for the killer to target these victims, if it’s following its instincts.”

As she says this, a strange hunger takes over her red eyes – but disappears within a single blink. At this moment, I realize my blood type is also O.

Turning flash off, I take another, less successful photo of the corpse. “So why then?” I ask. “We demon hunters aren’t exactly best friends with demons. Why are you helping me?”

“It’s simply in both our best interests,” she says. “ANGEL does not currently know we are coexisting with humans. However, if this feral vampire is allowed to continue on its rampage, our existence may become jeopardized. If they try and flush out a rat from a house and instead find a whole nest, there’s no doubt they’d try and exterminate us – and you’ve experienced first-hand how powerful we are, as low as we number. I’m sure you wouldn’t want a war to kick off right in your hometown.”

“What makes you think that?” I test.

Her eyes immediately harden, becoming ice cold. I unconsciously shift as I pick up the dangerous shift in her body language. “Don’t make me regret this, human. I dislike killing, but if you pose a threat to my species then I will not hesitate to finish our… battle.”

…Well, I’m convinced.

“I guess I could use your help,” I say. “Is that all you figured out from that blood sample? Is there anything else?”

The girl looks distractedly to the side. “Huh? Oh, right. The vampire shouldn’t be too far from here. By the time I arrived, the man had only been dead for a few minutes.”

At this moment, something clicks in my mind.

“It could still be here,” I say.

*Vampires prefer O-type blood.*

*Aren’t I also-*

Two things slam into me at once. The girl, who I’m assuming tried to push me out of the way but was too late to do so, and the feral vampire. We go flying towards the swings in a cluster of skin, nails and hair. My head hits the metallic pole hard.

Before my trembling vision, I can briefly make out the figure of the girl as she shoves the humanoid creature off. She took the brunt of the impact and her white dress is now torn around the waist. I can see a wound that completely goes through her abdomen and out the other side - however, blood flowing from it is already beginning to stem.

I grab ahold of the ground and try to stand up, but my head isn’t having any of it. A sharp pain assaults my stomach, which I instinctively clutch at. My hand comes away red.

I lift my head up and see the girl facing off against the creature. Its hair is uncut and tangled, and its face is gaunt. The ragged garb it wears gives the impression that it hasn’t had a change of clothes since it was born.

My vision blurs, and darkness begins to creep in from the edges. I can’t feel anything – the white ground before me is already starting to darken. Is that dark colour red? I can’t tell. The world is already fading to a monochrome colour.

The last thing I see is the silver blade flaring to life in the girl’s hand.

I feel so cold.

Chapter Four: Pact

I’m drifting in nothingness. Something warm and comforting is tugging at me, leading me along an invisible path. I don’t know where I am, or how I got here – I just know that it’s warm, and I’m so cold.

I’m dimly aware of sounds and sensations around me, but my brain is too muddled to distinguish them. I hear a girl’s voice, and I feel my body being probed by rough hands. Every time I’m touched, there’s a wrenching at my body. I firmly cling on to the warm presence leading me away.

*Damnit… just leave me be…*

It feels like I’m underwater – this sensation of drifting, of sounds not quite reaching my ears. It’s like I’m sinking further and further into the ocean.

“Let’s hope this works. You look like you can handle it.”

For some reason, I hear those words clearly. Before I can register what this means, I feel my nostrils being pinched and my mouth being opened.

*Leave me alone!*

I’m caught between a tug-of-war between what lies outside the realm and what lies inside. Whatever this voice is doing to my body is preventing the presence from whisking me away.

Then, something warm, sticky and… FoUL tips dOwWN my THROatttt-

BURninGG… BURniNng… FiRe in MY thrOAT- PAIN PAIN-

BLIND BliNDinG CAN’T feeEEL HuRTTTT

EverRYTHInG HuRRRTTTTS HURTSS HuRTS hurTS SO mUCH

Pai N my Mi ND Ca NT SE E Fe EE Ls s o PAI Nfu l

CHo KiNG bu RN ING Dro WNINg si Nk INgggg

S IN kIN gg.. . Sin KIN g… sInk I Ng. .. si nnking…

In to.. DaRk.ness..

DarKNess…

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I wake up.

I’m in a dark room – someone’s bedroom by the looks of it. It’s simply decorated without much furniture – just a desk, a shelf and a bed. I don’t see any possessions or anything of interest which might indicate whose room it is. The books are mostly classical books, ones which I wouldn’t be seen anywhere near.

Wait a second… how am I able to see the titles of those books in the pitch darkness?

The moment I think this, I realize there’s a dull throbbing in my head. My lips are also parched, and my throat is burning.

Water. I need water.

I roll out of bed and try to stand up, but collapse. My naked torso is exposed to the cool room. I realize that my body is burning, and slick with sweat. Thick bandages are wrapped around my abdomen, and I can see a large patch of dried blood which has leaked through.

Need… water…

Just as this thought hits my mind, the door opens and dazzling light fills the room. I cry out in pain, closing my eyes. I can already see black spots dancing around my vision.

“You made it.”

I feel a hand lift me to my feet. Slowly and steadily, I open my eyes – first a tiny squint, and then gradually more and more until my eyes have adjusted to the light.

It’s the girl. Wait, what girl?

Then, the events from that night pass through my head.

“Where am I?” I almost shriek. “What happened? What did you do to me?”

She wordlessly shakes me off and offers her hand which is holding a massive two litre bottle of water. All these questions slip my mind as I yank it from her, guzzling it down in a matter of seconds. Before I know it, half the bottle’s gone and my stomach is bloated. I feel the liquid sloshing around as I hand it back to her.

The parched feeling in my throat is still there. Why? Why am I still thirsty?

“Looks like it worked,” she says. “You’re one of us now.”

My mind must have been incredibly slow, because the signs were painfully obvious. The increased sensitivity to light, the sharp night vision, the unquenchable thirst…

“You… turned me… into a vampire,” I whisper. My knees give way beneath me and I sink to the floor.

It’s over. I’m a demon now, one of them. There’s no way ANGEL will maintain ties with me. How am I going to tell Mum and Judith? How am I going to live with them without thirsting for their blood?

“You bitch,” I say. “You did this… this was your plan all along wasn’t it!?”

I’m on my feet before I know it. I’ve grabbed her by the shoulders and pushed her against the wall, pinning her. She doesn’t respond, or try to resist.

“I didn’t plan for any of this. It was just bad luck,” she replies coolly.

I’m trembling. She looks at me with her deep red eyes, eyes which mine are probably now the same colour as.

Shit. What am I doing? This isn’t like me…

I release her and step back, panting. There are dark bruises on her shoulders where my hands were, but right before my eyes they begin to lighten and fade away.

“Drink this,” she says, holding out another, smaller bottle of red liquid. “You’ll feel better.”

I hesitantly take the bottle. “What type of blood is this?”

“It’s not human blood, rest assured.”

I’m still doubtful, but my thirst gets the better of me. I grab the bottle and down it without taking a breath.

“Is this water?” I ask. It tastes exactly the same as the bottle she’d given me earlier.

No… but this time, my thirst is gone.

“It’s animal blood. I haven’t experienced this first hand, but from what I hear, it’s like a nicotine patch for a chain smoker. It fulfils our needs, but not our wants – and will never be as satisfying as the real thing.”

I stare at the empty bottles in my hand. I’ve calmed down a lot, and can now think clearly. The throbbing in my head is gone. The first thing that comes to my mind is how I’m going to hide my recently attained status.

“That feral vampire pierced right through us both,” she now says, beginning to answer my questions. “I survived because of our accelerated recovery at night – but you were fatally wounded. The only way was to turn you into one of us, by feeding you my blood.”

So that was what the sensation was. She’d bled herself and turned me into one of them. I still shudder at the memory of the pain I was subjected to back then.

“What about the feral vampire?” I ask. “Did you kill him?”

She shook her head. “The moment I drew my Divine Edge, it fled. It must have realized it would die if it continued to face me.”

Divine Edge. Would mine still work?

“You will still be able to use yours,” she says, as if reading my mind. “Your soul is still the same. It is merely your body that has changed.”

I slump down onto the side of the bed. I just feel tired now.

“So what do I need to know now that I’m a vampire?” I ask. “There’re probably a few secrets you hold that aren’t in ANGEL’s monster manual. Am I going to be vulnerable to garlic? Running water? The holy cross?”

The girl gives a small smile. “No, nothing like that. Firstly, you are only a half-vampire – as such, your strengths and weaknesses will be diminished compared to true vampires. You will be stronger in the day than a full blooded vampire, but weaker in the night. Your pupils will be more sensitive to light and will take longer to adjust to changes in brightness. You will need to feed at least once a week or risk going mad with craving. In exchange for this, you will gain heightened senses, strength and speed. Your body’s self-healing speed will improve phenomenally at night, and you will be resistant to cold. Other than that, everything else will remain the same – you need sleep, food and water, just like an ordinary human.”

“What about my physical appearance?” I ask. “Do I get fangs? Can I turn into a bat or a wolf?”

Her eyes narrow. “No. When Bram Stoker wrote Dracula, he glorified many aspects of our race. The only physical differences are our red eyes, which we can cover with contact lenses. Rest assured your friends and family will not be able to tell the difference.”

She steps out into the corridor, gesturing for me to come after her. I tentatively do so, covering my eyes as they adjust to a new level of lighting.

“You need to get some food inside you,” she says. “You haven’t eaten for almost two days.”

I almost stop dead in my tracks. “Hold on… two days?”

The girl nods. “The transition from human to half-vampire takes a while. It took longer than most for you probably because you are a Divine Edge wielder and thus your soul is bonded more strongly to your body, which is why it reacted more harshly to the change and tried to reject it.”

Ugh… Mum and Judith are going to be worried sick if I don’t tell them anything…

“I told your mother you got drunk at a party and were crashing at my place,” she mentions.

“Wh-What? How did you get my number?”

“Your wallet.”

…Of course. I keep my home phone number in there just in case anything happens. Guess it was the right call this time - though I’m not sure how my family would react to me staying over at a girl’s place.

“Eat up.”

We’ve arrived at the kitchen. There are three boxes of pizza stacked on the benchtop. It’s only after the heavenly scent reaches my nostrils that I realize just how hungry I am.

“It’s on the house,” she says in response to my look. “I put you through this so I have to take some form of responsibility.”

That was all I needed. Without restraint, I open the lid of the first box.

It’s a vegetarian pizza.

Putting that aside for now, I open the next one… and the one after that.

They’re all the same.

“Why…?” I ask. “Where’s the meat?”

“I’m not sure you’d like it,” she says. “Vampires don’t eat meat.”

I stare hungrily at the pizza. I hate vegetables, but right now I’m so hungry I could eat anything. I grab three pieces at once and begin stuffing my face in a very un-gentlemanlike manner.

“Why’s that?” I ask, not even bothering to empty my mouth before I speak. Screw manners, I’m too hungry for that.

“To a vampire, a piece of meat devoid of blood is the most tasteless thing you can imagine,” the girl says, slightly wincing as a crumb of pizza nearly hits her. “If I were to describe it… it tastes like a packet of chips without the chips.”

I’m still a bit dubious, but I suppose there’ll be plenty of time to experiment when I get home. It’s barely been a few minutes, and I’ve already finished two of the pizzas. I’m not sure if it’s because of my hunger or my status as a half-vampire, but I feel like there’s no end to my stomach.

“Bran Lietmann.”

At the sound of my name being called, I stop. “Hm?”

“You have a younger sister, right?”

I carefully nod. “How did you know?”

I didn’t think I’d left any hints about her in my wallet.

“Just a guess. You look like a responsible elder brother.”

“Uh… thanks.”

That reminds me. I still don’t know this girl’s name.

“What do I call you by the way?”

She replies as if she’s been waiting for me to ask all this time. “Alice. Alice Vancratt.”

Alice is about to extend a hand, but thinks better of it when she sees how greasy mine are.

“How old are you? One hundred? Two hundred?”

Her face twitches, but other than that she reveals nothing else of her annoyance. “That’s a rude question to ask, Bran. I’ll have you know vampires age normally like humans, despite having a natural immunity to disease. I am seventeen years and six months old, a few months younger than you.”

I feel my face flushing as she berates me. I guess I deserved that.

It doesn’t take much longer before I finish my meal. I look longingly at the empty boxes, but my body is already telling me it’s full.

“So now what?” I ask. “I should probably head home before Mum gets worried. It’s still Sunday morning, right?”

“There’s one thing we have to do before that,” Alice replies. “We’d best get this over and done with. After this we can work out the other details, like how to catch the feral vampire.”

“And what might this thing be?” I ask. I’m feeling extremely content after satisfying all of my body’s urges. At this point, I’m up for anything.

“I have to introduce you to my father.”

…almost anything.

Chapter Five: The Blood Lord

The gaping entrance in the side of the wall is dark and seems to stretch on forever. I can’t seem to make out where it ends, even with my recently attained night vision.

“In here?” I mutter, trying not to breathe in the putrid stench.

Alice nods. We followed the Ashbrook River a fair distance away from the city and are now standing before what is supposed to be the entrance to the sewers. The ground is muddy (at least I hope it’s mud) and wet, but thankfully the water level isn’t particularly high. It stopped snowing a while back and the sun’s come out to shine, much to my annoyance. I now know what Alice meant when she said we were ‘weaker’ in the sun – I feel a light tinge of lethargy following me everywhere I go, one that was never present before.

Alice takes one more look around, making sure we weren’t followed, and heads fearlessly into the dark. She hasn’t been walking for long when she looks back and realizes I haven’t taken a single step.

“Come on, you’ll get used to the smell,” she urges.

I swallow. It’s not the smell that puts me off…

“Coming,” I yelp. I have to put on a brave front before her.

As we head deeper and deeper into the tunnel, the light behind us gradually shrinks to a small white dot. My lethargy is gone but replaced by another, worse feeling. Despite the coolness, I’m beginning to sweat.

“How long is it going to take?” I ask, trying to keep my voice under control. Alice glances back with a puzzled look.

“We aren’t even halfway there yet.”

She stops and takes a few steps towards me, bringing her face up close.

“You’re sweating,” she says. “Are you feeling alright?”

Before I can respond that I’m as right as rain, she presses a cool palm to my forehead. My heart was already thumping like a jackhammer – and she’s making it worse.

“J-just keep going,” I stammer. “I don’t want to waste any more time here.”

“If you say so.”

We continue to hike forward in the darkness, each step bouncing around the walls until it sounds like there’s an army marching in the pipeline. Every so often we hear the scampering of small feet and the splashing of water thrown into the mix.

The deeper we go, the more my feeling of anxiety grows. The darkness is never-ending and smothers me like a blanket. What if we get lost? What if the tunnel collapses? What if it floods and drowns? Are we going to starve to death? Just the thought of being buried here, deep under the ground away from civilization never to be found again is-

“Bran. I can hear your heartbeat.”

The sound of her footsteps stop and she turns back to me. Now that she mentions it, I can hear it too.

*Thump.*

*Thump.*

*Thump.*

Alice examines me with her warm red eyes. “Could it be… that you’re claustro-“

“I’m fine!”

My voice comes out louder than I expected. Echoes of ‘I’m fine’ ricochet along the walls, multiplying in intensity and number until a legion of them are speaking back to me, as if to mock my fear.

I’m not familiar with the capabilities of a full-blooded vampire’s night vision, but I hope it’s not powerful enough for her to be able to see my face. From what I’ve learned in biology from Mrs. Kuksal the retina’s rods are responsible for night vision, and they only perceive in shades of grey. If Alice could see the colour of my face now, I’m sure it would be as red as a beetroot.

Alice quietly comes back to my side and grabs my hand. As much as I hate myself for it, her touch is a comforting and reassuring presence. I feel the pulsing of my heart slowly die down until I’m breathing normally again.

“It’s not far now,” she says softly before tugging on my hand. Looking at my feet, I allow myself to be led by her.

One step at a time she takes me through the tunnels, twisting and turning. She must have been along this route countless times to be able to remember it so perfectly. Every single path looks identical and I have no doubt that if she were to disappear right here, right now, I would never find my way back.

After what seems like an eternity we come to a halt before a wall. The material comprising the dead end is exactly the same as the slick sides of the tunnel and nothing stands out from it.

Alice steps up to the wall and feels along its surface until her fingers apparently find something. She presses what looks like a single brick amongst many, which sinks in and begins to shake. Like a scene out of a movie the wall shudders as gears and mechanisms begin to turn. I watch in fascination as the wall slides to one side, revealing an even darker passageway behind it. There’s a delicious aroma wafting from it, one which almost makes me forget my claustrophobia.

“We’re pretty much here,” she says reassuringly. “Just a little more.”

I find my eyes unwillingly drawn to her hand.

*No. What sort of man am I if I can’t even manage this?*

Taking a deep breath to steel myself, I head into the darkness.

True to her word, this passageway only stretches for a few metres before widening into a hallway. From what I can make out with my nightvision it looks like some sort of outdated eighteenth century cathedral. There are torches hung on the walls, but they shed little light on the area.

At the sound of my entrance, I hear the shuffling of footsteps ahead of me before an old man appears from the aisles. He’s incredibly pale but looks well-fed and has quite a lot of meat on his bones. There’s a heavenly scent around him, one that tugs at my stomach. I wonder if anyone would notice if he went missing-

All of a sudden I realize what I’ve been thinking and shake my head. Was I seriously looking at this person as if he was a walking meal?

“My lady! I see you have returned. What brings you here today?”

“Kenneth,” Alice greets from behind me. “Doing well?”

The man nods.

“Where’s Father? Dinner?”

“Ah, they just finished a few minutes ago. They’re feeding now, I believe.”

Feeding? But didn’t they just finish dinner-

“Are you a human?” I ask.

Kenneth nods, giving a jolly smile. “That I am. Who might you be? Bringing another newborn here, Alice?”

“Pretty much. I know I promised I wouldn’t after what happened last time, but…” Her voice breaks off.

“You don’t need to explain to me,” Kenneth says with a shake of his head. “I’m sure you’ll have your hands full explaining to your father after all.”

She nods in response and strides down the aisle, turning towards a door on one end. Turning expectantly to me, she waits patiently as I make my way to her side.

“What is this place?” I whisper, peering around warily as if the walls had ears.

“It’s the hideout of our clan. We’ve been here for several generations, ever since we first retreated underground.”

“It shows,” I mutter, brushing away a web that plastered itself onto my face.

“As soon as we get things sorted out with Father, I’ll let you go home.”

The sounds of chatter slowly grow as we walk into a large dining hall. The delicious scent hangs heavily in the air and before I know it I’ve quickened my pace. I can’t focus on anything except what my ears and nose are picking up. I can’t even remember what I was doing here in the first place-

“Bran!”

I feel something tighten around my hand and almost lash out, until I realize it’s Alice. I’m standing in front of a woman sitting on a seat, red blood still oozing from a piercing in her forearm. She looks at me with a puzzled look on her face.

“Sh-shit,” I curse, confused and ashamed. “Sorry.”

There are several of these people seated around the long table, and they’re all bleeding. There’s a man going around to each of them, extracting blood into small glass vials. If we weren’t all the way underground in this ancient place, I could have easily mistaken him for a doctor taking a blood sample.

“Be careful not to lose control here,” Alice says. “These are all humans, with O type blood too. If you want to feed, you’ll have to wait in line.”

She gestures at where all the noise and chatter is coming from – a large group of people hanging by a large fireplace. I instinctively know that these people are all vampires.

“You use them as livestock,” I whisper.

Suddenly, I feel sick.

“There are some among us who must have human blood,” she says. “In exchange for food and shelter, we take in the homeless and take blood from them.”

“I thought you were a vegetarian,” I accuse.

“I am. I stay away from human blood.”

I gulp and look again at the circle of humans. Some of them are giving me odd looks, some of them are ignoring me entirely and some are simply focused on eating the leftovers placed before them.

“Think of it as mutualism,” Alice says. “They agree to this deal willingly. Both sides stand to benefit.”

“Just take me to your father already,” I grit through my teeth. I’d gladly return to the sewers if it meant there was no temptation of accidental cannibalism.

Alice dips her head and continues to walk past the hall, never releasing my hand. It’s something I can focus on, to take my mind off my reawakened hunger.

We end up inside another dimly lit room, lined by bookshelves on all sides. A desk lies in the centre of the room and a man sits before it with a fountain pen in his hand. His slick white hair is combed back, and he is wearing a crisp suit.

“Who is this?” he asks, sniffing the air. “I don’t recognize him.”

“Father… I’ve…”

It’s the first time seeing Alice like this. She’s at a loss for words.

“He smells like you. Don’t tell me you Initiated someone else?”

His voice is cold and quiet, but I can feel its edge. He’s angry.

“I’m sorry. He was about to die-“

“Then you should have let him. You made this mistake once, why do it again?”

He finally looks up, and I nearly take a step back from the force of his gaze. His glowing red eyes burn with a ferocity I’ve never seen before – it feels like I’m staring right into the eyes of death itself.

“He’s a member of ANGEL, and possesses a Divine Edge… I thought we could use his help in tracking down the feral demon.”

The man gets up and walks around to stand before me. I can feel his eyes staring me up and down, examining every inch of my body.

“Have you forgotten why I asked you to refrain from increasing the size of our family even further?”

“I-“

“As the Blood Lord, I have a responsibility to keep all my subordinates in line. The more people you share your blood with, the more potential there will be for someone to contest me.”

Alice meekly nods. She seems like a completely different person in front of her father – gone is the stoic, apathetic girl who saved me, and in her place is a small child being scolded for doing something wrong.

“Hit her.”

For a second, I thought I misheard. The man’s eyes bore into me, shaking my core as he commands me.

“Her?” I ask, pointing to Alice.

He nods. “Punish her for me.”

I turn to Alice, who is deliberately avoiding my gaze.

“Sorry, Sir. I think domestic violence is wrong.”

Instead of lashing out at me or something similar, the man sighs. Taken off guard, I decide to ask a few questions of my own.

“Who are you?”

“It’s as I thought… I have no control over you.”

He straightens up and looks down at me. “I am Ian Vancratt, Alice’s father. I am also the head of this clan - the Blood Lord. It seems like you are to be the latest addition to our family.”

“What did Alice do wrong?” I press. “She saved my life. Despite being the sworn enemy of a demon, I owe her.”

Ian whips his hand to the side without warning, catching Alice square on the cheek. The slap is like a thunderclap, and sends her sprawling into a bookshelf. Several books fall from their place, but she doesn’t respond.

“What was that for?” I yell. “You didn’t need to do that.”

“What is your name, boy?”

I step backwards. “Bran Lietmann.”

“Bran. If you had a daughter who disobeyed you, what would you do?”

I don’t even need to think. “I’d explain to her why what she did was wrong, and urge her never to do it again.”

“And what if she repeated that mistake?”

My mouth is already open, but I can’t find a proper response. What *would* I do? If my child continued to disobey me?

“This is not the first time Alice has Initiated humans into our clan,” he says. “I let her off lightly last time. This time I may not be so forgiving.”

“What’s wrong with that?” I protest.

“I told you to hit her, and you didn’t. If I asked any of my other subordinates, they would have done so whether they wanted to or not. You see, as it turns out, anyone within the clan who does not share the blood of the leader is forced to obey their command. I’m sure you see where I’m going with this.”

I remain silent, going over to help Alice to her feet. She intentionally avoids looking me in the eye.

“All vampires in the Vancratt clan are bound to me by an oath. They cannot disobey me, even if they try. The only way I can be overthrown is by one of my own family… or anyone they Initiate. Before Alice did anything, she was the only one capable of this – but now there are two others.”

He throws a look of disdain at his daughter.

“I… I won’t do it again,” she says quietly, looking down. “I’m sorry.”

“Apologies won’t fix the problem,” Ian spits, his voice gradually growing louder. “We already lost track of that other runt. If I get killed, do you realize you’ll be next? As a Blood Princess, your fate is linked with mine!”

“I’ll take full responsibility!” Alice suddenly cries. “I’ll make sure he doesn’t step out of line!”

“What makes you think that?” Ian roars back. I’ve now been excluded from the argument – it’s a verbal showdown between father and daughter. “You said so yourself, he’s from ANGEL! He’s a Demon Hunter, he specializes in killing us! What if he reveals our secrets to the officials?”

“I’ll kill him then,” she replies without hesitation. A chill runs up my spine at the sound of those words. “He can’t possibly be a match for Moonlight.”

Ian stays still, breathing heavily. An uneasy silence passes between the three of us, only broken by the clamour from the dining hall.

“You’re positive he’ll be able to help take down that feral vampire?” he finally asks.

“Yes,” Alice responds immediately.

“You’re taking full responsibility?”

“I am.”

Ian knits his brows. “All the other men I’ve sent have proven themselves incompetent. As my daughter and the strongest in the clan after myself, I fully expect you to be able to handle this yourself. Whether you enlist his aid or not, I expect this feral vampire to be taken care of swiftly and efficiently. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes Father.”

“Good.” Turning away from her, he returns his gaze to me. I shift unconsciously on the spot.

“My daughter believes you have the potential to be of use for us, so I will allow you to leave for now…”

I’m just about to let out a sigh of relief, until he finishes his sentence.

“…if you can pass my test.”

There’s always a test isn’t there?

“If you can defeat one of my men in combat, then I will allow you to leave.”

“What does it mean to defeat someone?” I ask, dread creeping up my spine.

Ian fixates his eyes on me. “You have to kill them, of course.”

Chapter Six: Meaning

*You have to kill them.*

I suck in a deep breath. Why did it end up like this?

The giant chamber is probably where all the sewage from the drains once came to converge. It’s since long been abandoned like the rest of the hideout and there isn’t a trace of water or filth to be seen. Rather, it’s been revamped into some sort of amphitheatre – or even an arena.

A few figures – vampire or human, I can’t tell – are already seated around the ring, talking amongst themselves. This must be where members come to spar or practice.

“Are you sure I have to do this?” I ask over my shoulder to where Ian is.

The Blood Lord smirks. “I could turn the entire clan against you with a single command. I don’t think you’re in any place to be asking questions, boy.”

Alice stands uncertainly beside her father, my winter jacket in her arms.

“I’ve called one of my most recent… disappointments to be your opponent,” he continues. “They’ve failed their duties time and time again. If they defeat you they’ll get another chance, otherwise they will pay for their failure... with their life.”

“What kind of leader are you?” I spit.

“One who gets rid of the weakest links.”

*And one who lives in fear of those who might surpass him*, I think.

He turns back and goes to take a seat near the front. Alice follows him but stays leaning against the wall, refusing to sit anywhere near her father.

I turn back to the other end of the arena. The battlefield is about fifty metres in diameter, so there’s plenty of room to manoeuvre. The rules are simple – whoever emerges alive will be allowed to stay alive. Anything is allowed – it’s a case of survival of the fittest.

I still can’t quite wrap my head around this. My opponent hasn’t done anything wrong to me – and I’m expected to kill them. The more I get to know Alice’s father, the more sadistic and disgusting I find him. How could someone like him have given birth to a person like Alice?

The old floodgates on the other side of the chamber open, but no water comes out. Instead, a small figure steps into the dimly lit chamber.

It’s a girl – and she looks like she could pass for a grade schooler.

There’s no way I can do this.

“Are you serious?” I scream towards Ian. “You want me to kill her?”

“Her mishaps very nearly cost us our safety and security,” he shot back. “We have no use for burdens like her who can’t pull their own weight.”

The girl looks solemnly in my direction. I can’t tell what she’s feeling from the expression on her face. Her fringe droops low to her brows and she looks like she hasn’t combed her hair for a month.

“Alice,” I try again. “Do something!”

She silently looks away. I think the only reason she’s here is because her father forced her to be.

I look around the arena, trying to think of another way. Maybe I could force my way out –

No. Even with my newfound power, there’s no way I can take on an army of vampires.

Could I kill the Blood Lord?

Ian catches my eye as if he knows what I’m thinking. A chill runs up my spine.

*Don’t engage unless there’s a ninety percent chance of survival.*

He’s the leader of a clan of vampires. There’s no telling what could happen if I fight him.

“Come on! You haven’t got all day, and neither have I!” he roars.

The girl remains still on her side of the ring. I could kill her so easily - just one quick swing with Nightfall and she’d be dead. She’s a demon, right? No different to those imps I slaughtered, or that feral vampire…

But why can’t I bring myself to fight? I know the old me would have attacked without hesitation, but with Alice’s transfusion I can’t help but see her in a human light…

“Guess I’ll have to give her a little push,” I hear Ian’s voice. “*Kill him.”*

Those two words send a spark up my spine, and the girl’s too from what I can see. It’s as if her body has been hijacked – she raises her head, and her red eyes flare for a brief moment. Then, she reaches out and a giant cleaver appears in her hand – a Divine Edge.

I’m put off guard by this sudden display. Until now, I’d mostly fought petty C and D ranked demons – those which lacked the cognition to manifest their soul as a physical object. The only times I’d ever fought other Divine Edge wielders were while sparring with ANGEL colleagues or the odd B rank demon.

“I’m sorry,” the girl mumbles. “It’s either you or me.”

She can no longer resist the command. Closing the distance between us with speed that only a demon could possess, she swings the cleaver towards me. I follow the blade easily as it travels through the air, and move back to avoid it. It would have been a close call back in my human form, but as a vampire my reflexes and speed have increased drastically.

This must have been what it felt like from Alice’s perspective when I’d attacked her.

A person’s Divine Edge is a reflection of their inner self. The first thing ANGEL taught me when they first picked me off the streets was that one could tell a lot by looking at someone’s Edge. Just by the markings left in the solid ground, I can tell that the vampire girl’s Divine Edge carries a heavy weight.

A massive weapon, too big and too heavy for such a young life. Heavy like the expectations of her, her responsibilities, and the burden she is.

The girl resolutely raises the cleaver again and swings. Her agility is greatly reduced, but she makes up for it in power. If I get hit by that thing, I’m going to be seriously injured no matter how strong I am.

Yet, I still can’t bring myself to draw my weapon against her.

“What an amusing find,” I hear Ian murmur to Alice. “Your friend still refuses to pick up his arms.”

“He’s not my friend. He’s just someone I took pity on.”

I don’t have time to be annoyed at her words simply because of the task of dodging each of the girl’s swings. Her fragile appearance is insanely misleading – each time the blade hits the ground, I feel its tremors against my feet. There’s no doubt that she possesses a handy amount of strength.

More swings, swipes and thrusts come towards me. I can feel them slowing down as she becomes more and more fatigued. She can’t last long in her current condition – I’m still hanging onto the hope that her simply passing out will hand me the victory.

“What are you doing?” she asks me. “Don’t you want to live? Fight back!”

She’s straining to breathe now. I remain silent, keeping my distance from her. Ian yells out from the sidelines.

“Come on, boy! You heard her, she wants you to fight!”

“Shut up!” I yell back. As soon as I look away, something comes swinging towards me.

I messed up.

*Clang!*

It only took a fraction of a second to summon Nightfall, and another fraction for me to block the blow. However, I’m forced to support the slender blade with both hands in order to keep it from being torn from my grip. The flat edge of the sword digs into my left hand and the hilt digs into my right as I go flying backwards, slamming into the low wall.

That cleaver is not to be underestimated.

I gingerly peel myself from the hard surface, creeping to my feet. The girl is panting, still glaring at me from the centre of the arena.

“So you were finally forced to draw it, eh?” mused the vampire lord. “A katana too… I thought you would have a much cruder blade…”

“Bran. Don’t make her die feeling worthless.”

I flinch at that voice. Instinctively I know that Alice is behind me, looking down at me from the other side of the barricade.

“Her uselessness has been foregrounded by my father for long enough. How would she feel if she were dispatched by an opponent who didn’t even need to draw his weapon?”

Her whisper is meant for me, and me alone.

The world is cruel. I have to accept that there’s no way I can save her.

The girl slowly brings up the cleaver. I can feel the pressure in the air lowering. My eardrums pop as power gathers around the center of the stage.

She’s about to Soul Link.

The cleaver’s aura grows and surrounds her. The fatigue on her face is almost painful to look at – she’s channeling all her strength into this blow. She raises it high above her head, trembling from the burst of power.

This is it – her strongest attack. A Soul Link; a perfect synchronization between one’s soul and body, only possible through countless amounts of practice. If a mere underling is capable of this, I’m scared of what the Blood Lord will be able to do.

It would be shameful not to face this head on. I will make her passing quick and painless… and meaningful.

I sneak a glance out of the corner of my eye. Ian is watching with interest.

Then, the girl brings the roiling cleaver down, demolishing the ground beneath her with a great shockwave.

My grip on Nightfall tightens as I lower my knees, one leg behind the other.

*Lend me your strength...!*

The ripple of dust and gale spreads outwards, cleaving the air. The wind is like a giant hammer, slamming down onto the earth towards my direction. I feel Nightfall’s strength coursing around my body – the will of my soul – and push off the ground.

The chamber blurs into one colour as I break through the attack, like a swallow cutting through the air. I slash once, surely and truly in the middle of my flight, and come to a halt at the other side of the arena. A few seconds pass, and the girl’s cleaver evaporates into the air.

But not because she dismissed its presence – because she’s dead.

The wind stops buffeting the area. The few people who happened to be in the chamber are watching with awe. The girl lies motionless on the broken ground, a slice of her chest removed from the rest of her body in a bloody heap. However, there is a small smile on her face.

I turn defiantly towards Ian and my stare reaches him from all the way across the arena, sharper than my blade. I only linked with my soul for a split second, but it was enough.

I gave her death meaning. I showed the Blood Lord that I am not to be taken lightly… and that I am a threat to his reign.

Chapter Seven: Changing

“Bran! You’re finally home!”

Judith greets me by the doorway as I throw off my shoes and collapse onto the ground. I’m absolutely exhausted.

Alice wasn’t pleased with my performance. The whole way back she was scolding me for showing off so much and provoking her father – something which you didn’t want to do. Most of it went in one ear and out the other – I’d already made up my mind long ago.

I don’t care about what Alice thinks anymore, I’m going to make my standing clear to my ‘Lord’. When he’s lying at the mercy of my blade, I will show him just as much compassion as he showed his nameless subordinate.

*Sniff, sniff.*

I look up, puzzled at Judith as she pinches her nose.

“You stink,” she says. “Almost like… poop. But weren’t you with a girl-“

Her face pales.

“N-no way… y-you’re into that?”

My mind is a still a bit slow, so I’m not exactly sure what she’s implying.

“Hmm… well I guess what my brother does is none of my business…” Judith looks back to me. “But who would have thought he’d find someone willing to try that too…”

“Judith, can you let Mum know I’m alright?” I say.

My sister straightens out as if coming out of a dream. “Y-yes, of course! Are you hungry?”

Well, it’s almost dark. It would be safe to assume I am – even if the adrenaline is still holding off my hunger.

“Yeah, just heat some leftovers. That should be fine.”

Judith nods and heads into the kitchen, her face still slightly flushed. I think back to the events of the previous few days. A whole weekend’s gone by, and it’s back to school tomorrow – except I’ll be attending as a vampire now.

I’ve already put on the contact lenses Alice gave me and I’m still getting used to their feel on my eyes. Picking myself off the floor, I stealthily head into my room and hide her other gift, a flask of animal blood under my bed. While I’m at it, I check my phone.

There are several messages from both Mum and Judith, but they stop after Saturday night. That must’ve been around when Alice called them to let them know I was alright. Just as I reach the bottom of the list, my phone vibrates to signal a new message. The sender is someone by the name of ‘Alice.’

I never added her to my contacts… she must have added it herself when I left my jacket with her back during the ‘test’.

It’s a simple message telling me to be careful of any high concentrations of O blooded people – which is unlikely to happen at school. I lock my phone screen and collapse back onto the ground.

I think I’m allowed to skip my patrol and report for today. We’re not expected to go hunting seven days a week anyway.

Judith’s call from the kitchen rouses me and I sluggishly head back into the living room.

“Leftovers from lunch,” she gestures. “Plenty of meat for you!”

I look at her plate full of vegetable sandwiches and my own plate of ham ones. They must have saved these just for me.

“Thanks sis,” I say, before taking a bite.

As soon as my tongue touches the meat, all colour immediately drains from my face.

*Vampires don’t eat meat. It tastes like a packet of chips… without the chips.*

I’d completely forgotten – and have never been more relieved that Alice bought Vegetarian pizzas instead of my favourite, Meatlovers.

The taste is exactly like she described. It’s literally like chewing on a piece of paper, or plastic. It finally dawns on me that I’ll never again taste the tender juicy meat of a beef steak, or the delicious texture of a chicken drumstick.

I’m going to miss it.

“What’s wrong?” Judith asks from across the table.

“Uh, nothing,” I quickly reply. “Just a little tired.”

“Thinking back to last night?” she asks with a sly smile.

“Wh-what? Get your head out of the gutter!”

I continue to chew on the tasteless sandwiches. I have to finish them – if anything, to fill my stomach. After all, Mum and Judith made these for me. I can’t let them go to waste.

It’s a battle, but in the end I manage thanks to my best friend – water. However, I’m not sure I’d be able to pull it off again.

“Judith?”

“Hm?”

“I think… I might also become a vegetarian.”

I see her eyes widen. “What lead to the sudden change of heart? I remember you laughing at me when I told you I wanted to stop eating meat.”

I poke at the crumbs on my plate and pop them into my mouth. Bread has never tasted better.

“I… I dunno. I’ve just been feeling really sick of it lately.”

“Is your girlfriend a vegetarian?”

“Why yes she – hey, wait a minute! She’s not my girlfriend!!”

“Whatever you say,” Judith nods happily. “I’m glad you’ve finally opened your eyes, though. That Alice sounds like a really good person – someone I could relate to. So responsible too… more responsible than a certain brother of mine who gets drunk at a party and can’t make it home…”

I sigh - but deep down, I’m smiling. I’ve just realized how much I missed her voice.

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Dread*.*

*A terrified troll running for his life, bounding across the rooftops as I relentlessly pursue him. The look on his face as he realizes what a mistake it was to visit the city.*

Fear*.*

*A man in ragged pants backed against the wall, cornered with nowhere to go. There are still patches of werewolf fur lined across his skin. Panic and confusion flit across his eyes as he tries to remember his rampage.*

Desperation*.*

*A faerie woman on her knees, pleading for me to spare her and her unborn child. An alien child whose instinct will be to gain the full attention of its mother, even if it means the murder of its step-siblings.*

Horror*.*

*A young boy letting out a scream as the body of his ‘imaginary friend’ lies dead on the floor.*

Resignation*.*

*A vampire girl, bravely fighting on despite knowing the outcome of her doomed battle.*

I wake up with my heart hammering in my chest. It’s the first time I’ve seen these faces again – the faces of the countless demons I’ve killed. It hasn’t always been a clear-cut decision for me to make, but in the end ANGEL’s laws are absolute. Whether it’s a troll, a fae child or a possessive spirit, if there’s even the possibility of it being detrimental, it must be eliminated.

A few days ago I wouldn’t have thought twice about killing a demon, but now... now, because of some cruel twist of fate which has placed me on the receiving end of the barrel…

I can’t help but think of the similarities between demons and humans. We may have originated from different dimensions… but sometimes I wonder if their dimension is but a parallel of ours. Just the fact that two entirely different species can breed with one another suggests that they may not in fact be completely unrelated. Could this mean we’ve been committing genocide all this time?

It’s not like me, thinking so deep into this.

I’m changing. It isn’t just my body that’s changed, but my mind as well. My beliefs which I’ve held for so long are slowly being unraveled. The day I first encountered a demon, when I first drew Nightfall, when ANGEL and I first crossed paths – it all seems like a lifetime ago. Maybe I’ve just seen too much.

Maybe I should tell ANGEL I’ve become a demon.

I almost laugh to myself in the darkness. I can just imagine Shizuka if I tell her – first, she’d doubt me and laugh it off. Then, once I prove to her that I’m serious, she’ll subdue me and take me to ANGEL, where I’ll probably get locked up while they decide what to do with me.

No, it’s probably not a good idea to do that. For now, I should just focus on the task at hand – taking care of the feral vampire.

My entire body groans in protest as I haul myself out of bed. If it weren’t for the nightmares and the aftermath of my Soul Link, as brief as it was, it would’ve been the best night’s sleep I could ever hope for. Instead, my body is struggling to repair what muscles it tore the day before. Suddenly pushing a body to several dozen times its normal capacity is just asking for disaster – in fact, the only reason I can still move is probably because I’m no longer entirely human.

Before I can make my way to my closet, a sharp knock rattles on my door.

“Bran! It’s time to rise and shine!”

“Yeah, yeah. Got it.”

I hear an almost inaudible gasp. “You’re up already? That’s rare.”

Taking my response as a cue to open the door, Judith pops her head through. “Mum’s joining us for breakfast. You’d better come down quick, she wants to hear all about last night!”

“You’d better not have given her the wrong idea,” I growl.

Judith gives me a cheerful smile. “Well, you are at that age, after all!”

I roll my eyes and throw my pillow at her. She swiftly closes the door to defend herself, laughing as she leaves me to get dressed. It’s going to be a pain to get out of this one.

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“Good morning,” Mum greets as I head into the living room. For someone who’s busy with work a lot of time, she doesn’t actually look that weathered at a glance. However, I know her more than anyone and I can see signs of strain in her cool blue eyes.

“Morning,” I reply. “How’s work going?”

We sit around the table, just the three of us, picking away at our food. It’s been a while since I’ve had a properly cooked meal, even if it is just French toast. Judith is by no means bad at making food, but she just lacks that special factor that Mum has.

“Not bad. It’s going to get busy again soon, though.”

“It’s always busy.”

Mum shrugs. “Well, business means more hours, right? It’s not like the bills are going to pay themselves.”

In the end, the main source of income is undoubtedly from Mum. The little cash I make usually serves as pocket money for food or schooling supplies, and mostly gets used up by Judith. Seeing her like this only makes me want to kill that feral vampire even more, for the bounty if anything.

In the midst of our chatter, which is uncomfortably beginning to head in the direction of my love life, I notice that my sister has a huge smile plastered on her face.

“What are you so happy about?” I grumble, after being given a mini lecture on safe sex.

Judith shakes her head. “Nothing. It just feels it’s been ages since we all last sat around this table together.”

A brief silence lapses around the table. We’re all thinking back to that time when we had four members of the family – before the accident.

Mum finally lets out a huge sigh. “Moments like these are going to become few and far between further down the line.”

“What do you mean by that?”

She leans back, chewing on a piece of bacon. She’s the only one with meat on her plate. “Well, soon both you and Judith are going to get busy with exams… and after that, if all goes well, you’ll be going to university. It’ll be harder and harder to find time to spend with the family.”

“Hey, don’t be so pessimistic,” I reply. “There’s still almost a year left. That’s plenty of time.”

“Maybe.”

Mum stares at me as I finish off my toast, down to every last morsel. “You know… it might just be me, but it seems like every time I see you again you change just that little bit more.”

I almost drop my fork.

“I-Is that so…”

I quickly avoid her gaze. Is it possible that she’s noticed…?

“Buuuuut… it’s probably just that girl, isn’t it? After all, it’s not uncommon for men to change after meeting someone.”

“She must be one amazing girl to take him away from his love of meat,” Judith chimes in.

And just like that, we collapse back into fruitless chatter. Still, I’d better be extra careful today and act like my usual self.

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“Good morning, Bran!”

Ashley greets me with a thousand watt smile as we climb up the stairs towards the second floor. I’d already prepared myself for the worst, but I’ve surprisingly been able to resist the temptation of what I assume to be O blooded people quite easily. As long as they’re not all clustered together, their presence is but a minor itch against the edge of my mind.

“Morning, Ashley.”

“How was your weekend?”

“It was…”

Hmm… what would be a word to describe the ordeal I had to go through?

“…tiring,” I decide to answer. “How about yours?”

“Well, training for the tournament really picked up, so I was stuck in the dojo on both days pretty much.”

“Oh yeah, good luck for that.”

It’s typical small talk, no different to what I discuss with classmates every day. However, I can’t help but notice my increased perception – all of my senses have been enhanced. Even while I’m holding a conversation I can constantly keep track of what people around me are doing, zone in on their conversations, even take note of small details in my surroundings. If this is what I’m like during the day, I can’t even begin to imagine what it would be like at night.

“Oh, I’d better get to class before it’s too late,” Ashley suddenly says, glancing at her watch.

“Bye.”

“I’ll be looking forward to our date after the tournament!”

Before I can protest, she runs off. Shaking my head, I quickly head into my own classroom.

Since when did I agree to go on a date with her? Then again, if I don’t I’ll have Leo to deal with.

The noise in the classroom slowly dies down as Mrs. Kuksal, who also doubles as our roll call teacher enters. I quickly sit up to attention.

“Good morning, everyone!” she greets.

A chorus of good mornings are given in return.

“We’ve actually got a new classmate joining us today. Please make her feel welcome and help her out around the school if she needs it!”

The door opens and someone walks in.  Someone with shoulder length blonde hair and beautiful eyes, someone who is hauntingly beautiful.

“Hello, everyone.  I'm Alice Vancratt, and I hope we’ll all get along!”

I can’t help myself from uttering a small gasp. Is this what she meant when she said she’d make sure we’d be able to plan our hunting? I never would have thought she’d be bold enough to transfer schools.

Alice takes a seat at one of the empty tables on the other side of the room. We exchange a brief look, but nothing more.

As Kuksal begins to mark the roll, I can't help but stare in her direction. There are several other stares also directed at her, but for different reasons. I hope she doesn't get harassed by too many guys.

The bell for first period goes off, and we all begin to head off to our classes.  Alice stops me as I exit the class, pulling me to the side.

“Mind showing me the way to class?” she asks.

“What subject?”

She pulls out a slip of paper from her pocket - a timetable.  I skim over it, feeling the envious looks of people passing by.

“This is exactly the same as my timetable,” I mutter.

“Of course.  You’re my ‘cousin’, so the principal was kind enough to stick us in the same classes for convenience’s sake.”

“...Seriously?”

As I say this someone stops next to us.

“Alice. Need some help around the school?”

I don't even need to check to know that it's Leo. I'm about to leave him to it when Alice stops me.

“It’s alright, Bran has me covered.”

Leo shoots me a filthy look which Alice doesn't see, before smiling innocently. “Ah, that's great! Let me know if you need anything else, I'd be happy to help.”

Alice responds with an equally innocent smile. “I will.”

I have a feeling Leo’s not going to let this go so easily.  The moment he moves out of sight, Alice resumes our conversation.

“I don't like the look of that guy,” she whispers.

“What's not to like?”

She shrugs. “Just comes off as too convenient, I guess.  Almost as if he’s hiding his true self as well.”

She’s sharp. Not many people know about Leo’s flip side - the side he shows to the few people who don't worship him. It must be the vampire perception.

“Anyway, let’s go. I don't want to be late to my first class.”

Chapter Eight: The Hunt

As one of the longest, most grueling math lessons I’ve ever had ends, I pull out my lunchbox and begin digging into Mum’s stir-fried noodles. Her vegetarian option is still heavenly, but I’m just crestfallen I’ll never taste the old meat variants ever again.

“That smells nice,” Dennis mentions from beside me.

“You want some?”

He shakes his head. “Nah, I’m fine.”

We both look towards the far side of the classroom, where a large number of people have gathered around Alice. I wonder which ‘group’ she’s going to get conscripted to.

“I heard she’s your cousin,” he says, opening his own lunchbox.

I grunt in reply. “Hm.”

“She’s… quite beautiful.”

I stop eating slowly and look up. “What the-“

Eyes widening, he shakes his head. “No, I’m not interested in her. But I can still acknowledge her beauty.”

“Well… I guess she’s pretty.”

The sound of eating next to me slowly stops. Curious, I look up to see what the problem is. Dennis is staring at me with a curious look.

“Bran… could it be that you’re gay?”

I almost spit my noodles out. “Wh-What?”

“I mean, I almost never hear you talking about girls, and you seem to have no interest in them whatsoever… even when people like Ashley throw themselves at you.”

It’s not like that... I just don’t have the time, nor do I want anyone to be hurt because of my line of work.

“Dude, I’m straighter than a one-hundred and eighty degree line.”

Dennis raises an eyebrow. “I thought you were good at math. Anything over one eighty degrees isn’t straight.”

“It’s a figure of speech.”

He resumes eating, making sure to cover his mouth when he speaks. “So who do you think is good looking then?”

Oh man… how did I get myself into this situation…?

“Judith,” I say. “She’s always complaining about all the boys that ask her out. I guess her good looks must run in the family.”

“She doesn’t count,” Dennis shoots me down. “I’m talking sexual attraction. Who do your loins burn for?”

There’s an intense look in his eyes, completely different to his usual self. I think it’s topics like these that he really gets triggered on.

But seriously… what kind of questions are these?

“Alice,” I decide with a safe option. After all, it’s pretty much a given that everyone finds her attractive, myself included. I just have good self-control.

“Bran… are you telling me you lust for your cousin?”

Oh shit. I completely forgot she was supposed to be related to me.

“Um… never mind. Well uh…”

Come on… pick a girl, any girl…

“Leo’s sister,” I say. “She’s definitely cute.”

I’m not lying, either. She’s got that girl-next-door feel, and if I’m completely honest with myself I don’t exactly dislike it when she interacts with me. My common sense just usually gets the better of me – the common sense which went flying out the window the moment Dennis brought up loins.

“Ashley?” he asks.

I nod. “Leo doesn’t have any other sisters, does he?”

Dennis shakes his head. “No, I wasn’t talking to you.”

A feeling of dread settles over me as I follow his gaze behind my shoulder.

“A-Ashley!?”

She has her lunchbox in her hands, and her mouth is open in surprise. “S-sorry… I didn’t mean to overhear…”

How did I not hear her approaching? Damn it, Dennis…

She closes her mouth and takes a few uncertain steps backwards, looking at the ground. A red blush creeps across her face. I haven’t ever seen her this shy or embarrassed.

If word of this reaches Leo…

“Don’t worry about it,” Dennis says, giving a reassuring smile. “My friend and I were just having a bit of a heart to heart. What can we do for you today?”

This idiot… Acting as if nothing happened…

“I… I was just going to ask if I could eat with you guys.”

Dennis gives a firm, understanding nod. “I get you.”

Standing up, he’s about to bravely sacrifice himself when the sound of a chair scraping loudly across the ground stops him. Everyone instinctively turns to the corner of the room, where Alice has stood up and is excusing herself from her admirers. The classroom is dead quiet as she approaches me, stopping next to Ashley.

“Come on, Bran,” she says. “There’s something we need to discuss before lunch ends.”

Could this situation have gotten any worse?

She grabs onto my hand and pulls. I almost go tumbling onto the ground, but another hand stops me.

“Hey, I asked first,” Ashley says, all traces of her bashfulness gone.

No… no, no, no, no, no… I’ve maintained a low profile for so long and now this happens…

“Don’t worry about it,” she reassures. “It’s just family business. I have no intention of taking him away from you.”

Dennis is watching on with amusement. That bastard… it’s all his fault!

Alice’s vampiric strength feels like it could tear my arm off at any moment… but Ashley is no weakling either, being the karate team’s ace. I’m sure many guys would dream of being in this situation… but for me, it’s more troublesome than not.

“I’m his cousin,” Alice says again.

No you’re not.

Ashley finally succumbs and lets go. Like a rubber band, I go flying forward before Alice stabilizes me. Dennis winks at me and gives a salute before I’m dragged out of the eerily quiet classroom.

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“What’s wrong with you?” I groan at Alice as she drags me up to the rooftop. A strong wind blows at me, almost knocking me off my feet.

“Hm? I was just boosting your popularity by letting you ride on mine.”

“That’s not the problem - and besides, it’s better to blend in than be infamous!”

“Are you dating that girl? She seems awfully into you.”

I’m about to respond when I realize that Alice’s eyes are boring uncomfortably into me. She seems abnormally… pressing.

“I’m not.”

Alice suddenly realizes she’s still holding my arm and lets go. She turns around and presses herself against the wire fence, looking out across the school grounds. A long moment passes, only disrupted by the wind as it sails past us.

“You’re right,” she finally says. “I was a bit short tempered after all those people started crowding around me.”

It seems like she’s calmed down.

“I didn’t want to be impolite,” she continues. “But they just wouldn’t stop. In the end, I decided that prioritizing our mission was more important than maintaining good relations. Those people don’t really want to be my friend anyway, they just want me as a status symbol for their group.”

…Can’t argue with that. I would have handled the same situation a lot worse.

“So… before lunch ends on us, what’s the plan?”

Alice steps away from the fence and sits down on a bench, gesturing me for me to follow suit.

“Right. So, first off, we know that the feral vampire is active every night,” she begins, all business.

“Yep.”

“All the people it’s attacked have been in places close to the woods, so I think it would be safe to assume that the vampire’s lair is somewhere in the wild.”

She whips out her phone and brings up a map. The woods she’s talking about are quite small, right on the edge of the city. They stretch on for a few kilometres before the next settlement – Ashbrook is just about the last main urban area before it starts diving into rural territory.

“We met at that park there, didn’t we?” I ask, pointing to a spot near the edge of the woods.

Alice nods in agreement. “We’ll patrol starting from that area, and split up in opposite directions.”

“Isn’t it dangerous to split up? The last time it almost killed us both, and we were together…”

“It’s a risk we’ll have to take. We’ll put each other’s numbers on speed dial and the moment we catch sight of it, ring the other person to let them know. We don’t want to shout or alert any people, otherwise things will get messy.”

“Alright then. So, what time?”

“I think eleven is when all the traffic starts to die down, especially since it’s a weekday too.”

“Eleven at the park, got it.”

For some reason I can’t help but feel like we’re going on a date.

*Dad, Mum, what was your first date like?*

*Well son, it all begun one frosty winter night, when we decided to team up to kill a vampire…*

I shake my head to clear these thoughts.

“Something the matter?” she asks.

“Huh? Uh, just a little nervous, that’s all. I mean, I almost died last time we fought that thing.”

“It’ll be fine. This time, you’ll be ready… and as a vampire, you should be more than a match for it.”

We sit on the rooftop for a while longer, before the bell rings to signal the start of classes again.

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For once tonight, it’s not snowing.

The day passed as usual for me, except I wasn’t able to get much sleep. Every time I think about fighting that monster my blood starts to rush and I can’t relax. I’ve never felt such an intense desire to kill anything before, not since my first encounter with the things known as demons.

Even though it’s not snowing the ground is still covered in white from earlier in the afternoon. I wrap my scarf more snugly around my neck and pull the zipper to my jacket up to the very top, more out of habit than anything else. To be honest, I could walk around naked without feeling anything.

I gently remove my contact lenses and place them in my pocket. With the thin layer of plastic gone from my eyes, I feel slightly unburdened.

*“Good to see you again,” Shizuka says. “I was worried about you for a bit.”*

*“Please, I’m fine.”*

*“The demon hasn’t killed anyone at all over the weekend, its last victim being at the park. The only reason I can think of is that people were out later at night than usual, and thus harder to isolate. Either that or it just wasn’t hungry.”*

*“Makes sense.”*

*“In any case, this only means it’ll be even more likely to appear tonight. Be careful, no matter what happens.”*

*I deliberately haven’t told her that the demon technically killed me already.*

*“I will,” I say. “I’m honoured that you care so much for your subordinates.”*

*“Don’t get the wrong idea, it’d just be a pain if you died - that’s all.”*

*“Sure, sure,” I nod. “You should be more honest with yourself, Shizuka. Guys like honest women.”*

*“Just get out of here already,” she growls, flicking a cigarette butt at me.*

I grin in spite of myself at the meeting earlier this afternoon. I can’t wait to see the look on her face when I kill that fiend and take its bounty – a feat worthy of the woman herself.

Alice is already at the park by the time I arrive. She sits on the swing, looking out passively into the distance. Even though I was prepared, I still can’t help but have my breath taken away from me when I see her. She really is something completely different at night.

Does it really matter that she’s not a human?

“How long are you going to stand there for?”

She tilts her head and her eyes meet mine. I immediately look away before trudging across the snow to her.

“Are you cold?” I ask stupidly. Her frock is more something that you would wear in summer, not winter. I take note of the crude stitches around the waist, where it was torn open by the vampire’s attack.

“No.”

“Maybe you should wear something just in case. We wouldn’t want to look too out of place in case we happen across anyone.”

She seems to think for a moment before nodding. I unzip my jacket and pass it to her.

“We’ll meet back here in half an hour,” she says, wrapping it around herself. “If either of our phones ring, we head immediately to the other person’s patrol route even if they don’t say anything.”

I nod and watch her leave, trudging away in her sandals. Before long, I’m alone in the park. Letting out a deep foggy breath, I turn in the opposite direction and head off.

No matter how many times I wander Ashbrook at night, I’m always surprised at how quiet it is. It’s hard to imagine that somewhere in this tranquil, sleepy city there’s a beast running amok. The place has a rather good reputation as far as crime and homelessness is concerned, so that may be part of the reason why.

At some point during my patrol, I begin to catch scent of something in the air. It’s faint, but the unmistakable smell of blood. I can already tell from its potency that it’s O type. I put my hand into my pocket where my phone is, but hesitate.

I could be mistaken. I should confirm first.

Following the trail takes me up to the far end of the city, near the river. The smell is growing stronger – the only way it could be so strong is if the blood were directly exposed to the air. Breaking into a light jog, I head up along the road until I reach the riverside path. The murky waters slosh gently along the edge of the concrete canal. The smell of blood is sickeningly sweet, and it’s all I can do to resist succumbing to my instincts.

I climb the slope, finally reaching the beginning of the bridge. It’s a place that holds memories for me, and a place I’ve avoided coming to for a long time. I immediately press the speed dial button for Alice’s number, but forget about her as soon as I see what awaits me.

There is a man lying dead against the railing, his face deathly pale and devoid of blood. His chest has been opened quickly and efficiently, not a trace of clumsiness to be seen. There is no red around him, just a small stain about his wound. The feral vampire stands over its victim - a long, thin being akin to a wraith come to claim its prize.

*“Hello? Bran?”* Alice’s voice goes unanswered.

The dead man, the demon, the bridge…

It’s almost an exact repeat of that day.

Chapter Nine: Night Falls on my Soul

*The skies rumble as rain continues to lightly drizzle down. The small umbrella I’m holding barely does its job, failing to stop sprays of water from drenching my socks. I don’t even know why I’m here – all I know is that I’m feeling just as terrible as the weather, and as lost as a droplet of water in the sea.*

*Dad is gone, and Judith is in a critical condition.*

*It’s all the truck driver’s fault. If only he hadn’t taken to the wheel after drinking, they’d still be here. A jail sentence is too lenient for his crimes; he should die –*

*No. He didn’t intend for this to happen, he just made a stupid decision.*

*I hope Judith’s alright. I don’t know what I’d do if I lost her too. Mum’s taken the biggest hit though, she literally looked like the walking dead this morning. I heard her sobbing through the walls last night.*

Flash.

*The sky rumbles again. I shouldn’t be out so late at night – Dad always told me not to wander around alone.*

*But Dad’s gone now.*

*Before I know it, the sound of rushing water has crept up to me. Ashbrook Bridge lies ahead, spanning the identically named river below it. The waters are overflowing from the rain, and have slowly begun to invade the footpaths on either side.*

*Right ahead, in the middle of the bridge is a man. He looks away from the distance and sees me. I wonder what’s going through his mind – seeing a ten year old boy all alone at night, in the rain too.*

*Our eyes lock for a brief moment, and the rain stumbles in its intensity. I almost drop my umbrella in surprise.*

*It’s the truck driver. The man who ran over my family, who is responsible for Dad’s death.*

*I slowly walk towards him. He looks back impassively from his position on the bridge.*

*“I’m sorry,” he mutters. His face is drawn and haggard, and his eyes are bloodshot. I don’t know if he’s truly sorry, or if he’s just dreading his future in a prison cell.*

*I say nothing in response. I don’t know how I should feel.*

*“They’re everywhere,” he says. “Everywhere I go, I see them. They were the reason I drank, they were why I took my eyes off the road.”*

*What’s he talking about?*

*“You probably wish I was dead, don’t you?” he asks, a sad smile on his face. “Even* I *wish I was dead. I wasn’t thinking straight that night – they were all around me, whispering into my ear. The alcohol did nothing to drive them away.”*

*He’s speaking in a resigned tone, as if he’s given up all hope. I’m confused as to what he’s trying to tell me – is he saying that he’s sorry? Or is he trying to say it’s not his fault?*

*He turns back to the railing and climbs onto it. Is he going to jump? If he jumps down, will he die? I can’t quite comprehend the significance of his action, but I know he’s doing something big.*

*Is it really fair for him to get away so easily? To leave this world behind?*

*“Don’t jump,” I finally speak. My voice is quiet, but even amongst the steadily increasing downpour of rain I know he can hear it.*

*Lightning flashes again, followed by another rumble. It’s really starting to pick up now.*

*“If you die now, you won’t be able to serve your punishment.”*

*The man sighs. “I’m already living it, kid – I’ve been living it for the longest time. And I’m the only one who’s been living it.”*

*He gestures wildly around the empty space next to him. “They won’t stop whispering. They’re everywhere I go, a whole group of them. I can’t do it – I’m already at my limit.”*

*“What are you talking about?” I ask, puzzled. “It’s just you and me on this bridge –“*

*And then, something brushes past me.*

*I drop the umbrella, looking frantically around. I still see nothing. Rain begins to seep into my skin.*

*“Oh no…” the man says. “They’re here. They’ve come to take me…”*

*He turns and tries to haul himself off the edge of the bridge, but a sudden force pulls him backwards and slams him onto the ground. It’s at that moment that I see a flash of something – something tall, thin and pale.*

*“No… please don’t…”*

*The man begs to the empty air before him. Scared, I take a few steps back.*

*“You don’t want to kill me in front of a witness, do you?”*

*I’m shocked. It’s the first time I’ve seen a grown man, an adult, reduced to a sniveling wreck. He crouches on the ground, whimpering with his arms above his head as he begs for his life.*

*Whatever he was talking to must have responded, because the man’s face suddenly pales even more.*

*“No…”*

*At this moment, he suddenly jerks upright and screams, a scream which is quickly cut off to a pathetic croak. An ethereal being unveils itself from out of nowhere, draining the man’s soul. It couldn’t be anything but a soul – a transparent substance full of life, shimmering with all the colours of the rainbow as it disappears into the thing’s face. With the completion of the transfer, the man slumps onto the ground, unmoving. I instinctively know that he’s dead.*

*I want to open my mouth and scream, but I’m rooted to the spot.*

*The faceless, weightless entity slowly turns towards me. It’s not attached to the ground – rather, it’s levitating a few feet off it. The spectral wraith reaches out a single bony hand towards me, slowly as if it has all the time in the world.*

*“Go away…” I manage to croak.*

*As it nears me I begin to shiver. The rain has soaked me to the bone now, but I’m certain the thing before me has something to do with it as well. I feel a great sense of depression as I look into its eyes.*

“This one has yet to experience it…”

*The wispy voice startles me. I didn’t think it would be able to speak.*

*More voices begin to join in.*

“So innocent…”

“So happy…”

“So unburdened…”

*More of the things begin to fade into existence. I blink several times, but they’re still there.*

*They’re everywhere.*

*Something hard touches my back and I realize that I’m trapped, right up against the edge of the bridge. The spectral beings are all around me – there are easily a dozen of them, of all sizes but with identical features. Their faceless visages are constantly shifting, never stopping on one form.*

“This one is a rarity…”

“He will make a fine specimen…”

“So pure and uncorrupted…”

*The voices are so numerous that they begin to overlap. I have no idea how many haven’t revealed themselves yet. As if they’re all drawn towards me, their bony fingers reach out to touch my skin.*

“The pure ones are so much more filling than the sinful ones…”

*“Go away!” I shout, louder this time. My hands pass through theirs, and icy cold chills pass through my body upon contact.*

*They’re right up against my face now, their cold exhalations brushing up against me. I can no longer feel the rain or the wind, only the cold of these spectres. The voices buzz in my ears, blending into one loud monotone.*

*Then, they all make way for one wraith. It’s the tallest one, the one which took the truck driver’s soul.*

*It reaches a hand out towards my face… and begins to drain me.*

*I can feel it – my soul, something which I could never feel before. There are some things you never realize are there until they’re gone, and your soul is one of them. As the substance begins emerging from my pores, channeling into the wraith, I feel my strength leaving me, my feelings, my senses, everything. The grey rain falling onto the bridge begins to fade into one mix, a puree of depression, of lifelessness.*

*Somewhere at the back of my mind, I’m resisting. I’m trying to pull it back, pull back the one thing of mine which cannot be replaced.*

*“No… please…”*

*I can see it. A long stream of translucent colour, stretched to the absolute limit as it holds onto my body with everything it has. The voices are overwhelming my senses – they are the only thing I can hear, the only thing I can focus on.*

*My soul… give it back…*

*Before I know it, I’m putting all the energy I have left into pulling back. The cerebral strain is devastating – all I can focus on is just holding onto that part of my body which was with me from birth. It’s a mental tug-of-war, between myself and the horde of spirits. The only thing keeping me sane is my base instinct, the need to survive.*

*At one point, something gives way. Still dazed and unable to comprehend anything, the force snaps as if it were a rubber band stretched past its limit. I go flying backwards, my upper half tipping precariously over the railing of the bridge.*

*My balance lost, all it takes is a strong wind to blow my small body over the edge and into the river below, the tainted essence of my soul trailing behind.*

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“You…!!”

I can feel it overwhelming me – the emotions that I experienced that night, the night it all started. They’re part of the reason Dad is gone. The truck driver was the one who killed him, but he’d been driven to the brink of madness by the demons. The only reason he’d begun drinking was because of them; the only reason he’d swerved too hard was because they’d deliberately distracted him.

They deserve to die. I don’t want anyone else’s life being ruined because of them.

“Come to me, Nightfall.”

It answers me like it did back then – the tainted blade, stained by demons.

I feel its power coursing through me. The strength and will of my soul, my instinctive hatred of demons, manifested in the form of a blade. The darkness that reflects the darkness in my heart.

The vampire raises its head from the corpse and tilts its head at me. According to Alice, it fled last time after she drew her blade. This time however, it shows no signs of fear as it stares me down.

Things can only get easier if it doesn’t run.

Letting out a cry, I charge into the fray. I am one with my soul – united through our hatred for demons, and our thirst for blood. I bring down Nightfall in a vicious arc but the feral vampire leaps back, narrowly avoiding it. A chunk of the concrete ground cracks from the impact.

Wiping its bloody mouth, the vampire reaches out its own arm. Before my eyes a crimson glow begins to materialize, solidifying into a jagged razor.

A Divine Edge? Has the vampire progressed so quickly in these past few days?

A silent message passes between us. It will do everything it can to survive – such is the law of the wild.

I can’t afford to let it live. If it’s adapted so quickly to be intelligent enough to wield its soul, there’s no telling how much further it could go. I have to kill it now before it becomes a bigger problem than it already is.

The beast growls before lunging forward at a blindingly fast speed. I blink once, and it’s already on its way towards my neck.

But I can go faster. The blink of an eye is plenty of time for me.

I parry the strike, gritting my teeth as sparks fly from where our blades cross. I can feel the vampire’s power – savage and unrelenting, knowing no bounds or restraint.

“I don’t suppose you can talk, can you?” I ask.

The vampire snarls a response before pushing away from me. I don’t give it a chance to recover, leaping after it with my sword brandished. Each swing jars my shoulders, but the discomfort is lost in the adrenaline of the moment.

*Kill. I want to kill it.*

A frenzy takes over me. There’s no need to put so much strength and ferocity into my blows, but I can’t stop myself. I’m panting already, my sweat freezing in the cold winter air.

*Kill it.*

At one point, we both slip up at the same time. Nightfall slashes through its forearm, while the razor tears through my thigh. We both disengage, panting as we stare across the bridge at each other.

The pain feels good. It’s been a while since I’ve had such an urge to kill. I feel the most alive when I’m on the brink of death.

Clutching at my thigh, I cringe as the cold eats into it. However, before my eyes, the wound is beginning to close up. Similarly, my opponent has already stopped bleeding, its pale skin knitting itself back up.

“No rest for the wicked,” I mutter, re-engaging. The vampire defends itself as I slam into it again and again, already losing myself in a berserk rage. I might as well be wielding a club, because there’s no way something like this can be considered swordplay.

The vampire retreats further and further as I press my offense, until it reaches the edge of the bridge. I’m smiling without even realizing it – a bloodthirsty smile brought up by thoughts of victory, and blood.

Bringing Nightfall up, I slash at the monster before me. In a split second, it makes its decision and leaps over the edge of the bridge.

Infuriated at having my kill taken away from me, I rush to the edge of the railing. The drop is at least fifty metres long, but I see nothing below me save the calm waters of the Ashbrook River.

Then, a change in the air pressure behind me leads me to turn around, just as the vampire tackles me. It must have scaled down, across the underside of the bridge and back up to the other side to ambush me.

Coughing in surprise, I can only grapple the vampire as we go tumbling into the murky waters.

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*I’m falling.*

*The world is lurching around me, heaving and twisting. One moment the river is the sky and the sky is the river, the next moment it’s neither. Rain races me on the way down, the clear droplets suspended in mid-air as they match my speed. My soul tails me, only barely attached to my body.*

*After an agonizingly long moment of weightlessness, I crash through the surface of the water, entering a complete zone of darkness. I should have broken something, but I’m still able to move. Clawing around the viscous river, I kick and fight my way to the surface.*

*Air. I need air. Nothing else matters but air.*

*The resistance against my head gives way and I breathe it. Wonderful, delicious air.*

*My next thought is of land. I need to get out of here, to stand again on solid ground. I need to be able to move.*

*Coughing and still half-blinded by the murky water in my eyes, I swim. I scramble and claw, crawl and kick my way across the river, one painstaking stroke at a time. Everything has left my mind – the truck driver’s death, the soul eating spirits, my traumatized soul – there is only one thought in my mind, and that is to survive.*

*I roll onto the muddy grass a few metres away from the footpath, gasping and wheezing. The rain continues to assault me, as if trying to finish the job that the river couldn’t.*

*Something cold touches my face, not even allowing me a single moment’s rest.*

*There’s no rest for the wicked, after all.*

*I force myself onto my feet. The wraiths are everywhere – they’ve drifted down from the bridge and are crowding around me, their disjointed voices calling for me. I am alone on the path, there is no one nearby, no one to help.*

“He was fun while he lasted…”

“Foolish human thought he could escape with alcohol…”

“So easily startled…”

*I clamp my hands against my ears. My soul is slowly sinking back into my body, but I can see that it will never be the same again. Where the wraith touched it, a black disease-like glaze is spreading. The lively, ethereal substance has become dark and withered, tainted by these ghosts.*

“He wasn’t the cause behind the accident,” *a voice breezes past me. I turn around, catching a flash of white among many.* “We distracted him, we caused him to swerve. It was so good, the way his miserable soul tasted…”

“The deepest misery we’ve tasted for a while…” *another voice calls out.*

“But yours… it is so pure, so uncorrupted… truly a rarity to find a boy who has experienced no hardships…”

*Something strokes my face.*

*“Go away!” I shout into the horde.*

*I can’t breathe. They’re smothering me. It’s only a matter of time before I give in, before I run out of energy and collapse. It’s so cold…*

*Just so… cold…*

*I feel it again. Something’s grabbing onto my soul, pulling it out from my body. The withered, dark substance is leaving me again, and I don’t have the strength to fight.*

*Is this it? Am I going to die just like this?*

No.

*Whose voice is that…? I can’t distinguish from all the other ones, but for some reason it stands out to me…*

It’s not over yet.

*Is that my voice? It sounds like my voice… but at the same time, it sounds alien.*

*My senses are dulling. A shady darkness is falling over my mind’s eye, like the setting of the sun, like the fall of night.*

*There’s something in the distance, something which seems familiar like an old friend. I just can’t remember the name of it.*

*As the last rays of light disappear, I see it.*

*My soul.*

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We plunge into the darkness, bashing and clawing at each other. I feel burning pain where my exposed wounds make contact with the water, but fight on. As we continue to sink, the currents break us apart.

*Thud.*

My feet touch the bottom of the river. It’s eerily quiet, an isolated zone separate from the outside world. It’s almost like I can forget about my troubles here.

*Kill.*

I bend my knees and leap upwards like a spring, channeling as much energy as I can into my legs. I feel a barrier of water building up in front of me as I fly to the surface, before it explodes and fresh air greets me. Taking note of my surroundings, I quickly prepare myself for a safe landing.

The breath gets knocked out of me as I hit the grass in a spray of river water. On the other side of the river the vampire has clawed its wounded body to the pathway, a trail of blood leaking behind it. The harmful bacteria from the water must have slowed both our regenerative traits.

I try to stand up, but one of my knees gives way. Opposite the river, the vampire creeps to its feet and shakes itself of the river filth, before slowly beginning to hobble away.

“Damn it…”

I can only watch as it slowly carries itself off into the distance, turning a corner and disappearing from view.

A few moments pass as I quietly listen to my own breath, until someone calls out to me.

“Bran!”

I already know it’s her. The pattering of her sandals drawing closer are already pulling me back, back to the heavy rain that was pouring on that night.

Chapter Ten: Moonlight

*The moment I recognize it, the moment I reach out to it, the moment I feel its smooth grip in my hands, I know its name.*

*“Nightfall…!”*

*My eyes open. It rests in my hand - a pitch black blade, slightly curved, long and slender, a small rectangular crossguard. I feel the connection between us – it is my own soul I hold in these hands, corrupted by the touch of those monsters, as well as the hatred and fear I harbour towards them.*

*“You killed Dad,” I say quietly. “You hurt Judith.”*

*The ghosts are silent. They’ve taken a few steps back from me as I face them, firmly holding onto Nightfall.*

*“You killed the truck driver too. You ruined his life.”*

*There are a few whispers coming from the crowd of white. I’m unable to process what they’re saying – the only thing I can feel is a white hot, burning anger.*

*“What are you?” I look up. Their eyes – no, they don’t have such a feature. Their faces are directed towards the blade in my hands, the katana which is spewing forth black smog like an uncontrollable fire.*

“We are demons, and we feed on your souls.”

*And now, it clicks.*

*The moment the demon says it, I know it’s true. They’ve always been here, they’ve always been terrorizing humans since the beginning of time. I don’t know how I know this, but if I were to guess, I would guess that it was because of Nightfall. There is a theory that we only use ten percent of our brains – perhaps this is the power, the finely honed instinct of survival that lies in the other ninety percent of our brains.*

*I raise Nightfall. This is the first time I’ve ever held a real sword, but at the moment I don’t even think of it as a weapon.*

*It is my soul. We are the one, two parts of the same being.*

*I charge into the horde of voices without a single moment’s hesitation.*

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“Bran, are you alright?”

Her cool hands grip my shoulders.

“I’m fine,” I grit, pushing her away. “We need to go after-“

Alice silences me with a single look. She then proceeds to check my wounds, grimacing as she does so.

*If you were going to do that anyway, why bother asking in the first place?*

“These don’t look good,” she mutters.

I follow her line of sight and flinch. My skin is torn and shredded, and the muscle fibers underneath are clearly visible. If I focus I can see them slowly reknitting themselves, but it’s obvious that they won’t heal as quickly as they’re supposed to.

“It’s got a Divine Edge,” I spit. “We need to kill it quickly, before it gets even stronger. We don’t want it learning how to Soul Link, or learning how to hide itself amongst society.”

“There’s no ‘we’,” Alice replies. “You’re not going anywhere. I’ll go after it, you find somewhere safe to rest and wait for my report.”

“It’s too dangerous,” I protest. “There’s no guarantee you’ll-“

*Glare.*

A shiver runs down my spine. The look she gave me conveyed more than any amount of words could.

*You owe me your life. If you get in my way, I can just as easily take it from you.*

A part of me wonders if she can – but then, I remember that I’m in no state to test that theory.

“I’ll stay here then,” I say, swallowing. “Take care.”

Her eyes transition to a softer shade of red as she nods. Standing up from my prone body, she looks off into the direction where the vampire fled.

“I’ll track it to the woods,” she says. “It’s probably gone back to its hideout to nurse its wounds. If I don’t come back… that’s where you should look.”

With that, she sprints away and towards the bridge. I watch her cross it without breaking stride until I’m once again alone by the riverside.

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*It’s over.*

*I stand alone by the river, shivering not from cold but from fear.*

*What have I done?*

*I’ve killed them, every single one of them.*

*The worst of the thunderstorm is over, and the rain has been reduced to a light sprinkle. A mass of white corpses lie on the ground, their ethereal bodies fluttering softly in the wind. They exist, but only I can see them.*

*I slaughtered them all. Were they all responsible for Dad’s death? Perhaps. Perhaps only a few were involved, and everyone else was innocent.*

*They tried to kill me. I acted in self-defense. Yes, I was justified in killing them all. They are evil, they terrorize humans, they feed on them to survive.*

*But don’t we do the same to other animals? Would it be right for a farm animal to slaughter us in self-defense?*

*The sound of sirens in the distance rouses me from my thoughts. I look to my hand, and see that the black blade has disappeared. Every time I summon it, I will hear the voices of those demons, and I will feel the anguish they felt. After all my soul has been tainted, and I have been cursed with the gift of life. Unable to die because of my will to live, and unable to live without feeling this emptiness that comes with my power.*

*I hear voices, concerned voices on the bridge. They must have discovered the dead body. The voices continue to speak, and I hear someone shouting in my direction. Footsteps rush down to where I stand, trampling the ectoplasmic bodies of the fallen wraiths. A towel wraps around me, and I hear more voices.*

*What will become of me now? I simply will not be able to ignore them, now that I know of their presence. Is it now my responsibility to hunt and kill them? Where do they hide? Are they all invisible to ordinary people? How many different types are there?*

*As the gentle arms guide me towards the ambulance, I feel someone’s gaze on my back. Turning sideways, I see someone out of the corner of my eye.*

*Dressed in a black suit, neatly trimmed and wearing tinted glasses. He takes them off, revealing cool grey eyes that stare into my soul. They flicker to the pile of ghost corpses for a brief moment, before returning to my own.*

*He knows. He can see them.*

*He has come for me.*

\*\*\*

The snow is beginning to fall once again. Alice breaks into a steady run; if she doesn’t hurry the trail will be buried under a fresh layer of white. The longer she takes, the more time the vampire has to recover.

She stops at the edge of the park. The trail of red goes right across it, all the way into the heavy thicket of the woods. This park is where she first encountered the demon, and where she first encountered the demon hunter.

He’d better not have done anything reckless. She wishes she could keep a closer eye on him, but the words he said were the truth. This vampire cannot be allowed to live for any longer.

Removing concerns for him from her mind, she races off across the snow and plunges past the tree-line. It’s already dark, but with a fresh layer of leaves between her and the sky it’s reached a new level of darkness. If she weren’t a vampire, she would be as blind as a bat.

She follows the dark stains across the earthen ground. The snow here is thinner than in the city, no doubt due to most of the snowflakes being caught in the treetops on the way down. There is plenty of cover; she is at a disadvantage while fighting the feral vampire in its home.

Regardless, she continues to follow the trail. Her father will not accept failure. She must protect the Vancratt clan from exposure to ANGEL, and to do that, the feral vampire must die.

At a certain point, the trail stops. She peers around into the darkness, but there are no signs of where the vampire went. She looks behind her, and sees that the trail has disappeared under a thin layer of snow. She doesn’t remember the way back.

Taking a deep breath, she closes her eyes and calms herself. If she can just climb a tree, she will be able to rectify her stranded situation. No, the more pressing issue is to find and kill her target.

Looking at the ground, she notices a few shredded pieces of bark. The tree in front of her has nail marks in its trunk, ones which match those of a humanoid. Something wet and sticky drips onto her shoulder, and upon glancing at it she realizes that it’s blood.

But not human blood.

Alice whips her head up, just as a black shadow from the canopies blots out her entire field of vision.

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One more step.

It’s all I can do to take one more step.

Standing up took far more effort than I expected, and every time my foot hits the ground more blood spurts from my wounds. It can’t be just the water – I’m guessing that vampire had more harmful bacteria in its mouth and nails. Despite having regenerative properties, my bloodstream has to be purged before my body can work on the actual wounds themselves. For now, I can only continue walking.

I can’t let Alice fight that thing alone. It’s just a gut feeling, but that thing could be more than a challenge for the Blood Princess. It being weakened does little to alleviate my fears.

Damn demons. I never would have expected that there would be fighting amongst their own race.

The trail is already beginning to disappear from the steadily falling snow, but Alice’s footsteps are still visible. As long as I follow those sandal prints, I’ll be able to find her.

Every inch of the journey I anxiously await her phone call of success. I want to call her to check up on her but if she’s fighting the monster in the forest, a phone call could well spell out her demise. I can only pray that my fears are wrong.

Countless steps later, I finally arrive at the park. I don’t know if the cold’s numbed my senses or if my body has finally gotten rid of the pollutants, but I’m able to walk without cringing. How fitting that the beast would flee back to where we first encountered it.

I’ve rested long enough. Steeling my resolve, I break into a light jog towards the woods.

\*\*\*

She doesn’t know where it is. Surrounded by the tall trees, she may as well be completely blind. With so many places to hide and attack from, she can only put faith into her other senses.

*Rustle.*

There. From the left. Something moves, and she whips herself around to narrowly avoid it. The vampire already caught her by surprise the first time, and it was all she could do to avoid having her head taken off. Her left arm droops limply by her side, broken and dislocated.

She holds her Divine Edge in her right hand, her dominant hand. The soft, silver glow lights up her immediate vicinity – an artificial moon in a realm of no light. If she can just get a clear window of time to focus…

*Snap.*

A twig, to the right this time. Alice raises her blade barely in time to block an attack from the shadows. Metal slides along metal, followed by a sharp pain in her side. The jacket given to her by her ally falls to the ground in a shredded heap, and the shadow disappears as quickly as it appeared.

She needs to find a way to slow it down, or to keep it in her sights for long enough to properly fight. Before the feral vampire can attack again she sprints off into the thicket, kicking up white snow as she does.

How can she turn this around?

Something moves behind her. She ducks instinctively, just as the low whoosh of a blade passes above her head. The crimson razor continues its path unhindered, cutting cleanly through the trunk of a tree. Alice leaps to the side as the giant log comes falling down, shaking the forest as it lands.

Hmm… it’s not certain if it will work, but it’s definitely worth a try.

\*\*\*

I don’t need the trail of blood, nor sandals to continue my pursuit. I already know which direction Alice has gone, even with no landmarks to guide me in the endless woods.

I can smell blood – her blood.

Most of the poison has been purged from my blood, but I still won’t be able to do anything too strenuous for a while. I continue to trek deeper into the wilderness, trusting my senses.

\*\*\*

The trees continue to fall as Alice ruthlessly slashes through them. Patches of dim moonlight begin to open up on the ground, brightening the silent forest if only by a bit. She keeps moving, making sure never to stay still enough for her enemy to pinpoint her location. All the while, her silver sword chops down the tall trees effortlessly.

When she’s finally satisfied she stops and leaps onto the highest fallen trunk, above the mass of fallen trees. She’s cleared her enemy’s habitat, creating a single flat arena to match it on even terms. The moon peeks out from behind the snow clouds and illuminates her enemy, allowing her to see it clearly. It glares with a primal rage at the girl and bounds off deeper into the woods.

Alice clutches at her shoulder and leaps down, chasing after it. She is reluctant, but will clear the whole forest if necessary if it means catching her target. Trees will regrow in a few decades, but if ANGEL catches wind of her clan it will not regrow even in a thousand decades. Their roles have reversed once again – she has resumed her part as the hunter.

Trees continue to fall, a single path clearing as she lashes through them with the speed and agility of a beast. Her strength is returning with each inch of moonlight that touches her skin, and it’s not long before she finally corners it.

They’ve arrived at the side of a ridge, and a simple cavity in the stone wall littered with bones, bloodstains and rotting corpses tells her that she’s found it – the vampire’s home.

It has nowhere to run now, with the tall rocky expanse towering behind it. Judging from its heavy breathing, it doesn’t have the stamina to continue running anyway.

Alice herself isn’t in the best condition either, but there’s nothing she can do. After all, she’s come all this way and destroyed half of the woods in doing so. The snow continues to fall, unhindered.

Brandishing her blade, she points it at the vampire with her uninjured hand as if issuing a silent challenge.

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This jacket… I’ve seen it before.

I grab it and shake the powdery snow off. The reason I’ve seen it before is because it belongs to me. It’s cleanly slit across the centre, and the warm blood that coats it definitely belongs to Alice.

Clenching my teeth, I break into a run. Each step racks my body with pain, but I can’t rule out the possibility that she’s in danger.

It isn’t long before I break into a clearing, glowing silver in the moonlight. Upon second glance, I realize that it’s not a clearing, and rather a circumference of fallen trees. They’ve been cleaved through at the base and cover the ground in an assortment of leaves and trunks.

There’s no way this could have been nature’s work. She was here for sure.

Letting out a steamy breath, I leap through the light snow and onto the trail of fallen trees.

\*\*\*

It’s fast.

She doesn’t know if it’s because she’s injured, or because it’s backed against a wall. She’s been on the defensive ever since the fight began.

It uses all the weapons it has at its disposal – its Divine Edge, its nails, its teeth, its body. It truly fights like an animal – a style no civilized being would be capable of. She has no idea how the boy managed to hold his own against this thing.

Sparks fly as their blades meet. The moon has disappeared behind the clouds and the forest is once again pitch black. Her blade is the only light in the darkness, and even so its silver glow is dimmer than usual due to her condition. Her movements are clumsy, her balance offset by her fractured arm. They cut each other again and again, only for their wounds to regenerate. To defeat it, she must either separate its head from its body, or completely destroy every inch of it in one blow.

It’s only natural that the feral vampire is stronger. It’s been feeding on O type blood for several days in a row while she’s been surviving on animal blood for several years. However, this isn’t something she can change. She’s lived with it up until now without a problem. She has to stay in the moment, maintain concentration.

The vampire’s fist clips her side, scraping the frock she’s wearing. An object falls out of her pocket and onto the ground – her phone.

In the brief moment in which she’s distracted, something goes piercing into her abdomen. She looks down and sees a jagged crimson edge. Reacting instinctively she pushes herself away with a cry of pain, creating a space between them to recover.

This isn’t good. If the fight drags on for any longer, she will lose. If only she could have a chance – something, anything that could turn the tide of the battle. She could destroy it in one blow if she could Soul Link – but to do that, she needs at least a few moments without being attacked.

Sensing imminent victory, the feral vampire lashes forward with a renewed sense of vigour. Filthy nails come at her when swings of the razor are blocked. Body slams connect with her when their blades refuse to make ground. She doesn’t know what to expect, and her body cannot keep up. The wound made by the enemy’s Divine Edge isn’t healing quickly enough, and she’s beginning to feel light-headed.

Something… anything that can help her…

“ALICE!”

A distant shout from the path of fallen trees. Alice cannot help but look away, her focus broken.

And in this moment, her enemy strikes.

\*\*\*

She’s there, at the end of the path. Her white frock is stained red, and her left arm hangs limply by her side. The feral vampire is in no better condition, but its base strength is simply stronger. If this goes on for any longer, she will die.

I capture all this in a single blink of the eye. I’m too far away to help. If I could Soul Link, I would be able to reach her in time – but my body simply won’t allow it. Human bodies know their limits, and will not allow you to willingly kill yourself. You can try to commit suicide by holding your breath, but you’ll instinctively breathe in when your body reaches its limit. If I synchronize completely with Nightfall, it takes a full day of rest before I can do it again without destroying all the muscle fibres in my body. In my current condition, Soul Linking is out of the question.

What can I do then? My eyes capture the scene before me, frame by frame. My mind moves at lightning fast speed, my perception at its very pinnacle. Something… *anything* at all that can turn the tide of this battle.

Without realizing it, I’ve found the answer. My body has already determined its course of action, and I can feel my hand reaching into my pocket. My thoughts catch up and overtake my body in a flash, and I find my eyes stopping on the mobile phone that lies on the ground in the distance.

*Faster!*

My hands close around my own phone. I know what to do. *I know what to do.* But can I make it in time?

*Faster!!*

My mouth is open. I’ve unlocked my phone – never have I been more relieved that I don’t protect it with a passcode.

*FASTER!*

“ALICE!”

My shout travels at three hundred and forty metres per second, and reaches her ears. She turns to me, a look of surprise and horror as she realizes that she’s given her opponent an opening.

I press the speed-dial button on my phone, just as the feral vampire closes in for the final blow.

\*\*\*

*Bzzzzzt.*

The loud vibrating of her phone distracts the vampire. It can’t help but turn its head a few metres away to look at it.

Alice is about to turn to retreat, but realizes in an instant that this is what she needed.

A chance. An opportunity.

The vampire stumbles backwards as the brightness of the screen temporarily stuns it. The forest is almost pitch black due to the blanket of grey blotting out the moon, and the vampire is at the peak of its powers from its diet of O type blood. Every single vampire knows that greater power comes with greater weakness – pure blooded vampires are stronger at night, but weaker in the day. Half vampires are not as strong at night, but also not as weak in the day. Vampires which feed on the most potent type of blood gain tremendous strength, but pay for it with tremendous weakness.

Because of these conditions, the brightness of the ringing phone which wouldn’t blind Alice or the boy… is like staring into the sun for the feral vampire.

Alice widens her stance, a single arm holding her Divine Edge before her. Ranked as one of the most powerful weapons known to her clan, her strength comes not only from her battle prowess, but from the purity of her soul which she wields. The silver aura emanating from the blade flares to life and surrounds her as she welcomes it to her body, allowing it to multiply her strength tenfold. The snow continues to fall in the darkness but curves away from her slight frame. Even nature respects the power of her Divine Edge.

The soft light grows into a harsh one as she channels all her energy into the longsword. Only she is not blinded by this magnificence, because this is what she is, a shining light in the darkness. The pressure in the air intensifies, electrifies, and drops. The boy’s ears pop as he watches on in wonder. Alice’s eyes flare red, glowing almost as brightly as the sword in her hands. The feral vampire looks up having finally recovered, only to find itself face to face with its death.

The silver light builds up to a pinnacle, burning as brightly as the sun. Alice lets out a cry and steps forward, placing every last ounce of her strength into this thrust. The tip of her sword pierces the vampire’s chest, before igniting and exploding in a supernova of silver.

Chapter Eleven: Heads or Tails

A small moon is born on earth.

The tiny singularity of silver expands and detonates inside the vampire’s chest before continuing on its path. Speeding like a laser it rips into the ridge behind it, completely cutting through the rock. It continues for a while, before widening and expanding. The beam of moonlight irradiates the night sky, so brightly that it almost seems like day for an instant. As if the moon has landed on earth, and shattered into a thousand rays of silver.

Of course, I can’t see most of it since I shut my eyes automatically as soon as the light first detonated. However, after the winds have finished buffeting and the deafening roar in my ears finally subsides, when I finally open my eyes again ignoring the patches of red still dancing around my vision, I instinctively know.

This is her Soul Link.

I stride towards her, taking care not to worsen my wounds as I do so. She lies on her knees panting before the lower half of the feral vampire. Its upper half is nowhere to be seen… along with the middle section of the stone ridge. Instead a huge canyon has formed where the ray of moonlight hit, and a massive pile of debris and dust has settled at its base. I can only barely make out the opposite end of the gorge. The power contained in that single blow can only be described in one word – Godlike. The ability to modify the features of the earth itself, to create new landmarks.

“Moonlight,” Alice whispers.

The silver longsword in her hand shimmers and disappears, its role fulfilled.

“I hoped I wouldn’t have to use it. I have no idea how many lives I ruined today.”

What a fitting name – the name of her Divine Edge could not have been anything else.

“The birds and the insects and the flowers… all for a single enemy.”

I kneel down and touch her lifeless left arm, probing gently. The bones have already set, and are beginning to mend. It will probably take a few days to regenerate a wound of this caliber – as opposed to the few months it would take an ordinary person.

“It’s over now,” I reassure, still trembling at the awesomeness of her attack. “No amount of thinking will change what happened. Your clan is safe. The feral vampire is dead.”

I pull her to her feet. Her hair is disheveled, and snow is beginning to settle on her fine blonde strands. Her frock is torn and bloodstained – we both look like we’ve stepped out of a war movie.

It’s over. We’ve won.

But the look on Alice’s face… is as if she’s lost.

“Hey, you owe me a jacket,” I say, trying to draw her away from her thoughts.

It seems to work. “I… Sorry. I was careless.”

I smile despite myself. We just narrowly avoided death and she’s worrying about a piece of clothing, and the amount of trees she killed.

“You look happy,” she says, and I can tell she’s trying not to dwell on it either. “Thinking of what you’re going to do with the money?”

I freeze. Money… yes, that’s right. It was all for the money, wasn’t it?

Right?

“Y-yeah,” I say.

I hope I’m convincing enough to her, because I sure aren’t convincing myself. Somewhere along the way, the thought of the bounty completely slipped my head. The real reason I’d followed her, the real reason I’d fought with her…

I wanted to help her. I wanted to protect her. By saving my life, even with questionable methods, I… I felt like I owed myself to her.

Looking away in embarrassment, I head over to the vampire’s small alcove. The smell of rotting flesh overwhelms me, and I have to struggle not to throw up.

“It stopped snowing,” Alice says from behind me.

I look at the pile of bones. There are bits and pieces of human litter amongst them – even here, out in the wilderness, humanity has left their mark.

“Wait a second… what’s this?”

Alice has stopped beside me and picks up a plastic wrapping. It looks like a panel of medicine tablets, except all the pills are gone.

“There’s more,” she continues, rifling through the junk.

I come closer to her to see. She’s right, there are more empty bottles and boxes of pills and drugs.

“This… this is cocaine,” she says, holding up a clear zip bag with traces of white inside.

“How do you know?”

“We dealt in drugs during a time when our clan was financially burdened. Those times are long past, but I’ve seen enough to be sure that this is an illicit drug.”

She kicks at the various pills and bottles. “In fact, I think these are all illegal drugs. Why else would they have no labels on them?”

She’s right. An unsettling feeling is taking over me.

“Why… why would there be drugs in a place like this?”

Alice turns to me, her mouth drawn into a thin line. “Drugs have a greater effect on vampires than humans, especially ones that tamper with the sensations we feel. In fact… some of them can make us lose our minds and become insane.”

We quietly stare back at the remains of the feral vampire behind us.

“Where would it have obtained all of this?” I ask, already knowing the answer.

“Someone… someone gave them to it.”

She tosses the litter aside. At that moment, a small cough startles us.

“Where’d that come from?” I ask.

Alice wordlessly pries apart some of the bones and the rotting corpses in the corner with her working arm. I swallow and help her, trying to ignore the sensation and the smell of the flesh as much as I can. It isn’t long before we find the source of the voice.

“It was a mother,” she whispers.

The newborn vampire stares at us with wide, curious eyes. It doesn’t look very old, a few weeks at most. It looks almost like a human child, except for its red eyes and the feral aura it gives off.

“So this is why it suddenly appeared out of nowhere,” Alice says. “It gave birth, and the newborn probably wasn’t satisfied with animal blood.”

The baby continues to stare wide-eyed at us.

“Are you saying someone mated with that… thing?” I ask.

“Well… babies have to come from somewhere, you know. I wouldn’t be surprised if the father was the one who supplied all these drugs.”

I continue to stare at the baby. It doesn’t look dangerous now, but it could well grow up to become a threat to society.

I have to kill it.

Before I know it, I’ve drawn Nightfall.

“What are you doing?” Alice reacts. “It’s just a baby!”

“Its mother was under the influence of drugs,” I say. An unsettling calm has taken over me. “There’s no telling what side effects could be present in the child.”

*It has to die.*

*It has to die, or it could ruin the life of an innocent, just like what happened to me.*

*It could grow up like its mother, and kill so many like she did.*

“Even so… you can’t just kill it! It hasn’t done anything wrong yet!”

“It’s what your father would do. You can’t risk raising a feral infant that may or may not be controlled. If we leave it out here, it could become just as dangerous as its mother was.”

Alice immediately materializes Moonlight, but cringes in pain and drops it. The blade hits the ground and disappears.

She won’t be able to fight for a while, not after an attack like that.

“No,” she says, crouching over in pain. “You can’t.”

I take a good long look at her. She truly doesn’t want to kill it – her soul is too pure. She worries about everything, even the plants and animals she shares the same oxygen with.

Because of this, she is weak. Only the strong can survive in this world.

“I’ll go deep into the woods,” I finally say. “I’ll drop it somewhere where it won’t ever return to civilization. If it can’t fend for itself, it’s not my problem.”

Alice holds my gaze. “You promise you won’t kill it?”

It takes everything I have not to look away. “I won’t kill it.”

She slowly stands up, still maintaining eye contact. “I’ll head back first then. You know the way, right?”

I nod. I know the general direction.

She stays for a while longer, before turning and slowly trotting along the path of severed trunks.

When she moves out of sight, I lift the baby up to eye level. I don’t want to kill it.

*Rain.*

*A horde of wraiths, whispering over and over again.*

*Dad’s tombstone, carved far too early.*

*Judith in a hospital bed, tubes and IV drips connected everywhere along her body.*

“I have to do it,” I say to myself. “As long as there is a chance the demon could harm society, I have to kill it.”

It’s what ANGEL would want me to do. It’s the ‘right’ thing to do.

But Alice’s pleading look resurfaces in my mind.

Is it really the right thing to do?

I sit on a rock as the clouds eventually clear, and the beginnings of light begin to shine across the horizon. I still haven’t come to a decision. The baby has already fallen asleep.

In the end, I decide to flip a coin.

If it’s heads, I’ll kill it. If it’s tails, I’ll leave it out here with a one percent chance of survival.

The coin toss is the longest in my life. When it finally lands, I can’t help but question what I’m about to do.

Chapter Twelve: Motivational Words

When I knocked on the door to Shizuka’s room, she wasn’t pleased. Her hair was tangled and she was still bleary eyed from being woken up at three AM, but as soon as she saw me that look of annoyance was replaced by one of concern.

“You look like you’ve come back from the dead,” she murmurs, scanning me from head to toe.

*You should have seen me when I just got home*.

Covered from head to toe in dried river water, my bloodstained clothes reduced to rags, it took the stealth of a panther to sneak through the house and take a shower. I threw out my clothes on the way back to dispose of the evidence, and the contact lenses are once again sitting comfortably in my eyes.

There’s no way I could sleep after what just happened in the woods, so I decided to come here straight away to claim my prize. It’s actually the first time I’ve seen her without makeup or a cigarette in her mouth, and in fluffy pink pajamas too. I’m not surprised at all that she can see the mental tiredness in my eyes.

“Come in,” she yawns. “You’re lucky I’m in charge of you, any sensible person would tell you to come back in the morning.”

“It *is* the morning.”

“No it’s not, it’s the middle of the night.”

She heads back into the living room, flipping on the light switch. “Can I get you anything? Tea? Coffee? Or do you plan to go back to sleep later?”

“I’ll take tea,” I decide. I’m definitely not feeling sleepy – the excitement of the battle, the thoughts going through my head concerning my decision with the baby, the anticipation of my prize… I’ll probably be sleeping for a whole day once it all dies down, but for now I can’t stop my heart from racing.

The soothing sound of a kettle hissing calms my nerves, if only slightly. Now that I think about it, the air here is surprisingly fresh. Maybe I should come more often at night.

“So what happened?” Shizuka asks, stifling a yawn. “Something big, I’ll wager.”

“I killed it,” I say. “The feral vampire.”

I don’t hear anything. Concerned that she nodded off, I pivot my head from the couch and see a rare sight.

She’s surprised.

I’ve seen her happy, angry and sad (usually after a date gone wrong)… but never surprised.

“…Wow.”

She stands there stupidly as the kettle pings to signal the completion of its task.

“Don’t you want to see proof?” I ask, slightly unsettled.

She shakes her head. “I believe you. It feels like the battle really shook you… something’s changed.”

Well… the hardest part was after the fight itself.

I bring out my phone and the picture of the lower half of the vampire. I deliberately took it from a position where she wouldn’t be able to tell that half the forest had been cleared, and a new canyon formed. If ANGEL found out about the cost of our victory… I have no idea what would happen, but it wouldn’t be good. For now, I’ll sit back and let the conspiracy theorists do the work for me.

“You completely destroyed it,” she marvels, handing me a mug of tea. “Are you sure you’re not taking the credit for someone else’s work?”

“Nope. If I weren’t there, that thing would still be alive.”

Well, that’s not a lie. Alice would have died if I didn’t give her a chance to fire off that beam.

“You’ve really gotten stronger,” she says. “When I first met you I thought you were just an arrogant brat. But here you are now, taking on A level threats. Guess I didn’t need to call in aid from District Thirteen after all.”

It’s rare to be praised by my superior, so I take it in like a puppy being rewarded by its master. “Aw, it was nothing. I was always this strong, you just never gave me a chance to prove myself.”

“Hah, I guess you’re still an arrogant brat – but at least your arrogance is well founded now.”

I’m not sure whether that was a compliment or not.

Shizuka comes around and sits on the sofa beside me. “I’ll have the money transferred to your account. Take a break for a few days – you’ve earned it.”

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I ended up skipping school that day, because I felt like it.

It’s Wednesday now and even though it was only two nights ago that the feral vampire was killed, it feels like everything’s changed. A sense of nostalgia overcomes me as I sit down in class, ready to begin lessons.

Two days ago I walked through those gates as a demon for the first time. Today, I walk through as a feral vampire slayer, and the proud owner of ten thousand dollars.

As my eyes wander over to Alice’s empty seat, I wonder what will become of her. Will she still continue to attend Fifth Hill High? Or will she disappear, never to be seen again?

“You look terrible,” Dennis remarks from beside me.

“Really?” I feign ignorance. “I guess I didn’t sleep well last night.”

“Huh. Could it be that the aliens did something to you?”

“Aliens?” I ask. I’m already beginning to see where this is heading.

“Yeah. Didn’t you see the news this morning? There were strange lights reported from the woods around Ashbrook, and a huge section of the trees were cleared. That’s not the strangest thing though – something blasted through the ridge and created a small canyon right in the middle.”

I feign surprise. “Wow. But aliens… really?”

News sure does travel fast.

Dennis shrugs. “There’s no natural explanation for the incident, so people are going crazy with the theories.”

It’s not too far from the truth, really. Demons and Divine Edges are pretty much just different words for aliens and high tech weapons.

With that said, the door opens and Mrs. Kuksal strides in. I guess Alice really won’t be coming in today.

As she begins to read off the names in alphabetical order by surname, I become increasingly aware of a sharp gaze on my neck. I turn my head just in time to come face to face with a crumpled ball of paper, inches away from my face. Before I can register this I’ve caught the ball, surprising both myself and the sender.

Leo’s scowling face glares at me from across the room. Bringing the paper under my desk, I unfold it.

*We need to talk.*

Well, this is unlike Leo. If he wanted to say something he’d usually just single me out during class or a break and confront me, rather than give me prior warning.

Just as I’m contemplating whether or not to accept his request, the door opens.

“Oh, Alice! There you are, you’re just in time to avoid being late.”

Mrs. Kuksal cheerily sends out a greeting and sends her off to her seat.

“Sorry, Miss. I got caught up in traffic.”

Liar. You live close enough to walk here.

I don’t even realize I’m smiling to myself as she goes and takes her seat, shortly before the first period begins.

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“So what’s the problem?” I grumpily ask as Leo confronts me during lunch. I’d intended to ask Alice about her current plans, but I can’t exactly ignore him now.

“Our school got knocked out in the quarter finals yesterday,” he grumbles.

“Quarter finals? For what?”

“Karate, what else?”

Huh… what’s the big deal?

“Quarter finals is pretty good,” I say, unsure of where this is going. “For such an unknown school, at least.”

Leo nods in agreement. “We did our best, and all that practicing paid off. But… Ashley’s really been beating herself up over our loss.”

“Hmm… it’s not her fault though, is it?”

“It’s not. But she still feels somewhat responsible for the loss… and she seems really depressed. I can’t stress to her enough that she did everything she could, but still…”

“So what’s this got to do with me?”

Leo pauses for a moment, before shakily lowering his head.

“I need you to cheer her up. I feel like you’re the only one who could do it.”

Well, well… I never would have thought the day would come.

“So… you’re asking me for a favour now? After all the shit I’ve had to take from you?”

I hear his breath catch in his throat. “Pl… please. I’ve never seen her like this… do it for her, if not for me.”

I revel in this newfound sense of power. “What’s in it for me? Why would I suddenly help one of my enemies?”

Leo keeps his eyes fixed to the ground. “I’ll pay you money. I’ll stop picking on you. I’ll…”

“I don’t need your money,” I smirk.

I’ve already made up my mind about helping her out – after all, I can’t say no to someone who’s been so nice to me. I just need to keep up this act to get Leo on his knees and begging for mercy.

“Please,” he begs again. “I’m sorry for being an asshole to you, and I know saying it doesn’t really do anything but I’m apologizing anyway.”

“Are you really though?” I sneer. “Look me in the eye and say it.”

Leo slowly raises his head and holds onto my gaze… before cursing.

“Godamnit…”

“I thought so.”

I let out a heavy sigh. I suppose I’m still in a good mood from the recent turn of events.

“Alright, I’ll help her out. I seriously hope things change between us from here on.”

“Thank you,” he bows again. “I won’t forget this.”

Next thing you know, a night’s rest will have him picking on me again.

Leo keeps his head bowed as I turn and stride away. I might as well get started now – I don’t like seeing Ashley down in the dumps just as much as Leo doesn’t.

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This is the first time I’ve stepped into Ashley’s class. She’s actually in the top class for most of her subjects that are ranked, so a commoner like me intruding is a rare sight. I hate to say it, but lots of the geniuses in these classes are either loners or elitists.

Ignoring the curious and condescending gazes from the superiors in the room, I head towards Ashley’s lone desk. There’s a depressing aura around her, probably the reason why everyone including her friends are nowhere to be seen. They probably think she needs some time to herself. I’m going to hope that Leo’s plan of having me cheer her up works.

“Yo,” I greet, slumping down in front of her. “Mind if I have lunch with you?”

At first, she seems not to have heard. Then, slowly, she lifts her head and looks at me from behind her bangs. There are shadows under her eyes, clear signs that she hasn’t slept well. This was probably how I looked yesterday morning.

“Okay,” she says quietly, pulling the lid off her lunch. Well, it’s a start.

“I heard about what happened,” I decide to begin. “You shouldn’t dwell too much on it. You trained pretty hard, I’m sure everyone’s proud of how far you guys came.”

I’ve never really had to comfort anyone before, so I hope I’m not just making things worse.

“Everyone had such high hopes,” she murmurs. “We were going to make it to the finals… maybe even qualify for the nationals. But we didn’t even make it to the semis…”

“Well, of course it’s not going to be easy,” I reply. “I mean, you are going up against some of the toughest schools in the district. Some of them are schools specialized in sports, they have far superior equipment and facilities, as well as coaches. It’s not really your fault.”

“We trained so hard, but we still didn’t stand a chance…”

Oh boy… I’m starting to get a bit sick of her defeatist attitude.

“Look,” I say, my voice slightly rising in volume. “That just means you need to train more, improve, evolve. It’s not the end of the world – there’s still next-“

Oh shit.

“This was my last year,” she whispers. “And the last for a lot of other seniors too.”

“W-well, I’m sure you just got the juniors and freshmen fired up for next year,” I say. “I mean… there’s still university and stuff, right? I’m sure they have clubs and tournaments there.”

She sighs and doesn’t say anything. What am I supposed to do now?

“Be proud of what you achieved,” I say. “You’re a martial artist. You can defend yourself if anyone tries to beat you up – that’s already more than what I can do. Hold on a sec.”

I turn my back to her and whip out my phone, doing a quick Google search.

“Here’s something that Bruce Lee, one of the greatest martial artists in the world once said. ‘A goal is not always meant to be reached, it often serves simply as something to aim at.’ It’s not about the destination, but about the journey. You were aiming for the top – you didn’t reach it, but you came close. You inspired the school, raised the bar for everyone else. You made friends and enemies. You became strong.”

I’ve unconsciously stood up. “Martial arts aren’t about winning or losing. They’re about a way of life, about sets of values which you uphold and keep with you forever. Sure you lost, and it’s good to feel frustrated. Isn’t it so much more exciting to know that you’ve still got a ways to go? That there are still so many strong opponents to beat? I’m sure you’ll run into them again in university. There’ll be plenty of opportunities to fight again. Do you think they’re not afraid of you? While you’re here, sulking in the corner, they’ll be training to widen the gap. Do you want that? Or do you want to look up, stop looking back, and take one step forward? The journey’s not over yet, Ashley. That goal isn’t going anywhere, even if you graduate, even if you die.”

I stop, panting. Around me, everyone suddenly breaks into a massive round of applause.

“Bravo!”

“Well said!”

“That was so motivational it almost made me cry…”

C-crap… I just made a fool of myself in front of the geniuses…

Ashley gives a small smile before hastily covering her mouth. “You’re so embarrassingly corny,” she says.

I quickly sit down, searching for a hole to hide in. But I can see the usual glint in her eyes again, the glint that was missing before.

Thanks, Bruce. I owe you one – and it seems like my bullshitting skills are still on point. I literally picked the first quote from the Google search.

“Leo put you up to this, didn’t he?” she asks, beginning to eat.

“Uh… well…”

“You don’t have to lie. He’s such a good brother, only he’d think of this.”

Yeah, whatever you say…

“You’re right, though. I got so caught up with winning that I forgot the reason I tried out karate for the first time – just in case any scary men tried to force themselves on me, I could defend myself.”

“W-well… that’s one way to put it.”

“Although if it were you… I wouldn’t mind,” she says, a suggestive look in her eyes.

“A-Anyway,” I say, quickly looking away. “My work here is –“

“Not so fast. The match is still fresh on my mind, Bran. I need you to overwrite those memories with something happy.”

I’m not sure I like where this is going. “Like what?”

Ashley grins, leaning over to whisper in my ear. “Go on a date with me.”

Chapter Thirteen: A Date gone Horribly Wrong

The shopping centre is packed, typical of a Saturday morning. Even though there are couples everywhere, I can’t help but feel a little self-conscious.

Nothing eventful’s happened in the past few days. I’m a bit relieved and bored by this recent turn of events – none of my patrols have yielded anything, and Shizuka’s received no reports about demon threats. It was pretty much just an ordinary school week, albeit one filled with growing apprehension regarding this ‘date’.

“Come on, Bran! Let’s go, let’s go!”

The thing is, Ashley didn’t come here to shop. Dragging my hand and pulling me through the mall, we’re one of the first to reach the ice rink as the previous session ends. Seeing her like this puts me at ease though. It looks like she truly has recovered from her slump.

“You should have worn a jacket,” she says to me. “It’s pretty cold, unless you skate a lot.”

“I would’ve,” I begin. “But I lost it.”

I almost said ‘but Alice lost it,’ which would have been bad. Most of the people are wrapped up in winter wear, and I’m one of the only ones only wearing a single layer. Maybe I should pretend to be a little cold, just to try and fit in.

Ashley is the first to step onto the ice, adapting to the rental skates in a matter of seconds. She’s already moving smoothly around, skating as if it’s second nature to her. I can’t help but be a little nervous in anticipation of when it’s my turn.

I’ve actually never skated before in my life.

Just as I think this, a whiff of something pleasant passes me. Turning my head instinctively, I realize that it’s a family of two parents and their small child. They must have O type blood, or I wouldn’t have reacted as strongly.

I sure am glad I filled up on Alice’s animal blood yesterday.

“Come on, Bran!” Ashely urges. “Don’t just sit there, you have to skate with me! This is a date, you got it? D – A – T-“

“Yeah yeah,” I say, cutting her off. I don’t want her drawing any more attention than she already is.

Putting on the skates and strapping them on firmly, I take one step onto the ice… and my foot immediately comes out from under me. A sharp pain hits my behind as I slip backwards.

Ashley giggles. “You suck! Don’t tell me you’ve never skated before?”

“H-Hey, it’s not that uncommon is it?”

She extends a hand which I grab onto and pulls me up. I immediately hug the barrier at the edge of the rink to prevent another fall.

“I guess I’ll have to be the man this time,” she sighs. “Usually the guy is meant to teach the girl, not the other way around.”

She snatches my hand and slowly moves forward, keeping me in tow. I focus on maintaining my balance, but quickly realize how much harder it is than it looks.

“I give up,” I say. “This is too hard.”

“You’re pathetic,” Ashely shakes her head. “Look at that little boy. He’s learning faster than you are.”

She points to an infant in the distance, skimming over the ice as if he weighs nothing. My morale immediately plummets even lower.

“Maybe you should go do a bit of your own skating for a while,” I say. “It must be pretty frustrating for you to teach amateurs like me.”

Ashley sighs. “You’re right. If you still can’t last ten seconds without falling over we’re going to do this every week until you can.”

…I’m not sure how to feel at this.

As she disappears off into the distance, I propel myself forward a tiny bit. Wobbling unsteadily, I quickly return to the solace of the barrier before I lose control.

“This is ridiculous,” I mutter. “If only I could just run normally without these things… I’m sure I’d be faster too.”

A group of kids skate past casually as if it were the simplest thing in the world. One of them is even moving backwards.

Alright, that does it.

I push off from the wall, gradually building up speed. Using every inch of my focus, I manoeuvre my body to maintain a low centre of gravity. The cool air blows against me as I gradually pick up speed, one firm stroke at a time.

Maybe this isn’t so bad after all-

Just as I think this, I realize there’s a problem – the other end of the barrier is coming up at a dangerously fast speed, and I don’t know how to brake or turn.

And then I collide with a huge *bang*, drawing the attention of everyone in the rink. Pain streaks through my body like a lightning bolt and I go tumbling onto the ground. As the throbbing in my body slowly subsides, a few faces pop in above my vision.

“You alright there?”

“I’m fine,” I yelp, my face turning red. I pull myself up and reassure the people around me, who reluctantly leave. I think I’m going to take it slowly from now on.

“Crikey! Who woulda thought you’d be here of all places!”

A heavy hand slaps me on the back, knocking the wind out of my already battered ribcage. I turn to the direction of the gruff voice and see a familiar face.

“Baz?”

A huge figure looms over me. His form-fitting shirt barely holds back his rippling muscles, and he has a childish grin plastered over his face. We used to call him Ginger because of his shaggy red mane back at ANGEL, but after he shaved it to a buzz cut we started calling him Bazza. Now I just call him Baz because it’s one syllable less.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

“Mate, you do realize this place is close to the Fourteenth District, don’t you?”

Hmm… now that he mentions it, he’s got a point. There’s a bit of overlap between Districts Fourteen and Fifteen, and it’s not uncommon to find fellow demon hunters from neighbouring areas at the place.

Bazza wraps his arm around my shoulder and grinds my head with the knuckles of his other hand. I push him away before I get crushed to a pulp.

“So what are you doing here?” I ask.

“Oh, ya know. I was just helpin’ my brother Byron ice skate; there’s a chick in his class he’s got his eye on.”

He points behind him to where a younger, smaller and less ripped version of himself is skating – a little shakily, but still miles better than me. The boy grunts and salutes at me in the distance.

“Bran! Are you alright?” another voice cries out.

Someone stops beside me and grips both my shoulders before I can react. I find myself uncomfortably close to Ashley’s face.

“That sounded painful,” she frets.

She checks my shoulder and stomach tentatively, before bending down to probe my bruised knee.

“I – I’m fine,” I stammer. I see Bazza’s face slowly break into a sly grin.

“Ohoho, who’s this?” he smirks. “I always knew you were a fair bugger, but I never thought you were actually keen for women.”

What? Why does everyone think I’m gay!?

“She’s just a friend,” I quickly say.

“Really?”

“For now,” Ashley adds, throwing me a glare.

Baz quickly pulls me aside, almost yanking my arm off with his strength. Turning so Ashley can’t hear us, he frantically whispers into my ear.

“Bloody oath mate, she’s smokin’! Where do ya find these chicks? Help a bloke out!”

“Dude, I didn’t ask for any of this,” I shoot back.

I suddenly realize that the whole ice rink’s gone quiet, thrown into a buzz of hushed whispering. Pushing Baz away from me, we turn around to see what the source of the commotion is.

“Oh god no,” I whisper.

Three people have just stepped onto the ice rink and are skating smoothly and efficiently towards us. One of them is my sister, Judith. Another is Ashley’s brother, Leo.

And the third… gliding along like a professional figure skater is a certain blonde girl in a white summer frock. Over that is a familiar black jacket, one that was torn and bloodstained last time I saw it but is now patched up and stitched together neatly.

I curse to myself, causing disdainful glances from a nearby family.

Alice, Judith and Leo approach us casually, waving.

“What a coincidence,” Leo says. “Who would’ve thought we’d bump into each other here of all places?”

You bloody… coincidence my ass!

“What are you all doing here?” Ashley pouts. “I wanted some time alone with Bran, too…”

“My, my,” Judith muses. “You’re quite the womanizer aren’t you?”

Alice remains silent. Her frock is brand new – there are no signs of the damages from the previous battle, or at least none that I can see. She must have a whole wardrobe of them. The jacket on the other hand…

“Why are you wearing that?” I ask.

“Because it’s cold,” she snaps.

I thought vampires weren’t supposed to feel the cold?

As Judith, Alice and Ashley start off with their girl talk, I yank Leo aside. “What is the meaning of this?”

Leo shrugs. “Just need to make sure you don’t try anything creepy on my sister. As love-struck as she is.”

“What about them?” I gesture to Judith and Alice. “Did you really have to bring them? Mum’s going to roast my ass about this!”

Leo shrugs. “Believe it or not, they were already tailing you before I bumped into them. From there, following you became easy. Nice ice skating skills, by the way.”

I scowl at his smirk. “Well, now I know you’re following me, so what’s the point?”

Leo jerks his thumb to the side. “I got worried when I saw the big guy, just in case he was going to help you abduct her or something.”

I want to hit this guy, but forcefully restrain myself.

“When Ashley started getting all touchy feely with you after the fall, Judith and Alice both stepped on at once so I figured I’d come too.”

The sound of laughter redirects our heads. Both our gazes turn to where Baz is staring, mesmerized at the three girls as they become acquainted with each other at an unnervingly fast speed. You’d think they were lifelong friends from a glance.

“Oi, stop looking so hungrily at my sister,” I say, snapping my fingers in front of Bazza’s face.

He turns with a distant look on his face. “Fair dinkum… you’re one lucky bastard, ya know? Surrounded by all these lovely sheilas…”

He shakes himself as if waking up from a dream. “I have to do it while this image is fresh in my mind…”

“Do what?”

“I’ll be right back – needa use the shitter for an hour or two…”

Before he can skate away both Leo and I grasp on his shirt and pull, yanking him back.

“You’re not going anywhere,” we both say simultaneously.

Barry sighs, slowly getting to his feet. “Alright, alright… geez, don’t get your knickers in a knot.”

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“Still feeling up for more?” I ask Ashley as we sit outside McDonalds, eating lunch. Our date for two somehow turned out to be a group outing.

Ashley turns her head. “Of course. I’m not going to let *them* ruin it for us.”

Everyone else casually looks away.

“Nothin’ like some Maccas after some hard yakka,” Barry says. “Eh, Byron?”

“Hard yakka my butt, you didn’t do anything except try to hit on girls,” his brother retorts.

“Hey, can’t blame a man for followin’ his instincts.”

Ashley and Judith were a bit hesitant at first, but in the end Bazza’s down to earth and honest personality won them over. If it’s one thing I admired about that guy, it’s his charisma. You can’t help but admire his straight-forwardness.

As the Samson brothers and Leo make idle conversation with Ashley and Judith, I lean over to Alice and speak in a soft tone. “Be careful around him. He’s from ANGEL.”

She wordlessly nods, and I notice her posture stiffen.

I suppose the day wasn’t that bad - it could have gone a lot worse. I think Ashley was originally intending to wander around for a bit and shop after lunch, but with more people than intended our plans will probably change.

It’s actually been so long since I’ve last just had an ordinary day out with friends just walking around, chatting, laughing, eating, hanging out in general. I’ve been so caught up in the other half of my life lately that I’ve forgotten what it’s like to be an ordinary high schooler. If we replaced Leo with Dennis, it would be perfect.

*This isn’t bad at all,* I think to myself.

“Bran, can I try some of your smoothie?”

Before I can answer, Ashley reaches out and grabs the cup from out of my hands.

“Oi, hold on a second,” I begin, but she’s already latched her lips around the straw. She looks incredibly happy at this small action.

Bazza, Leo and Judith watch with disgusted faces. “Just get a room already,” Bazza says.

Ashley shoots a victorious glance at Alice, who turns away. After what seems like a moment of consideration, Alice clumsily drops her half-eaten burger onto the floor.

“Oops.”

That didn’t sound convincing at all.

Eyeing my own half-eaten one, she looks at me expectantly. “Do you mind if I have some of yours? You look like you’re full already.”

“Hold on,” Ashley protests. “Bran’s a growing boy. You can take mine!”

“Yours has meat.”

“Tch…!”

I’m starting to get sick of this.

“Just take my stuff,” I growl, thrusting the remains of my meal in front of me. “I’ll go buy some more.”

Without waiting for a response, I excuse myself from the table and head back to the fast food restaurants. I’ve never really understood the concept of indirect kisses – it’s just sharing food and drink, there’s nothing more to it.

Just as I take my place at the back of a queue, watching Ashley steal most of my food from Alice, a blaring alarm begins to sound.

Surprised at first, it isn’t long before an announcement rings across the shopping centre and sends everyone into a state of unease.

*“Attention, all shoppers. Attention, all shoppers. This is an emergency. Please evacuate the shopping centre in a calm and orderly fashion via your nearest exit. I repeat, please evacuate via your nearest exit. This is an emergency.”*

All thoughts of food immediately leave my mind as I see people beginning to stand up and head off. They clearly don’t think too much of it, however I’ve already noticed a few security guards closing in around the edges of the food court.

This is real.

Hurrying back to our table, I gesture for everyone to get up.

“Let’s go guys,” I say. “We don’t want to stay around here when the crowds really start moving.”

“It’s probably just a drill,” Leo dismisses. “I mean, what are the chances-“

Just as those words leave his mouth, something breaks down the fire exit in the distance and leaps into view.

It’s a pale humanoid, dressed in tatters with long uncut nails and dirty blond hair. Even though I’ve only seen one of them before, I immediately know what it is – and I’m sure Alice does too.

A feral vampire.

Chapter Fourteen: The First Vampire

*“Attention, all shoppers. Attention, all shoppers. This is an emergency. Please evacuate the shopping centre in a calm and orderly fashion via your nearest exit. I repeat, please evacuate via your nearest exit. This is an emergency.”*

The announcer’s voice blares over the food court yet again. Some customers still haven’t caught sight of the feral vampire and are moving along as if they have all the time in the world, but that’s about to change.

The vampire moves quickly and pounces on an overweight woman, tackling her to the ground. She lets out a scream before her chest explodes in a mist of red. This sound finally seems to draw some attention, and that’s when the real panic begins.

Barry looks out at me from the corner of his eye, his mouth twisted in a snarl. “Demons,” he mutters under his breath.

I nod in response. Beside me, Alice’s fists are balled up so tightly that her palms must be bleeding.

The vampire continues to feed on the corpse with no regard to the chaos ensuing around it. A few moments later another one leaps in through the broken fire exit, followed by a third. They shiver with excitement like small children in a confectionary factory.

“Shit,” I curse. “We need to leave. Now!”

Grabbing Ashley and Judith’s hands, I haul them with me as fast as possible to where the crowd has begun to merge into one giant stampede. Screams are thrown everywhere as people are caught and killed – I think the vampires have long since stopped killing for food, and are rather doing so out of enjoyment or some other factor.

As someone right next to me is taken down and slaughtered, I clench my fist and sock the vampire right in the face. It goes sprawling back into a table, splintering it before collapsing in a heap.

“We have to stay back,” I say to Barry. Alice looks like she’s about to leap into battle at any second so I place an arm firmly on her shoulder.

“Get everyone to safety,” I growl.

“You can’t fight them on your own-“

I move in towards her so that Barry doesn’t hear. “Don’t give yourself away yet. He still doesn’t know.”

Alice matches my gaze before finally nodding. “Fine. I’ll be back.”

Judith, Leo and Ashley don’t seem to notice that we’ve been separated in the midst of the crowd. Byron appears to know what’s going on from the resolute nod he throws in our direction.

*Bang! Bang!*

The sound of gunshots going off only serves to heighten the sense of alarm. The crowd becomes an unstoppable force, trampling everything in its path in order to squeeze through to the lower floors. A quick look behind me almost causes me to throw up – there are already several dozen victims lying scattered about like ragdolls, painting the food court in a nauseating shade of red. The three vampires have surrounded two security guards who are frantically firing off rounds. Even though they hit their targets squarely, all it takes is a few moments before the holes in their flesh begin to close.

“There’s more of those buggers over there,” Barry growls.

On the opposite side of the centre two vampires have appeared from the fire stairs. In the blink of an eye, two more people have been slaughtered.

“You take care of these guys,” I say. “I’ll handle those.”

Without waiting for a response I race towards the other two vampires. More screams arise from the crowd – it seems like the demons are swarming in from all the emergency exits at once. Shoppers have started jumping off the railings to avoid the congested escalators, some of them landing successfully while others land with sickening thuds. I don’t even want to think about how many people have been trampled underfoot by the crowd already.

So this is what it looks like when all hell breaks loose.

I have to somehow contain them so ANGEL gets enough time to send backup. A pale blur of jagged nails and bony fingers comes flying towards my chest, but I step backwards and draw Nightfall in an instant. The vampire hesitates as it tries to regain its footing, allowing me to separate its head from its body.

They don’t seem as powerful as the vampire with the bounty, so Barry and I may just be able to hold them off for a while. However, the more pressing issue on my mind is… where did all these vampires come from?

I swiftly dodge another clumsy swipe and lop off the second vampire’s head as well. They have the exact same look as the one Alice and I killed a few nights ago – an insane expression, driven only by instinct. Could they be under the influence of drugs too?

With the vampires in this section cleared, I risk a glance backwards. Baz wasn’t able to save any of the guards, but the three vampires lay decapitated by the blade of his giant fiery battle-axe.

We nod simultaneously and rush towards the other exits, all of which are spewing out the monsters in groups of one and two. The ground is littered with corpses and blood – it’s all I can do to avoid falling or slipping on any of the obstacles on the ground.

“I’ll go up,” Barry grunts, his Divine Edge cleaving through a vampire in a haze of embers. “You go down. Save as many as you can.”

“That goes without saying.”

Nodding together, we part ways by the escalators.

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“Where’s Bran?”

Ashley, Leo, Judith and Byron have already made it outside when she realizes. She tries to turn her head and get a look, but the force of the panicking crowd is too great.

“Bran! Barry!”

They scream out for the two, but their calls are lost in the crowd.

“I’ll go look for them,” Alice says.

“Wait…”

Ashley is about to tell Alice that it’s too dangerous, but for some reason seeing the determined look on the other’s face removes her ability to speak.

“Good luck,” she says instead. Alice turns around, shoving her way through the crowd and back through the doors.

It’s deathly quiet as she wanders the ground floor, taking care not to disturb any of the corpses. She doesn’t know why, but a particularly unsettling feeling has wormed its way into her. Who caused these attacks? How did they do it? *Why* did they do it?

The attack is too organized. And the timing… just when they’d taken care of that feral vampire, a whole swarm arrives…

The stench of blood is thick in the air. Alice pauses and hears the sound of teeth ripping into flesh, of blood being guzzled down. Preparing herself for the worst, she steps out from around the corner.

Two vampires raise their heads like animals caught in a headlamp. Blood drips from their mouths in long sticky strands.

Both parties move at once. Alice dashes forward and weaves around an incoming attack, bringing her weapon up to completely cleave the vampire in half. The second vampire has already moved in to follow up, but she crouches low and tumbles out of the way. Her feet touch the ground for a fraction of a second before she’s in the air again, using the momentum of her jump to slash across the vampire’s midsection before it can react. Both demons collapse onto the ground, their upper bodies separated from their lower ones.

Before she can catch her breath, the sound of snarling and bare feet padding across the ground reaches her ears. Slowly turning around, she sees more vampires appear from the corners of her vision, creeping in from the walls, the floor above, even the ventilation ducts.

Even though she isn’t a human, they eye her hungrily. Alice stands with her back against the wall, thoughts of how to escape desperately racing through her head.

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One of the feral vampires is scratching at the closed doors of the elevator. It doesn’t look like it knows what the buttons do, so it’s trying to open it by brute force. There are no sounds coming from within, but I can almost smell the fear from those trapped inside.

I crouch low, moving as quietly as I can. By the time the vampire notices, Nightfall has already travelled through its neck. I can see the flesh closing around the wound as the vampire’s head rolls to the ground, but with no brain all the regeneration in the world won’t save it.

“Go!” I yell, slamming the button to open the doors. The terrified people within are huddled in one corner, but the moment they realize I’m not an enemy they bolt off as fast as their legs can carry them.

With this section clear, that should be the whole floor. Barry’s taking care of the upper floors, so I’ll head down and see if there’s anything else I can do.

Placing one wrist on the railing I carefully jump down to the level beneath, landing cleanly on the carpet.

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Barry wrenches his axe from the skull of a dead vampire and pants. The top floor has been completely cleared. There were only three to be found, compared to the five on the floor below. The amount of dead bodies has also drastically decreased from lower floors, due to the direction in flow of the crowd.

The big man clears the sweat from his brow and heads towards the fire exit. The one thing he noticed was that a majority of the vampires had flooded into the shopping centre through the fire stairs – maybe he will find the answer if he takes them all the way to the top.

Taking one last look at the near empty place behind him, he pushes open the door and heads into the stairwell.

The cold grey concrete of the steps spirals downwards in a dizzying descent. Barry grips the edge of the railing and shakes his head – he doesn’t need to look down; his destination is above him. Taking them steps two at a time, it isn’t long before he reaches the door to the rooftop. It’s been battered open and is swaying in the wind.

Taking a deep breath, Barry steps out into the open. Around him the high-rise buildings of Ashbrook stretch out as far as the eye can see. However, his attention is caught by the person that leans against the fence right in the centre of his vision. An ornate set of blood-red armour protects his body and hides his face. It’s nothing like he’s ever seen before – the style and material that comprises the suit is alien in nature, something that cannot be the work of man.

“Who are you?” Barry yells.

The armoured being turns around. Raising its visor, Barry sees two gleaming red eyes.

“None of your business,” it growls.

The figure slowly walks forward. Despite being the taller of the two, Barry can’t help but take a few steps back. For some reason, the thing in front of him commands a presence that reminds him of a lord looking down upon his subjects.

“Are you behind this?” he cries. “Why? Answer me now!”

A low rattling sound emerges from the helmet, which gradually grows louder. Barry realizes that the stranger is laughing at him.

“You are an interesting human,” it muses, its voice muffled from the armour. “However, I cannot forgive you for murdering so many of my servants. Because of you, I will personally have to dip my hand into this affair.”

Before Barry can answer, the man raises his arm and draws a blood-red spear from midair. Although crude in design, the spear screams of age and power. Just by looking at it, he can almost hear the screams of all its past victims in his mind. There can be no doubt – this is a Divine Edge, wielded by an incredibly powerful demon.

“It feels like a shame to waste my strength on you,” the figure sighs. “But I have to be down there in person now, since you killed all of my minions.”

The wind blows, and the figure is gone.

“Where did the cunt go?” Barry grunts. There’s a whir of movement behind him, and he turns just in time to face the incoming tip of the spear.

Barry raises his axe and blocks it, losing his balance as he does so. Before he can comprehend what just happened, the figure is gone again.

“Fast bugger,” he curses. It seems like the armour doesn’t encumber his opponent at all.

He hears the low whistling of the spear again, and turns – but it’s too late. His side opens up in pain as the barb pierces through, barely missing his vital organs.

Barry is speechless. He’s never faced such a strong or powerful opponent in all his years of service. There can be no doubt… this armoured knight is an S ranked demon, one of the strongest to ever walk the land. Compared to it, the A rank demons he’s defeated cannot even hold a candle to this monster.

“If you stop struggling that would make things so much easier.”

Barry leaps backwards from the voice that spoke right beside him. The scarlet knight stands casually with its massive spear on its shoulder, watching in interest.

“No way,” Baz grunts through the pain. “I won’t lose to the likes of you.”

He drops one end of his battle-axe to the ground and makes the decision. It takes a fraction of a second to synchronize his soul with Firebrand – if he can’t beat him with this, he can’t beat him at all.

His Divine Edge flickers with golden flames as it slowly rises off the ground. Barry picks it up and swings it in a massive arc, sending a wave of hungry conflagration towards the being. It hesitates for a moment as if briefly stunned before leaping out of the way. Barry thrusts his burning axe before him, watching his enemy’s reaction.

“You’re a vamp, aren’t ya?” he grunts, as more of his blood spills to the ground. “But not a feral one.”

“So even you’ve figured it out,” the knight replies. “I didn’t expect one like you to have such a sharp mind.”

Barry swings the axe again, sending another burst of fire into the air. The rooftop is scorching hot now – even with no fuel, the flames will continue to burn until Barry runs out of energy.

“You’re making this incredibly hard for me,” the figure grunts. “I was hoping I wouldn’t have to do this…”

“Shut ya trap,” Barry roars, lunging forward. His cry ends in a grunt of pain as more blood spills from the wound in his side. Despite the labyrinth of flames the knight is unscathed.

Panting, Barry tries to attack again – but his opponent has already disappeared. Looking around in bewilderment, it’s only when he hears the screeching above him that he realizes where.

One millisecond passes before the point of the red spear plunges into Barry’s shoulder from directly above – and continues downward. His knees buckle beneath him as the armoured being continues to drive its spear down, forcing Barry onto his back, further down until the tip hits the ground… and further still. A huge tremor emerges from the point of impact, almost ripping his body apart from within before the entire rooftop collapses. Clouds of dust, rocks and debris fly into the air as the knight continues to head down, pushing through the ceiling into the highest floor.

Barry hits the bottom of the top floor, but doesn’t stop there. He sees the berserk gleam of red through the visor as his assailant continues to dive, destroying this floor too.

Weightlessness takes him once more as he falls again, only to be stopped on the next level beneath.

And this continues floor by floor as the demon spirals further and further towards the bottom, leaving a trail of destruction in its wake.

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The vampires have no idea how to work as a pack. Pushing in front of each other like animals fighting over a scrap of meat, the only reason Alice is still alive is because of their lack of cooperation.

Two snarls come from behind her belonging to two vampires closing in too quickly for her comfort. One of them bumps into the other and sends it off course – however, it manages to rake Alice’s arm before she can push it away. There are cuts and bruises all over her body; just as she evades this attack, something else barrels into her from behind and sends her crashing through the window of a clothing shop.

Frantically trying to free herself from the tangle of clothing, she steps across the glass and stumbles back out of the store. Pain begins to take over her body as the clear edges open new wounds.

Why are they after her?

She almost falls over. Her head feels incredibly airy – she’s lost too much blood. Her eyes dart to the ground where there are an endless supply of corpses to feed on and regain strength, but she forcefully pries her gaze away. She will never drink human blood again, not for as long as she lives.

Another of the figures tackles her to the ground, trying to clamp its jaw over her neck. Alice weakly struggles against it, trying to pull away its iron grip. She knees it in the stomach and opens its throat with Moonlight; however the vampire’s grip still hasn’t loosened. Another one rams into her, taking her breath away and causing a part of her body to crunch. It takes a few moments before she can register the pain, but once it does she almost faints from the shock.

Agony takes over her mind and paralyzes her body. With two of the things on top of her, there’s no way she can push them off with one hand. Her left arm still hasn’t completely recovered and now it’s just been broken again. A voice is screaming nearby, a distorted and bestial cry of pain. She quickly realizes that the voice belongs to her.

The feeling of hard, rotten nails pressing against her chest is almost lost amongst the intense throbbing of her left arm. She feels her skin tearing open as the hand forces itself deeper, aiming for her heart.

Why?

Her blood is worthless to them…

Just as she’s about to completely fade out, she hears more voices in the distance. Snippets and phrases catch her ears – a welcome change from the incomprehensible growls of the feral vampires.

The weight on her chest is lifted, and light enters her vision once again. Someone is shaking her, and all around her she can hear the sounds of fighting and skirmishing. What happened?

“Alice! Are you alright?”

Before she can recognize whose voice that is, the darkness finally swallows her.

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I’ve made my way to the bottom floor. The building should now be completely cleared except this level, if Barry did his job right.

I can hear the sound of fighting up ahead. It seems like the majority of the feral vampires have found their way to the bottom. The question of why this is all happening is still on my mind, but I’ve pushed it away to make room for more important things.

It looks like a massive struggle happened here. The windows of a few shops have been shattered and there are several headless vampires strewn about the floor. But who could have-

Alice.

“Damnit… everyone else had better be safe,” I mutter.

As soon as I say this, a bloodcurdling scream rips through the air from around the corner. I know whose voice that is…

“Alice…!”

I tear across the ground with all my strength. I’ve never heard her cry out like that – she must be in incredible pain.

The seconds tick on as I draw closer and closer to the source. Almost slipping on a puddle of blood, I skid to a halt – just in time to witness the end of the battle.

In front of me is a legion of men dressed in ordinary looking clothes – and at their head is a man I’ve seen before, his slick white hair combed neatly back. His suit is stained with blood and scratches along it reveal a layer of tough leather hide beneath. He wipes the length of his thin rapier on the body of a dead vampire and looks at me.

“Ia - My lord,” I tip my head.

“I see you remembered your manners, half-blood.”

Ian Vancratt gestures to his men. At once, their bloodstained weapons disappear.

“What happened?” I ask. “Is Alice alright?”

The Blood Lord points behind him to where a few of his coven are bent over an unmoving body. “She’s heavily injured, but should live. More importantly… what the blazes happened here?”

He gestures at the mass of feral vampire corpses around.

“The hell if I know,” I mutter. “We killed the one that was causing you trouble before, and that should have been that…”

Ian prods the dead body by his feet. “There’s no way they would massacre so many. Even wild vampires have more sense than to mindlessly slaughter. No, I’m willing to bet that someone planned this.”

Just as things start to quieten down, the entire building shudders. I fall to my knees and look up – dust is falling from the ceiling.

“What’s going on?” I cry.

The ground continues to shake like an earthquake. I try to stand up, but fall back down onto the ground. The other vampires are also trying to maintain their balance, but to no avail.

The shaking slowly builds up in intensity until there is one final shudder – and the roof explodes.

Dust and debris spout from the hole and a red blur breaks through, colliding with the ground. A heavy force pushes everyone away from the point of impact, knocking us off our feet. The shaking stops, but small tremors still rack the building in various places.

I cough and spit the dust away from my eyes and nose, struggling to see. A glint of crimson catches my eyes, and only when the cloud completely dissipates do I realize it’s armour.

There’s a sickening wrench of something being pulled out of flesh, and the armoured figure steps away from the crater. My eyes tentatively wander over to that spot – and feel my heart stop.

It’s Barry – the red hair is unmistakable. A gaping red hole lies in place of his right shoulder, and the first few inches of skin and flesh immediately surrounding it has been blown away entirely. Blood and burn marks streak his body and I can see the soft fizzle of his fiery soul around his skin.

He shudders weakly, but his chest continues to rise and fall. He should be dead. There’s no way someone can survive from such a wound –

No. Perhaps Barry is the *only* person who could survive such an attack. The area around his shoulder is raw and red, but isn’t bleeding.

He must have cauterized it with his Divine Edge, Firebrand. But even so, how did he survive a fall from all the way up there?

My eyes wander to the armoured figure, and the smoking tip of its spear. It’s only a guess, but if that thing destroyed the ground as they fell, it would mean he didn’t collide with anything until the final floor. The rubble and debris created instantaneously by the spear could have even provided cushioning for the big man.

A Divine Edge capable of such power… what *is* that thing?

“Who are you?” Ian asks, voicing the question on all our minds.

Tremors continue to pass as the building settles after having a hole punched through it. The red knight turns… and its helmet sublimates in a similar way a Divine Edge would.

Underneath the helmet is a middle aged man, his long blond hair streaked with grey. Rough stubble lines his chin, and his eyes glow a malevolent red.

“No way…” Ian drops to the ground, his face a deathly pale.

“What’s going on?” I cry.

The faces of the Blood Lord’s men have also paled.

“Impossible…”

“After all this time…”

“The tales were true…”

Ian takes a step back. “What do you want with us? Why are you here now of all times?”

The armoured man takes a deep breath and speaks, his voice booming with a quiet confidence and arrogance. “It feels good to breathe again after all these years. It’s just a shame things had to be like this.”

“What do you want with me?” Ian cries.

The man whirls his spear. “This is pathetic. I can’t believe we’ve been reduced to hiding underground, our clan that was once the strongest in the land. What have you been doing all this time?”

“Times have changed,” Ian shoots back. “You can’t possibly know. You’ve disappeared off the face of the earth for centuries now. We’re not what we once were.”

The man shoots me a look. “Look at you. Hiding in fear of the hunters, the humans, society. We would never have stood for this. You’re clearly too weak to be a leader.”

At the mention of this, Ian seems to realize something. “You… you were behind all of this?”

The armoured demon nods. “It was the only way to bring you and your daughter out in the open. I already knew that there would be no way you’d willingly hand over what I wanted.”

“Those feral vampires…”

“Drugged to insanity. I’ll admit I was surprised your daughter dealt with the first one – I was expecting you to step in and make my job easier. Instead, I had to resort to this.”

“What do you want with my daughter? What business do you have?”

There’s a long silence before the crimson knight finally responds. “Your family still shares the blood of Dracula, after all this time… but it has been tainted by outsiders. Only you and your daughter are still pure – ideally I would have taken your wife, but she is dead. The only suitable bride for me now is Alice Vancratt.”

I’m on my feet before I can even think. “What the fuck? That’s sick! She’s just a girl!”

The man turns around at the sound of my voice. “What do you want, scum? Filthy half-bloods like you have no right to address me!”

“I won’t let you anywhere near my daughter,” Ian growls.

The man turns his back to me, fueling my rage even more. “That’s fine. I’d expected that answer anyway.”

He suddenly reaches out his spear arm and before anyone can react, it’s extended to nearly five times its length. Ian lets out a choking sound as he looks down and sees the tip buried deep in his chest.

“Weakling,” the man spits. “A strong Blood Lord would never have fallen so quickly.”

As if broken out of a trance, the Vancratt clan kicks into action. As one, they rush forward to support their leader – but the spear suddenly bends sharply, forming a makeshift hook. As soon as the impaled man is firmly in place, it retracts and shrinks back to its normal size, pulling the Blood Lord along with it.

As if they know what’s about to happen, Ian’s followers desperately scramble for their leader – but it’s too late.

The armoured man bends down and sinks his teeth into Ian’s neck, drinking down the vampire’s blood. It only takes a few moments before he removes his face from the Blood Lord and tosses him aside.

“Disgusting,” he says, wiping his lips of the red. “The blood of a weakling.”

The vampires hesitate, before resuming their attack. The man raises his hand without blinking.

“*Obey*.”

His eyes flash red, and I feel a stiffness take over the atmosphere. The group of vampires who had already moved forward to attack are frozen, desperately struggling to overcome the command. I can see them quivering in their spots, rooted to the ground.

“*Bow.”*

They’re struggling against the order, but the power of the Blood Lord is too strong. One by one, they fall to their knees.

“I am Vladimir Dracula III, the Prince of Wallachia and the first vampire to reach these lands. Without me, you would all still be stuck in Hell having never known this wondrous place. I have awakened from my slumber, and hereby reclaim my title as Blood Lord.”

A deadly silence takes over as the vampires are forced to acknowledge their leader.

“I will salvage the land that has been taken from us by these humans, one acre at a time, and you will follow me as destined by your blood. As my first act, I will have you *take the girl to safety and ensure she stays alive. I care not for her condition, as long as she can bear healthy children.”*

The vampires stand up as one, unable to resist their commands. Moving over to Alice, one of them gently lifts her onto their back. Dracula scans the place one more time before his eyes rest on me.

I can’t move. I know I need to save her, but I also know that if I try to fight now… I will die.

*Stay calm. Stay calm. Don’t jump in without a ninety percent chance of survival…*

“Let’s go,” the new Blood Lord says. “This boy is a weakling. He is not worthy of my spear.”

The men nod and head off towards the back exit, taking Alice with them. Dracula smirks one last time at me before following them, leaving me alone in a graveyard of bleeding corpses.

“Boy…”

I quickly rush over to where Ian lies on the ground. The wound in his neck has closed, but his chest is still bleeding.

“Alice… you have to save her…”

“Hold on,” I mutter. “We’ll talk this through later. Wait for your wound to regenerate-“

“No, boy. That spear… it negates vampiric regeneration. I want you to listen carefully before I die.”

He speaks calmly, as if he has all the time in the world.

“You are the only one who can fight him. Only two people outside of Alice and I share his blood – and you are one of them. The other one is lost, and was never a fighter.”

“What are you talking about?” I ask.

“Your existence is a mistake, and a convenient one at that.” Ian clears his throat. “He cannot control you because of Alice’s blood in your veins. You are also strong, and possess the vampiric reflexes necessary to fight him head on. No human hunter can hope to fight a demon of his caliber. If he is allowed to continue his path of conquest, all that we’ve built up… it will be destroyed. ANGEL will erase us.”

I nod. “I’ll kill him.”

“Save Alice. Defeat him, and become the Blood Lord.”

At the mention of this, I immediately balk.

“No,” I firmly say. “I couldn’t care less about your clan. I’m going to get revenge for Bazza, and repay Alice. You’ll be lucky if I don’t wipe out your clan myself, demon.”

The hint of a smile touches Ian’s lips. “Haah… I knew there was something different about you the moment I first set eyes on you. You were already part demon before you met Alice, weren’t you?”

“You…!”

“Only a demon could be so uncompassionate towards others. I’m surprised you haven’t killed Alice already with that hatred you hold for us.”

Something inside of me breaks.

Nightfall is in my hands in a flash as I plunge it straight through his eye and into his brain.

The sound of police sirens in the distance signals the arrival of the emergency services, as well as ANGEL. Barry seems to be in a stable condition – they’ll find him soon enough and nurse him back to full health. For now I have to escape, and find Alice.

I killed him. I killed Ian, just as I promised to myself. But why do I feel so shaken?

*Only a demon could be so uncompassionate towards others.*

No. I’m a human. I may have demon blood and my soul may be tainted by demons, but I’m a human. I feel remorse when I kill demons who aren’t necessarily harmful. I felt remorse killing that innocent vampire girl back in the sewers.

I only kill them if they’re a threat to humanity… if I’m forced to… only because ANGEL tells me to… as long as there’s the smallest possibility that a demon can harm society, I have to kill it…

No.

I can’t do it anymore.

I can’t keep making excuses for what I do.

There was never such a rule.

Chapter Fifteen: A Need for Speed

*The fan rotates slowly above my head. I can’t help but get the feeling it could fall off its perch at any moment.*

*“What do you want?” I ask my visitor, not moving at all. Even the slightest stirring causes discomfort with the amount of tubes stuck inside my body. I have no idea what’s going on, but I know that this is more than an ordinary hospital ward.*

*The people who share the room with me are all scarred – not physically, but mentally. It’s only been half a day since I’ve been here, but I’m already sick of it.*

*A man’s face pops into the edge of my vision – a stern-faced man with greying hair and a square jaw, dressed in a meticulous grey suit. However, the features that catch the bulk of my attention are his cool grey eyes, eyes that seem to peer into my very soul. I’ve seen those eyes before.*

*He was there last night. He knows what I did, he saw what I saw.*

*“Bran Lietmann,” the man says. “You’re been through a lot, haven’t you? At such a young age, too.”*

*“Who are you?” I ask.*

*The man takes a seat beside me. The other people in the ward look away as he pulls the curtains across, obscuring us from view.*

*“Phillip Dumonet, a thirty-seven year old truck driver was found dead on Ashbrook Bridge last night. No visible wounds were discovered on his body, and his cause of death is believed to be internal. Doctors are still looking into the case.”*

*I remain silent.*

*“He was reported to suffer from depression, schizophrenia and hallucinations. Just a few weeks prior to his death, he was arrested on charges of drink-driving and manslaughter of Mr. David Lietmann. He continued to insist that this was caused by his hallucinations, that they had deliberately misled him and tormented him for a long time leading up to this moment.”*

*The man looks up from the file he was reading from and stares intently into my eyes. I can feel his all-seeing gaze scrutinizing my every movement. I want to turn away, but it feels like I’ve lost all control of my body.*

*“Forty-five soul eaters were found dead at the scene. You killed them, didn’t you?”*

*“Is that what they’re called?”*

*“Yes. Demon spirits who feed on souls, especially potent ones. They are known to plague individuals and lead them down a path of misery, only to devour them when their depression reaches a certain level.”*

*“Who are you?” I ask again.*

*This time, the man answers. “Hector. James Hector. I’m the director of ANGEL – an underground government organization that protects unknowing civilians from demon threats.”*

*Naturally, being only ten years of age half of that comes out as incomprehensible jargon to my ears. Hector knows this and rephrases it in layman’s terms.*

*“Bran, we want you to help us kill demons.”*

*“Kill… demons?”*

*He has my attention now.*

*“Yes. Of course, we only kill demons that are a direct threat to society. Naturally gifted demon hunters are scarce, and no matter how you did it, the fact is that you single handedly dispatched forty-five E ranked demons. You definitely have potential.”*

*“If I join you… I can kill them?”*

*Hector nods. “You’ll even be paid for it. You can avenge your father’s death by making sure things like this never happen again. Think of all the lives you can save-“*

*I don’t need to hear any more.*

*“I want to kill them. Kill them all.”*

*Hector’s eyes narrow as I say this, but his surprise only lasts for a second before he recovers. “You’ve made the right decision, Bran. After you get cleared from the hospital, I’ll take you down to our head office and take care of the specifics.”*

*“Where do I find them? When do I get to start killing them?”*

*“Don’t worry about that. We’ll take care of the intel – all you need to do is just follow our orders.”*

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Hector knew from the moment he met me. I had already changed back then, the seed for my hatred of demons planted on that day. Most of those demons I’d killed could have been left alive, but I showed no mercy. I didn’t think twice about eliminating them, not until I myself became one.

Mercy and compassion is what sets humans apart from animals… and demons. If I possess none of those, I’m no better than they are.

I burst out of the back door to the mall, just barely catching the back end of two small trucks as they speed off into the distance. There’s no doubt that Alice is on one of them – but she won’t be alone.

I quickly scan the carpark for my options – I could steal a car, but I wouldn’t be able to drive without a key. I could run, but I wouldn’t be able to keep up for more than few minutes – not to mention ANGEL would be on my trail faster than I could blink.

My eye lands on a bicycle chained up to a street pole. I guess this is my only option.

Running over, I crush the lock effortlessly in my hand and mount it. It’s been a while since I’ve ridden a bike, but it’s one of those skills that once you learn you can never forget.

“Let’s see how fast we can go,” I mutter, cranking all the gears to the highest possible speed.

My legs strain for a bit, but once I start moving forward the speed begins to rack up. I quickly zip around the bend, keeping the two trucks in view.

Due to emergency services blocking up routes, the roads here are busier than usual. I can see the hefty vehicles struggling to manoeuvre amongst the traffic, making risky shortcuts and crossing red lights in order to make their getaway. Cars honk and drivers swear as I follow them, making equally reckless moves along the footpath. I'm panting and drenched with sweat, but it feels like my body has a mind of its own as I continue the pursuit.

Dracula’s men finally notice me. I see a few heads pop out from one of the trucks, speaking to each other across the roar of the traffic. They dismiss me before apparently receiving orders from the driver - that’s when they pull out the long black guns and take aim.

Oh god…

The flash of a muzzle with little resultant sound tells me they're using silenced arms. They're already causing enough of a clamour as it is; it's just as well that they don't draw even more attention to themselves. I'm just about to give up all hope when I realize something’s wrong.

The bullets are moving slower than usual. No, it's not that - I'm perceiving them more quickly than I should be able to. I can see the small rounds in midair as they travel towards me, predict their paths of motion, even judge their times of arrival.

Of course… this must be what it means to be a demon.

Three of them are on the wrong course so I ignore them completely. The fourth one looks to be on a collision course with my head so I lurch to the side. The fifth one is heading towards the frame of my bike, so I swerve left sharply to avoid it.

But the sixth one… there’s no way I'll be able to dodge this, or one of the others will hit me.  What do I do…?

*Thud.*

My left forearm flies off the handlebars from the recoil. A sharp, red-hot pain bites into my arm - but quickly fades to a dull throbbing. Taking my eyes off the road for a fraction of a second I see the wound already knitting itself back together, still smoking from the impact of the bullet.

Vampires are truly formidable beings.

There’re a few shouts of triumph and another spray of bullets. This time, both of Ian’s - no, Dracula’s men fired. There’s a much wider cone of bullets, and the way they’ve been aimed means I won't be able to avoid all of them.

Damn it!

I'm already thinking of which parts of my body to sacrifice in order to protect the bicycle, but suddenly I get a flash of inspiration. Will it work? Am I capable of this?

No time to think. Just *do it.*

Whipping my right arm around the handlebars, Nightfall appears in my hand as if he knows what I’m thinking. I watch the bullets closely and allow instinct to guide my hands.

*Clang! Clang!*

The bullets ricochet off to the side, bouncing cleanly off Nightfall’s blade. It was no harder than hitting a fast baseball pitch, but with a sword instead of a baseball bat - and a ball several times smaller; nothing vampiric reflexes can't handle.

I can’t help but feel exhilarated at having pulled off such a feat. This is truly the stuff of legends - it may be a trick of the light, but I swear even my attackers couldn’t help but look relieved. Maybe they’re still resisting Dracula, even now.

We speed across another red light. A sign up ahead tells me that we’ll be reaching the highway soon - if that happens, Alice is as good as gone.

I have to save her, no matter what. No one deserves a fate like this. Dracula doesn't even care about her welfare - all he wants is her blood, and her genes. I still can’t believe he’d simply manoeuvre all those feral vampires like chess pieces, only to discard them for his purposes.

The trucks swerve sharply around the bend, tyres screeching along the bitumen. As I follow them I realize that there's someone leaning out of the driver’s window, a massive bow rippling with spiritual energy in his hands. As soon as I see it, I know it’s a Divine Edge.

Crap. Well, it makes sense - after all, it *is* the logical step to take if human weapons don't work.

As soon as the bolt appears in the bow, I know I won't be able to shrug this off. The vampire takes aim, looking down an imaginary scope at me. Are they really going to do this? Firing off something like that would be akin to setting off a small bomb – in broad daylight, and on a busy road too.

Another incoherent order is barked, and the vampire releases the bowstring of light. There’s a crackle in the air as the bolt goes flying towards me. In that instant I make up my mind, and leap as far as I can from the bicycle.

I feel the heat and intensity of the projectile as it sails past me and strikes the small vehicle with a deafening *boom.* The world pitches around me as I tumble to the ground, catching a glimpse of the hellfire behind me. A section of the road has been blown apart, charred black by the destructive power of the arrow.

In my mind, I apologize to the owner of the bike for destroying it, before quickly pulling myself to my feet.

The truck is still moving, but it’s slowed down after briefly shuddering due to the recoil of the attack. I feel a giant wave of heat push into me from behind, giving me a gentle push forward. If I’m going to do anything… it has to be now.

Alice. I have to save her.

Allowing the thermal to propel me, I launch myself off the ground into a sprint. Each footstep makes contact with the road for no more than a millisecond as I almost fly forwards, pumping my arms and legs as fast as I can. The distance between me and the truck is rapidly closing – the conditions are just right for me to be able to overtake it.

I can already feel my body beginning to reach its limit – I’ve just about held my top speed for as long as I can and my form is slipping. Just a few metres more…

The truck in front of me swerves to avoid another car, and in that moment it decelerates.

This is my chance. The path couldn’t have been clearer before my eyes.

Channeling all my energy into my legs, I leap forward and slam into the back of the trailer. My hands slide along the surface until they sink into some handholds, and I stay in that position for a few moments trying to catch my breath.

A few frantic voices from inside tell me that I’ve been discovered… shortly before the doors go flying open. I almost lose my balance, one hand slipping from its position on the door. My feet fall dangerously close to the ground.

The truck speeds through the city towards its outskirts, swerving left and right in an attempt to shake me off. I hang on for dear life, struggling to maintain a solid grip as the surrounding urban landscape gives way to a tall cliff face.

We’ve reached the highway.

The open doors slam against the rock and I go flying back towards the centre, taking this opportunity to grab on to the truck with both hands again. Nothing separates me from the broad Ashbrook River on my left except for a low metal barrier.

“-cut the damn doors!”

“Send him off the edge-“

They may appear to be doing this because they have no choice, but they’re definitely not holding back. The steel in front of me suddenly screeches as a rusty blade tears through it like paper. I manoeuvre myself to the side as the Divine Edge cuts down, making a sawing motion along the edge of the door. I quickly realize that the piece of metal I’m hanging onto is about to become detached from the rest of the truck.

Before I can reconsider my options a spray of bullets fly through the door, riddling it with holes like a slice of Swiss cheese. A few pellets cut through my chest, but thankfully miss my vitals. Cringing from the pain, I can only hang on tight as the door finally breaks away from the truck with a *snap* and hits the ground in a flurry of sparks.

I somehow manage to maintain my balance on the severed plate of metal, riding it as if it were a skateboard, but it’s rapidly slowing down. Gathering my resolve, I force my legs to move once again as I leap onto the metal barrier along the edge of the road, breaking into a sprint.

Balancing on this thin strip of metal is nothing compared to the pains of ice skating. I dig deep and accelerate, once again closing in on the door-less truck. I can see three of Dracula’s men watching me with grudging admiration – and no one else.

Alice must be on the first truck.

At the thought of her in the new Blood Lord’s hands, I somehow gain a second wind. The blood in my veins surge in fury, thumping in my ears as my legs propel my body along the metal barrier.

I’m close enough now.

I leap forward, drawing Nightfall and rocketing past a spray of bullets. My right foot hits the interior of the truck, and I follow up on it by cleaving one of the vampire’s bodies in half. The second one barely has time to cry out as I twist around and decapitate it, before ramming the third one off the truck and onto the road. He tumbles for a while before disappearing from sight.

Panting, I clutch at my wounds in an attempt to catch my breath… but those inside the truck itself are refusing to allow me to recover. The storage unit I’m in trembles before shuddering violently – and as I fall to my knees, I realize that I’m losing speed.

Springing to my feet, I cut a hole through the end of the container – only to find myself face to face with the back of the truck, moving further and further away from me. A vampire stands with his back facing the driver’s compartment, a short-sword in his hands. He must have undone the clasp connecting the actual truck to the storage container behind it.

This time, I don’t even need to think. I spring forward, cutting the underling in two before he can react and then swing around the side of the truck towards the front doors. My hands grasp onto the rear view mirror as I firmly hold myself in place, hanging precariously close to the long drop on the left. Three looks of surprise turn to face me, right before I thrust Nightfall through the frail glass window and all three of their skulls at once. Glass goes flying onto the ground like a fine crystal rain.

Opening the door, I throw the first vampire onto the road as he tries to recover from my attack. Now fully inside the truck, I haul the second one out too before kicking the driver’s head through the opposite window. The truck accelerates as his foot instinctively presses downward, and I’m forced to grab the steering wheel with one hand to keep it on course.

The driver slowly tries to pull his head back in but I yank on the steering wheel sharply, bringing the truck skidding into the cliff-face – and pulverizing the driver’s head along with it. Finally allowed a breather, I focus on steering the vehicle. The truck continues to accelerate, the dead vampire’s foot jammed firmly in place. We’re probably going at double the speed limit at the moment.

I can see the second truck up ahead – but it’s already a good four or five hundred metres in front. They’ve noticed the carnage in this one and have increased their speed to match.

Alice is on that truck… along with Dracula and more men, probably.

There’s a sharp bend in the road up ahead. I have to slow down if I’m going to make it – it curves around in the shape of a question mark. I can see the second truck as it disappears around the bend before reappearing, travelling perpendicular to the direction in which I’m going.

I should slow down... but I can’t. I can’t slow down, or I’ll lose her forever.

Taking my hands off the wheel, I smash the windscreen and step onto the dashboard. The wind almost sends me back into the driver’s compartment, but I manage to keep my balance.

The barrier up ahead is approaching at a blindingly fast speed. Preparing myself, I mentally count down to the moment of impact.

Three…

Two…

One…

The entire truck quakes as it breaks cleanly through the metal strip, entering freefall. A long drop lies below me, right into the river. However, my eyes are solely focused on the truck right in front of me, on the opposite side of the bend.

Now!

At the peak of the truck’s flight, I dive off and hurtle towards the other truck at full speed. A few moments later, I hear a loud splash behind me as the truck plummets into the river.

Getting closer… closer… just about there…

*Thwack!*

I land on the top of the truck’s trailer, almost flying cleanly off from the momentum. I dig my nails into the top, carving my way to a halt along the steel.

I did it.

Taking a breath to steady myself, I bring out Nightfall and stab straight down into the roof. Light floods the dark interior, briefly stunning the three vampires within. They open fire recklessly, aiming at the roof – but some bullets go astray and pierce through the floor instead. I hear the *phwoosh* of tyres losing air, followed by the truck beginning to lose control.

Taking advantage of this, I leap down through the hole I created and sever two of them in one stroke. The third one finally recovers and points his gun at me, but I charge him and wrestle for control of it. Pointing it at approximately where I think the fuel tank is, I fire repeatedly until I’m only met with blank clicks. There’s a shudder and the smell of burning petrol, and I know that I’ve hit my mark.

The surprised vampire throws me off his body and materializes a halberd, but it’s too late. With the last remains of my adrenaline I haul Nightfall through the air and towards its neck, cleanly splitting the vampire’s head from its spine. The sword disappears and the head goes rolling to the ground.

The light of day above us flickers as we pass beneath a canopy of trees. Lying on the far end of the container, bound with incredibly thick steel wire is Alice.

She looks at me with weary, pained eyes. Her broken arm is still twisted behind her at an odd angle – probably deliberately held in place to prevent her natural regeneration. The wounds she suffered from the incident at the mall are healing incredibly slowly, most likely due to her current condition. Her white skin is streaked with blood, dirt and dark bruises.

“Bran… is that you?” she asks, squinting past the light.

As I approach her, she realizes and makes a face as if she’s about to cry.

“Have you come for me?”

She asked me this once before, what seems like a lifetime ago. However, this time I am able to answer her.

“Yes.”

With that, I quickly kneel down and scoop her up in my arms. I hear the sound of flames ahead – we’re running out of time.

The truck’s about to go up in flames, and so are we – unless I act now.

With my last vestiges of strength I tackle the back doors and force them open, tumbling onto the hard asphalt with Alice cradled in my arms. No sooner do I hit the ground, my body shuddering from the impact, does the entire truck fly off the edge of the precipice and explode in fireworks of rubber and steel.

Chapter Sixteen: Going on a Journey

*She was always the strongest. From the moment she was born, expectations the weight of the world were placed upon her fragile shoulders. A direct descendent of the original line of vampires, the successor of the Vancratt line – there was no doubt she would grow up to become strong.*

*However, when she first drew the pure longsword that was her Divine Edge… that was when the expectations shot through the roof.*

*Her soul was one of the purest, and with that purity came power. She didn’t enjoy killing, but she had to obey her father’s wishes. Her father told her what was right and wrong, and that wrongdoers deserved to be punished. If she refused, she herself would be punished – and despite her power, she was no match for a fully grown vampire lord who shared her ancestry.*

*The friends she grew up alongside with playing in the park, the sewers, at school… they slowly drifted away from her as their levels in power became apparent, or as she shut herself away from the outside world. She never lost a battle – she would always be the last one standing, her blade of pure silver the bane of her enemies. There were none stronger than her – her father wielded her like a weapon, and used her as he saw fit. She didn’t have many friends; only people who either feared or admired her, or both. The human friends she had at school eventually grew tired of standing in her perfect shadow and spurned her, envying her looks, intelligence and physical ability.*

*They called her the Blood Princess – the daughter of the Blood Lord who would eventually surpass her father and the title of Lord. A future queen, but not quite there yet, so a princess. There was also the matter of finding another pure-blooded descendant of Dracula’s from another clan to become her partner, but that could wait.*

*She was alone.*

*When others failed, she would be sent and she would succeed. There was never a time when she needed help, when she needed to be saved. If she was ever in trouble, she was expected to be able to escape or turn the situation around on her own – because if she was the strongest and she couldn’t do it, then no one could. No one came to her aid; every single time she had to pray to God and hope she’d be able to prevail.*

*Her only weakness, if any, was her desire to save people. She didn’t like lives to be meaninglessly tossed away, and she would do anything to protect them – even if it meant breaking the rules of her covern, and facing severe punishment from her father. Even if she had to charge into a mall riddled with feral vampires to save two demon hunters – two of her mortal enemies – she would do it, because they had done nothing wrong to her.*

*And so, when she paid for her naivety and was overpowered and captured – she knew no one was coming to save her. She was the strongest, and no one would bother coming to her aid because they knew she would prevail… even if she couldn’t.*

*That was why… when the shadow of that person who looked like he’d been through Hell and back appeared… when he dropped through the roof, when he mercilessly slaughtered her captors with a monstrous snarl on his face… when he turned and their eyes met…*

*He had saved her once, stumbling his way through a forest of broken trees to reach her despite his injuries. Now he had come for her again, doing twice what no one had ever done.*

*That was why her chest felt warm… as warm as the liquid that rolled down her cheeks.*

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When I finally wake up, the morning sun is streaming through the trees and onto the dirt-covered ground.

Wait… morning sun?

I look around, and come face to face with Alice. She’s in just as sorry a state as I last saw her in, except her broken arm seems to have set in place again. However, it’s far from completely healed. I finally remember what happened.

After leaping from the truck, I hoisted her onto my back and trudged as far as I could from the explosion. I had no idea where I was going – all I knew was that I had to put as much distance between her and Dracula as possible. There was no way a simple explosion and a fall would kill such a monster – he would be back, and he had already proved that he would go to extreme measures for his goals. One of them had been attained; all that remained was for him to capture Alice.

After travelling for the remainder of the day, I had somehow lost consciousness and fainted – and now here I am.

“Are you alright?” I immediately ask.

Alice nods quietly. She seems a little… different from her usual self. Her shoulders are hunched up, a change from her usual relaxed posture.

I look around, and realize that my throat is incredibly dry. It’s not thirst for blood – I won’t be feeling that for a few days at least – but rather water. I rack my brain for options, before something vibrates in my pocket.

Pulling out my phone, I’m shocked to find out that it’s still functional even after all I’ve been through. I must have the luck of a god.

There’s a total of forty-nine missed calls – a combined number from Ashley, Judith, Mum, Barry, Dennis, Shizuka… and even Leo. There are also several messages – mainly asking where I am, whether or not I’m alright. I decide to start with the one who would probably be the most understanding and listen to my requests – Ashley.

“I’m going to try and get help,” I tell Alice as I hold the phone to my ear. “Just stay here and don’t move. We’ll find a way to safety.”

She nods again, still quietly looking at me like a cornered animal. I ignore her and listen to the tone ring – a single time before Ashley answers.

“Bran! Are you alright? What happened-“

“Hold on,” I say, in an attempt to stop her onslaught. “Just relax. I’m fine, and Alice is with me.”

“Thank God! I was so worried… the ambulance and the police didn’t find you, and we were worried that you got caught up in the terrorist attacks-“

“Wait,” I interrupt. “Terrorists?”

Is that how ANGEL’s going to sweep it under the rug?

“Yeah,” Ashley replies, a little slower now that she knows we’re fine. “They sent suicide bombers and machete wielders into the shopping centre, set off a bomb on the rooftop… even on one of the roads nearby. There are still no survivors in the shopping centre after the evacuation except for Barry… so we don’t know what went on inside.”

“Is Barry alright?” I ask.

“He’s fine, I saw him getting carried into an ambulance on a stretcher. I haven’t visited him yet, but he seemed stable.”

I breathe a sigh of relief. I still feel guilty that I couldn’t haul him to safety, but him being alive makes me feel slightly better.

“You need to come back quickly,” she gushes. “The government’s locking down the city – they’re stationing people at all the exits to check cars, buses, trains for terrorists. If you don’t come back soon, they might suspect you-“

“Wait… they’re locking down the city?” I ask. “How? Why?”

“It doesn’t matter, Bran. Just come back, and it’ll be fine-“

“Ashley. Tell me, please. This is important.”

There’s a brief pause. Ashley is no fool – she suspects something.

“You’re not one of them, are you?”

I saw this coming. I guess now is the best time to do it.

“No, I’m not. Ashley, I want you to believe me when I say this, and don’t tell anyone at all. Is there anyone around you at the moment?”

“N-no. I’m the only person in the house right now. Bran, what’s happening-“

“Listen very carefully.”

Alice and I exchange a look. She seems to know where the conversation is going.

“I’m not part of the terrorists. I’m actually fighting them – I went back in and tried to stop them. It’s complicated but… to put it in simple terms, they may have framed me. I need to know the specifics of the security around Ashbrook, because Alice and I may be detained because of this.”

“Wait… Alice is involved?”

“Unfortunately… yes. Please believe me, Ashley. Don’t tell anyone at all, unless I allow you. I know I have no proof…. But-“

“It’s okay, Bran. I trust you.”

She says it with such conviction that I know she isn’t lying.

“They found DNA samples at the scene of the crime, and are searching for the culprits. They’re taking samples of hair, cheek tissue, even pupil scans everywhere – shops, houses, high schools, you name it. All those above junior high are getting checked.”

“Pupil scans?”

I reach up to my eyes before realizing my contact lenses are gone. I took them off during the massacre – they would only slow down the speed of my perception. Alice’s red eyes stare back at mine, and I understand.

ANGEL knows there were vampires involved – and now they’ve thrown a net across the whole city in an attempt to flush them out. The DNA… it’s all an excuse, just to examine people’s eyes. Little do they know that the vampires have done nothing wrong – it’s all the work of one demon, one demon who if defeated will release them all from their obligations.

The first thing we need to do is to regroup, find a place to recover, and plan it all out from there. However, returning to Ashbrook is out of the question. As much as I want to… it would be like walking into a cage after narrowly escaping it.

“Damnit… we need a place…”

I realize that I just spoke out loud.

“You need a place to stay?” Ashley’s voice responds.

I nod, before realizing she can’t see me. “We can’t come back to Ashbrook… not yet at least. We’re somewhere in the wilderness next to the highway, and we need a place to regroup and recover. Do you have any ideas?”

If this doesn’t work… I’ll have to call Dennis. If that doesn’t work, I’ll be out of options. There’s no one else I can trust. I know for sure my Mum would bring me back by force, and that Judith wouldn’t be able to keep a secret from her.

Luckily, I don’t have to do any of that.

“My grandparents live out in the country,” Ashley says slowly. “They might let you board for a while… but I’d have to do some serious begging. Not to mention you’d need to make your way to the nearest train station outside of Ashbrook to get there...”

I almost swear, but hold back. “Leo can drive, can’t he?”

There’s another pause. “He can.”

“Then…”

“I’m not sure if he would though…”

“Tell him that he owes me a favour, and now’s his chance to prove his word. But before that, please do anything you can to get your grandparents to help us.”

“Al-alright.”

“Thanks, Ashley. I’m really sorry I had to put you through all this… but please bear with it. And don’t tell anyone – make up something convincing to Leo and your grandparents. Say your friends ran away from home and needed a place to stay or something.”

“Okay.”

“I guess that’s that then-“

“Wait,” she says.

I hesitate, listening to the quiet breathing on the other end of the line.

“When will you be back, Bran?”

And at this moment, my heart sinks a little.

“I don’t know.”

There’s a long silence between us, before she finally speaks.

“Alright then. Stay safe.”

“Bye.”

I hang up. Alice looks at me with a questioning gaze, but still remains silent.

“I guess we wait now,” I say. “Try to conserve energy – there’s no telling how long we’ll be here, and I don’t want to have to go down to the river to get water.”

“Okay.”

I’m about to move closer towards her and into the shade, when my phone rings again. It’s from Shizuka.

I’m about to pick up... until I realize that it might not be the best idea. After a few long moments of vibrating, the phone finally falls quiet. There’s around 50% battery left – I’ll have to hope Ashley gets back to me before it runs dry.

In my mind, I’m already going through all the available options that remain.

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The phone finally rings again past midday, just after the sun’s passed the halfway point. I pick up on the first ring but don’t say anything.

“Hello? Bran?”

Once I confirm it’s her, I speak up. “It’s me.”

“My grandparents agreed to let you board for a little while. I told them you and Alice decided to run away from home because your parents were disapproving of you two being together.”

I can feel my face reddening. “Wh-what? Was that really necessary?”

I turn away so Alice doesn’t see me.

“My brother also agreed to pick you up and drive you to the nearest city. You’ll have to take the train from there; it’s a long way to the countryside. Leo wants you to know that this is only because you helped him out earlier, and after this you’re both even.”

The corners of my mouth twitch. It’s almost like he’s forgotten what he’s done to me for the past few years… Well I suppose I can forgive him, since he *is* helping me in my time of need.

“Tell him I said thanks.”

“So where are you guys right now?”

I take a quick look around. “I’m not quite sure. If you tell Leo to just keep driving out from the highway in the direction of the Ashbrook River, you should see us. We’ll be waiting on the side of the road.”

“Okay then. I guess I’ll see you in a bit.”

“Thanks, Ashley. Oh, and one more thing.”

“Hm?”

“Bring lots of food and water, please. Vegetarian food. I’ll pay you back.”

“Alright. Anything else?”

“Nope, that should be fine. Thanks again.”

She hangs up, and I turn back to Alice.

“Come on. Leo’s coming to give us a ride to Edenheim, we should wait for them by the side of the road.”

I reach out and grab Alice’s hand – and she pulls back as if she just made contact with a red-hot poker.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

She stares as if dazed, before shaking her head. “Sorry.”

She reaches out again and, eyeing my hand as if it could disappear at any moment, grabs onto it. I haul her up and we start heading back to the side of the road.

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Leo and Ashley arrive in his second-hand car two hours later. The moment we’re close enough to see them, we gesture and wave on the side of the road until they pull over.

“Thanks for doing this, Leo,” I say.

Leo looks away. “I just needed an excuse to skip school. Now we’re even.”

“For sure.”

Alice and I step into the back seat, where two large bags of food and water have been supplied for us.

“Ashley, you didn’t have to come too,” I say as I stuff it into my mouth. I’m ravenous and I have to make a conscious effort not to accidentally send bits of half-chewed food flying into Leo’s precious car.

“What are you talking about? Of course I did. You’re leaving, Bran… and for all we know, you could never be coming back.”

“Don’t be silly,” I say. “I’ll be back. I promise.”

There’s a brief silence in the car, only broken by the sounds of Alice and I eating in a very sloppy manner.

“Sounds like a death flag to me,” Leo jokes.

“Shut up,” Ashley shoots.

The car continues to zoom across the countryside, leaving Ashbrook and its river further and further behind. Before long, I can’t even make out the high rise buildings of the city on the horizon. It’s only then that I realize I’m leaving behind the home I’ve grown up in for the past seventeen years.

“So, just how far away do your grandparents live?” I ask, sipping on water to help the food go down. I don’t want to dwell on depressing thoughts – the more I think about this, the more I’ll be convinced that going back and turning myself in will be a better option.

“It’s a place called Port McAubourne, right on the edge of the ocean.”

“The ocean? But that’s…”

“It’s going to take several hours by train to get there,” Ashley explains. “You’ll have to switch lines as well. Needless to say, it’ll be hard to find you once you’re that far out.”

In theory, it’s almost the perfect hiding place. However, reality is hitting me hard – I’ve never had to stay this far away from home, and I’ll be breaking off contact from almost everyone I’ve ever known in this period of time.

Is this really the only way?

I glance at Alice out of the corner of my eye.

No. I won’t run for the rest of my life – it’s only long enough until things die down and we can formulate a plan.

“You look down,” Ashley says.

I don’t respond. Every second we draw further away from home is a second I’m questioning my actions.

“Hey.”

Two hands suddenly slap my cheeks. Ashley brings them away, and I’m sure there are red marks left on my skin.

“You’re thinking too much, Bran,” she scolds. “You’re doing the right thing. Always trust your gut.”

“How can you be sure of that?” I mutter. “Does it even make a difference if we run away?”

No matter who wins – ANGEL or Dracula – we’ve drawn the short end of the stick.

“Bran, remember what you told me a few days ago? It’s not about the destination, but the journey. Even if you don’t think what you’re doing is the right thing, it shouldn’t stop you from trying.”

At the sound of this I let out a light chuckle. “You interpreted it completely differently to how I did.”

“It’s a versatile concept.”

I touch my stinging cheeks. I really do think too much – I should just sit back and go with the flow for once.

“Thanks Ashley.”

And that was how I left home for the first time.

Chapter Seventeen: The Middle of Nowhere

*“Come on, Ashley! Let’s go home already, class finished ages ago!”*

*Her friend grabs her arm and tries to move her.*

*“Huh? O-Oh, I didn’t notice the time. Sorry!”*

*She whips her head from the window and hastily apologizes. The other girl leans over her and curiously looks outside.*

*“Hm? Who’s that?”*

*Ashley feigns ignorance. “Who’s what?”*

*“That boy down there. He looks really serious.”*

*The boy in question is running intervals of four hundred metres on the school oval, collapsing onto the ground after each lap. However, the moment ninety seconds pass between each lap, he gets back on his feet no matter how tired he is. Sweat pours down his back and onto the grass. With the way he gasps and pants for air, hunched over on his knees, there can be no doubt that he’s running with everything he has.*

*“Is he an athlete or something?” her friend asks.*

*“No,” Ashley replies. “He’s trying so hard because he failed the fitness test.”*

*“Huh? No way!”*

*“He’s been doing this every day for a year now. I’m sure he’ll make it this time.”*

*Her friend shakes her head. “That dedication… every day, you say?”*

*“Yep. I’ve seen him doing it in the rain, the blazing heat, even the snow. I don’t think he’s going to stop until he passes this year’s test.”*

*The boy’s small legs finally give way beneath him and he lies on the oval, chest heaving. It’s a pain watching him struggle to stand up.*

*“You admire him, don’t you?” her friend declares.*

*Ashley doesn’t respond.*

*\*\*\**

*“It’s starting to get dark,” Ashley says as she approaches his lifeless form.*

*The boy turns his head, just as she dangles a bottle of water in front of him. It disappears from her hand in a second and he downs its contents in one breath.*

*“Why do you try so hard?” she asks, curious. “What lies at the end of your path?”*

*The boy sits up and shrugs. “There’s nothing else to do,” he says simply. “Mum needs some time alone. Dad’s gone, and my sis is in hospital. Running just helps take my mind off things, I guess.”*

*There’s something else he’s not telling her, but she doesn’t know it.*

*“But you do it with so much dedication. If you run, why not run at an enjoyable pace? It would be easier too.”*

*The look he returns her is a completely blank look, one that tells her he’s never even considered this possibility. She almost takes a step back at the words he says.*

*“If I’m going to do something, why wouldn’t I try my hardest? I started this because I failed the fitness test last year, and I’m going to do my best until the very end. I don’t want to live with regrets.”*

*With that, he picks himself back up and slowly begins to head back into the school. Ashley watches as his already small back disappears into the distance.*

*A few days later, right after passing the fitness test, that boy stopped running – and he began to turn up to class with cuts and bruises along various parts of his body. It was also around the time he began to lose focus and sleep at school.*

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“I guess this is it,” I say as the train begins to pull in. Alice still has my jacket wrapped around her, even though the underground subway is far from cold.

“Take care of yourself,” Leo says.

Ashley stands in front of us, just watching as the carriage doors open. People begin to flood out, heading home from work. The sound of their footsteps, chatter and the announcements ringing across the platforms seem strangely disconnected, as if I’m still in denial at our departure.

“I’ll miss you,” she says. “Make sure you come back.”

I firmly nod. “Thanks for everything you’ve done for me.”

She moves in and her arms wrap tightly around me. I try not to make eye contact with any of the passersby, or Leo’s smoldering gaze.

“Bran, I…”

I already know what she’s about to say.

“It’s okay,” I cut her off. “I know.”

I gently nudge her away. It pains me to do this, but there’s no other way.

“I’m sorry.”

With that, I board the train with Alice. There’s a look of total despair on Ashley’s face as the doors close.

I’m sorry, Ashley. I just can’t return those feelings.

Leo nods at me as his sister turns around to hide her face. The whistle blows and the train begins to move. The fluorescent lights of the station give way to the darkness of the tunnel walls, and the sounds of civilization are swallowed as well.

“You turned her down,” Alice says.

“Yeah. I just don’t think she belongs in the world that I live in.”

“Do I belong in that world?”

I half snort, drawing the attention of the passengers around me.

“Alice… you pulled me into that world.”

\*\*\*

It was a long ride. The first half was almost completely in the darkness of the underground, with no sights or sounds to distinguish whether we were even moving or not. There was only the soft lulling of the carriage, which eventually drew me into a half sleep. I would blearily open my eyes every so often only to see the same carriage, with maybe a few different passengers. At some point, Alice also fell asleep and her head eventually found itself onto my shoulder. She desperately needed the rest, so I left her be.

At the end of the line, I reluctantly woke her up. We switched to a different platform, one which quickly led to the over-world and a completely rural landscape.

The sun’s almost completely down by now, and I find myself mindlessly staring as the fields pass by. The rail line has literally been planted down in the middle of acres of farmland and there’s nothing to see except crops, rice paddies and the occasional herd of farm animals. The sunset makes for a great view though – without the tall spires of the city or the dark haze of light pollution, there’s nothing obstructing the red orb of light in the sky. It’s such a beautiful object, yet so disadvantageous to us.

At some point I become aware of breathing close to my ear, and realize that Alice is staring out the window past me. She seems mesmerized at our surroundings.

“Where are we?” she asks.

I shrug. “Somewhere in the countryside. We’ve still got quite a ways to go.”

She continues to stare, watching the animals in the distance feed and go about their daily – or nightly – business.

“What’s the matter? Never seen a farm before?”

She nods.

“Want to swap seats then?”

Another nod. I stand up and give up my window seat to her, before heading out into the main aisle. Taking this opportunity to stretch my legs, I head down the train checking out the passengers.

Barely any people are on the train – most of them are tourists or travelers, loaded with massive bags of luggage. There’s a family of foreigners sleeping, and what looks like a homeless person passed out on one of the seats. I don’t go too far away, mostly because there aren’t that many carriages in the first place.

How easy it would be to feed on these people. I could incapacitate them, drink a bit of their blood, dispose of their bodies…

I shake my head. What am I thinking?

This does pose a problem, though. I guess we’ll have to feed on farm animals or something at night, to quench our thirst. I’m just beginning to realize how many more details we have to go through, due to our non-existent planning. Where will we get money for living expenses? Ashley’s grandparents wouldn’t go as far as to feed and clothe us – letting us board for free is enough as it is. We’ll probably have to work.

But where are we headed? Not physically, but in the grand scheme of things? Will we just be hiding here, living day by day until Dracula finds us? Are we going to save up more money and then run elsewhere?

So many questions. My head is already pounding from overthinking.

By the time I get back, Alice has fallen asleep again. That was fast… I’d expected her to get bored of the countryside, but not this quickly.

She looks so much younger and unburdened when she’s asleep. It strikes me that this must be her face if she had grown up as a normal girl. When she’s awake she always has a cold, distant expression plastered across her features. In fact, I can’t even recall if I’ve ever seen her smile or laugh, or show any emotion at all.

What does Alice look like when she’s happy?

This is what I think before I close my eyes and drift off.

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“Bran.”

I awaken to Alice’s gentle shaking. It’s bright outside again – I must have slept through the entire night.

“I think we’re here.”

I rub my eyes and look outside. We’ve stopped by a small two platform station in the middle of nowhere – literally. There’s a single road leading from the railway which curves off into the distance, and nothing but long grass for miles around. A worn, faded out sign next to one of the benches reads ‘Port McAubourne.’

“Let’s go then,” I mutter, prying myself from the leather seat.

We step onto the platform – aside from us, only two other people get off. They both quickly disappear into two cars waiting by the side of the road and are driven off. The train behind us leaves at the blow of a whistle, chugging off into the distance.

“I thought this was supposed to be a port,” I say to the conductor, who’s eyeing us out of curiousity.

“You’re not from around here, are you?” he asks.

“Nope.”

The weathered man takes the whistle from his lips and lets out a heavy sigh. “We used to be a port, maybe a couple decades ago. Then the big industries moved further south, abandoning us. If you go down to the coast you might still see some remains of the old docks and ships.”

He points out into the distance. I can detect the faint smell of salt in the air.

“I see. We’re actually here to visit our grandparents,” I lie. “You wouldn’t happen to know how to get to this address, would you?”

I take out a scrap of paper with the address written on it. The man squints at it before jerking his thumb along the road.

“Head in that direction and you’ll eventually reach it,” he says. “The bus comes every hour and passes right by; it’s hard to miss. Their farm is one of the most famous ones around here. If you see the town, you’ve gone too far.”

I nod. “Thanks.”

The man tips his head in return. “Take care, boy. You too, young missus.”

With that, he heads back into his office. We make our way around to the rusty bus stop, and I scan the timetable plastered to its side.

“It left ten minutes ago,” I sigh. “Guess we’ll be here for another fifty minutes.”

“How about we walk?” Alice suggests.

I look into the distance. “Alright. Might as well.”

We set foot along the beaten path. The morning sun hasn’t reached its peak, so the conditions are fair. Just as well; I don’t think there’s enough water amongst the basic supplies hastily packed by Ashley.

The unchanging landscape continues to pass, but it might as well be stationary. With no landmarks or change in scenery, it feels like we’re walking on one long treadmill. We might as well be navigating a desert, with long grass reeds instead of sand.

“Let’s play a game,” I say, in an attempt to stave off boredom.

“What game?”

“Ever heard of ‘I Spy?’”

“What’s that?”

Hm. Ordinarily I’d be astonished at anyone who’d never heard of this game – you’d have to have been living under a rock for your whole life to not have heard of it – but then I have to remind myself that Alice has practically been doing just that.

“I spy, with my little eye… something beginning with G,” I chant. “So now you have to find something around us you can see that begins with the letter G.”

“Like grass?”

“That’s right!”

Alice nods. “I think I get it. My turn, then.”

She looks around and seemingly spots something interesting.

“I spy, with my little eye… something beginning with S.”

“That’s easy,” I say. “Sky.”

“No.”

My footsteps falter. “Stone?”

“No.”

I look around. What possibilities are there?

“Shoe? Shoelace? Shirt? Snail? Sock?”

“No.”

I scratch my head.

“Alright, I give up. What is it?”

“Snake,” she points, just as something small and scaly pokes its head onto the path from the grass. I yelp and skirt to the side, steering clear from it.

“That’s cheating,” I cry. “You have to see it, not hear or smell it.”

“I did see it,” she says. “You just weren’t looking hard enough. It’s a snake’s job to be hard to spot anyway.”

I let out a heavy sigh. “Alright you win. This game sucks.”

With my failed attempt at livening things up, we fall into a monotonous trudging. The sun steadily grows higher and at one point the bus we should have waited for passes us.

A few minutes later, the long grass gives way to farmland, and a large house in the distance rolls up from across the horizon.

This must be it – our new home.

Chapter Eighteen: Settling In

“What is the meaning of this, Hirano?”

A thick file comes slamming down onto the desk, skidding over to where Shizuka patiently stands. She picks it up and flips through it, even though she already knows what it is.

It’s a damages report – a summary of all the casualties of Research Sector Fifteen; an obscure laboratory on the outskirts of town where research on new methods to combat demons is conducted. Despite being guarded by trained ANGEL operatives, it was raided and destroyed a few nights ago by an unknown force.

“We’re working on it, Sir,” she responds.

The man before her is not to be questioned. He is their absolute leader, the one most suited to the burdening task of keeping everything operating smoothly – James Hector, the head of ANGEL.

“We’ve set up pupil tests around all the major congregations of people, as well as customs and security along the border of the district. If there are any vampires among us, we’ll find them.”

“It’s clearly not working,” Hector growls. “Where’s your resident demon hunter? He of all people would know the area best, including any potential vampire lairs.”

“He’s… missing in action,” Shizuka reluctantly says. “We lost contact with him during the massacre at the mall.”

She can almost hear Hector’s teeth grinding in his head. “I’m sending all operatives from the surrounding regions to help. We need to contain this threat, before it spills out into the public.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Leave now. I will call for you later.”

Shizuka bows and exits the room. As soon as the doors close behind her and she’s a fair distance away, she slams her fist against the wall.

“Damn it…”

She knows her efforts have been fruitless. The vampires have clearly been hiding from them for a long time, and wouldn’t be foolish enough to give themselves away so late in the game.

But why? Why now? Something must have happened.

She takes out her phone and dials a number. It rings for a while, before finally connecting.

*“The service you have requested is unavailable-“*

She cancels it and almost throws it down in frustration. She can only assume the worst – that Bran Lietmann is dead.

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“Is there anything else you need?” the nurse asks, after changing Barry’s bandages.

“You,” he winks suggestively.

The woman shoots him a scowl and hastily finishes packing up her equipment.

“Wait! I’m just fooling with ya,” he cries, but jerks in pain as he turns his head too far. He can only sigh as the nurse disappears through the doorway.

He’s incredibly lucky. If it weren’t for ANGEL’s ‘Doctor’, one of the few possessing a Divine Edge with healing properties, his shoulder would’ve been beyond recovery. Hell, if it weren’t for his own quick thinking, he would have died of blood loss.

*I survived a fall from the rooftop of the shopping mall.*

He still can’t quite wrap his mind around it. Even if it was more like falling from two storeys multiple times, the fact is that he *survived.* Just thinking about the crimson lance is causing his bandaged shoulder to itch.

Just as Barry’s about to reach for the television remote, the door opens and a big-breasted Asian woman walks in.

“Don’tcha know how to knock?” he grumbles.

Shizuka doesn’t respond and stops next to the big man. The smell of tobacco slowly invades the room.

“Barry. What exactly happened in the mall?” she demands.

“Straight to the point, eh?” he says. “Where’s my ‘Get Well’ present?”

“’Get Well’ present? What do you want?”

Barry smirks. “How about you lemme cop a feel-“

He suddenly groans as a sharp pressure comes down on his injured shoulder.

“H-Hey! Watch it, you friggin’ chink!”

“I’m Japanese, not Chinese.”

“Alright, alright! Calm your tits, I was just foolin’!”

The pressure is lifted from his shoulder and his ragged breathing stabilizes. Barry lets out another sigh.

“There’s a really strong vampire,” he begins. “I fought him on the rooftop. Had a Divine Edge and all – and quite a powerful one too. I could barely keep up with it.”

“Do you know its name?” Shizuka interrogates. “Anything that might give away its identity?”

“A crimson spear,” he replies. “Blood-red armour to match. I dunno how to describe it, but… the aura of his soul felt primeval.”

Something flickers in Shizuka’s eyes, but Barry can’t see from his position on the bed.

“Anything else?”

Barry shakes his head, a movement that causes another twinge of pain in his shoulder. “The bugger impaled me and sent me flying down through the building. I think I passed out after I broke the third floor.”

He sees Shizuka nod out of the corner of his eye. “Thank you for your help, Barry.”

“Call me Baz.”

She stands up and leaves. He’s just about convinced that he’s alone in the room again when he hears her footsteps reverse to stop by the doorway.

“Get well soon, Barry. We need you – or rather, District Fourteen needs you back ASAP.”

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The door opens on the third knock, and an elderly woman with a kind face peers through. Alice is still too busy looking up at the house to notice. Well, you can’t really blame her – after all, she probably hasn’t seen many country houses like this before, having lived in a city for her whole life.

“Oh, you must be Ashley’s friends!” she exclaims. “Romeo and Juliet, was it?”

“Bran and Alice,” I correct. Where did Romeo and Juliet come from?

“Ah, that’s right,” she murmurs. “Your story reminded me so much of them that I must have subconsciously renamed you in my mind.”

The door widens a little further and an old, balding man appears by the woman’s side. Now that I think about it, I can see features of both Ashley and Leo in their grandparents’ faces.

“Don’t mind her,” he says. “She’s getting a bit forgetful these days.”

“Thank you so much for having us,” I say. “We’re very grateful, uh… Sir? Mr. Bowen?”

“Just call us Bob and Betty,” he smiles. “We don’t really mind. Now are you going to stand there out in the sun, or are you going to come in?”

I bow. “Alright. Pardon the intrusion.”

Grabbing Alice, we step into the old but well-furnished house. I can immediately tell that this structure has withstood many generations, just from the feel and atmosphere of the place. It’s obviously been well taken care of, and will continue to shelter generations to come.

“It’s been so long since we’ve had kids living here,” Betty sighs. “How are Ashley and Leo doing now? The last time I saw them, they were still shorter than me.”

I look at her small figure, slightly shrunken with age. They must have still been in primary school at that height.

“They’ve both grown,” I say, struggling not to add ‘in more ways than one’. “Ashley’s become quite a beauty. As for Leo…”

I feel a chilling glare coming from Alice as I say this, but I’m more concerned about how much of their grandson’s personality I should reveal.

Well, I guess he came through for me in the end.

“…Leo’s doing pretty well too. Studies hard, a good sportsman, popular with the ladies.”

It took all the self-control I could muster to not snort or laugh at the ‘sportsman’ part.

“Betty, I’m going back to the fields,” Bob calls. “Call me if you need anything.”

“Alright, dear.”

He nods at us and heads through the living room towards the back door. Despite being as aged as his spouse, he still possesses a sturdy frame and wiry muscles. It’s the body of a farmer, a man who has been working for almost his whole life. Betty also looks reasonably strong and healthy, but it’s clear who does the majority of the work on the farm. It’s not surprising after all – they both grew up in an age where women were housewives who tended to the children and the home.

“Now, if you’ll just follow me up the stairs, I’ll show you your room.”

My foot almost slips as I take the first step. “Room?”

“I’m afraid all our other rooms are filled up with junk,” Betty sighs. “I keep telling Bob to throw some of his rubbish out, but he’s adamant. I guess a lot of the stuff reminds him of the good old days.”

She stops to give me a wink. “If we kept you two in separate rooms, you’d just sneak out in the middle of the night anyway.”

“Wh-What!? We’d never!”

I turn back to Alice for confirmation, but she keeps quiet.

“Oi! Say something!”

“I need Bran to keep watch over me.”

“Don’t say things that can be misinterpreted!”

My face burns in embarrassment. I’m sure she really just means that in case we get discovered, we’ll have a better fighting chance if we’re together. But did she really have to say it that way?

“Ah, it must be good to be young,” Betty smiles, watching our interaction. “Enjoy it while you can. The longer you’re together, the more you lose that heart-racy feeling. That’s when a lot of couples fall apart.”

I’m about to argue that we’re in no way a ‘couple’ until I remember the whole basis behind them allowing us to stay here.

Of course. So that’s why she was acting like that. Alice only said what she did to keep up the pretense. I’m ashamed that I almost tore down the lie so carefully put in place by letting my irrationality get the better of me.

“We’ll never fall apart,” I firmly say. “I’ll stay with you forever, Alice.”

Alice’s eyes widen. How’s that for pretense? To add to the integrity of my act, I grasp her hand in my own. She doesn’t do anything for a moment – then, I feel a slight squeeze in return.

“Here you are,” Betty says, stopping before an old, faded door. “This used to be where Leo and Ashley stayed, and their mother before them. I’m sure you’ll like it.”

She smiles at the sight of our clasped hands. “There’s a lock on the door too. Just thought I’d let you know.”

With those words, she goes back down the stairs. I can feel my ears burning.

“Alright, let’s get this sorted out,” I say, dropping her hand immediately as soon as Betty leaves our sight.

I gently push open the door and step inside. It’s surprisingly well-maintained – they must regularly clean it up and vacuum it, because there’s almost no dust to be seen. A single bed lies to the side, and there’s a desk next to it with some other pieces of furniture which probably haven’t been used in a while.

“I guess I’ll take the floor,” I mutter.

“The bed looks like it can fit us both,” Alice replies.

“Are you insane?” I cry. “We can’t sleep together! What if-“

“We’re supposed to be a couple, aren’t we? Isn’t that what couples do?”

I freeze mid-sentence.

“They wouldn’t check on us in the middle of the night, would they?”

An uneasy silence floats between us. It’s unlikely, but any unusual sounds in the night could well lead them to do just that. I also have no idea what they’d do if they found out we weren’t in fact lovers, but here for some other reason. We only have one shot at this – we can’t risk things going wrong.

My eyes drift towards the lock on the door.

“Couldn’t we just lock the door? Then they wouldn’t be able to-”

As I say this, I realize locking the door comes with its own problems. There’s no doubt that from any outside perspective, if a door was locked and there was a boy and a girl alone in a room behind that door… only one thing could be happening.

I don’t think I’d be able to face them in the morning if that were to happen.

“We’ll sort this out later,” I growl. “For now, we should unpack what little belongings we have.”

\*\*\*

The day passes quickly. After lunch, we go back up to our rooms and start planning out what we’ll do. It’s decided that we’ll visit town the next morning in search of work. For now, we take some time to familiarize ourselves with the house and its surroundings.

There’s also the issue of our ‘thirst.’

“Are there any updates on the situation at Ashbrook?” Alice asks, as we stride further away from the farm.

“I’m pretty sure Ashley would contact me if anything happens,” I reply. “For now, we should just focus on the task at hand.”

The house is almost behind us. A few moments later, it completely disappears beneath the horizon.

“Ready?” I ask.

Alice nods, and we both take off.

It’s been a while since I’ve been able to stretch my legs properly. Running at a light pace, we race across the road at the speed of a galloping horse towards the wilderness. Our aim for now is to find a source of non-human blood which we can feed on to last us for the duration of our stay.

“How’s the shoulder, by the way?” I ask, above the roar of the wind.

Alice seems to have healed up fine since the high speed car chase and the massacre, but I’m sure the wound extends beneath skin-level. After all, her broken shoulder was held out of position for quite a while to stop her regeneration – surely, such damage couldn’t have healed so quickly.

“It’s almost done,” she replies, not even losing her breath. “It still hurts a little when I swing my arm, but after tonight it should be completely healed.”

“That’s a relief,” I say, and I mean it. The sooner she’s back to full strength, the sooner we can start thinking about returning to Ashbrook to fight.

We lose ourselves in the rhythm of our feet, and it’s only when the sun is beginning to sink back into the sky that I realize we still haven’t picked up any traces of wildlife.

“We should have waited until night,” I mutter.

“I don’t think that would be a good idea,” Alice replies. “Sneaking out in the middle of the night doesn’t look good no matter how you look at it.”

“True that.”

A few birds are flying off into the distance, the only creatures we’ve seen so far.

“If only we could fly,” I murmur.

“Are you stupid?”

Alice bends down and picks up a rock. In one swift motion, she hurls it into the distance. There’s a *thud* and one of the dark shapes drops out of the sky. She races off towards it, and from what I can see manages to catch it.

I slowly make my way towards where the bird fell. Alice isn’t wasting any time – she’s already digging in, making sure not to spill a single drop of blood. Seeing her like this reminds me of our first encounter – all that’s missing are the swings and the snow.

“Save some for me,” I call out.

She quickly finishes up and tosses the carcass at me. I catch it, blinking as a few droplets of blood fly into my eye.

“Done?”

She nods and begins to head back. I look at the hole in the bird’s chest where the stone penetrated, and also where Alice pressed her lips against to feed. There’s enough blood left to last for a day or two. I’m not exactly starving for it, but I can’t say I don’t want to drink up.

It’s just…

“Hurry up,” she calls from behind me. “We don’t have all day.”

I wonder… if I drink from this, does it count as an indirect kiss?

“I’m going to leave you behind.”

I quickly press my lips to the wound and drink. Only a kid would get caught up over something like this. The dry feeling in the back of my throat subsides to a slight tingling, and a feeling of satisfaction takes over me.

“Coming!”

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*I’m at the edge of a lake. It’s not an ordinary lake, but a lake of pure red – a lake of blood. The overwhelming smell almost washes my self-control away – but something else stops it.*

*There are two figures in the middle of the lake. They’re flailing about wildly, struggling to swim in the viscous liquid. I realize that I can move, and begin to wander forward in a mix of hunger and curiousity.*

*After I’ve taken a few steps, I realize that I know those two figures – quite well, in fact.*

*Judith and my mother are drowning in the lake of blood.*

*My mind immediately clears and I rush over to them – but all of a sudden the ground around me explodes, and humanoid figures rise from the ground like zombies. Their blood red eyes tell me that I’m dealing with vampires. I draw Nightfall and fight, cleaving through them left and right in an attempt to reach my family, but each time I strike one down more rise to take their place.*

*There are too many.*

*In the distance, I see Shizuka, Barry and more members of ANGEL. They’re just watching me, not doing anything else. Just standing there. I want to cry out for help, but if I break my focus for just a second, I will die.*

*Each step I take forward, I have to take two back. Each vampire I kill, two more sprout from the ground. I’m fighting an uphill battle.*

*Then, my mother completely sinks beneath the surface of the pool, leaving only Judith behind.*

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My eyes open, and I find myself staring up at the unfamiliar ceiling of Bob and Betty’s house. My entire body is drenched in sweat, and Nightfall is clenched tightly in my hand. I quickly dismiss it, breathing out a sigh of relief.

It was a dream. Of course it was a dream. Yet, something about it tells me I shouldn’t completely dismiss it yet. After all, isn’t there a saying about dreams representing the deep subconscious?

It’s still the middle of the night, and I’m not thinking clearly. I roll over and am about to close my eyes when something stops me.

*Why is Alice sleeping next to me!?*

Despite our discussion, I’d decided to sleep on the floor. In fact, when I closed my eyes, she was still on the bed, presumably already asleep.

So, why is she here on the ground with me?

I sigh. Maybe she rolled off.

Climbing to my feet, I air out my soaked nightshirt before grabbing her blankets and draping them over her curled up figure. I freeze for a moment, captivated by her snoozing expression, and swallow. Why do I feel so nervous?

Could it be that I like Alice?

“…Bran…”

I hear her soft voice clearly, and my heart skips a beat. Is she awake? No, she’s still breathing too deeply for that. Does that mean she’s dreaming?

“Bran…”

For some reason, the way she said it made it sound erotic. My mind runs away with possibilities of what she’s seeing behind those closed eyelids.

“…pass the pepper…”

I resist the urge to slap myself and quietly lie down on the bed. If she’s not going to use it, I will.

Chapter Nineteen: Proposal

“Make sure you don’t put too much stress on that shoulder and you should be fine,” the doctor says.

Barry blinks once. “Really?”

“Yes. I have no idea what sort of treatment Raphael’s giving you, but it’s been working.”

He hands over a form for him to sign. Barry flexes his shoulder slowly before scrawling a hasty signature on the slip.

“That’s that then. Take care, and hopefully I won’t see you again.”

He turns and exits the room. Barry remains seated on his hospital bed, his home for the past two weeks. With Raphael, ANGEL’s resident ‘Doctor’ boosting his recovery every day, his muscle and bone had regrown at a drastic rate. He can’t believe he’s been discharged already.

“Thanks for all your help, Kendra!” he cheerfully says to the nurse as she begins to clear the table.

“It was my pleasure. I’m so glad you’ve managed a full recovery.”

Barry smirks. “Got anything planned after your shift?”

“Boy, I’m old enough to be your mother. Go chase skirts elsewhere.”

In the middle of this exchange, the door opens and a young girl strides through. She’s still dressed in school uniform, and her black hair is tied back into a ponytail.

“There you are,” she says. “I’ve been looking all over for you-“

She freezes as her eyes meet Barry’s.

“Judith?” he grunts in surprise. “What are you doing here?”

“You know this person?” the nurse asks.

Judith nods. “He’s a friend of Bran’s.”

“Hold on,” Barry says. “You know each other?”

Kendra and Judith exchange a look.

“I’m her mother,” she finally says.

Barry feels his face heating up. He never would have imagined the nurse he’d been harassing had been his friend’s mother.

“I stopped by the police station again,” Judith says. “They’re still investigating, but it’s pretty clear that they’re prioritizing the recent raids and bombings over his disappearance.”

He’d already heard it from Shizuka. After Bran’s disappearance and Dracula’s return, the vampires had begun terrorizing Ashbrook with attacks aimed at seemingly random locations. Random murders had also begun taking place at night, making the streets unsafe for even grown men. Dracula was waging war with ANGEL, attacking its supply bases and research centres, and petty demons were taking advantage of the District’s missing demon hunter to emerge and join the fray.

Times were changing.

“Damn,” Kendra curses. “I really hope he’s alright…”

“He’ll be right as rain,” Barry cuts in. “I’m sure of it.”

Bran is strong. Barry knows that his fellow demon hunter wouldn’t have died so easily – there’s definitely more going on than meets the eye.

A short silence follows his declaration, before Bran’s mother speaks again.

“What about Alice?”

“Nothing either. At this point, I’m almost certain that she’s with Bran.”

Something scratches at the back of his mind, but he can’t quite put his finger on it so he dismisses it.

“Well, I guess I’m off,” he says. “I’ll leave you two to it. Things to see, people to do - I mean, things to do, people to see.”

He’s already on his feet when Kendra stops him.

“Hang on,” she says, planting an arm on his broad shoulder. “Judith, you’re heading home now, right?”

Bran’s sister nods. “Got nothing else to do. I just dropped by to update you.”

“Walk her home then,” she orders. “And don’t do anything dodgy.”

Barry sighs. It’s not that Judith isn’t attractive – she’s just toopale for his liking.

“Don’t worry ma’am,” he says. “It’s against the bro code to go for a mate’s sis.”

Judith shrugs. “Whatever.”

She swiftly turns on her heel and stalks out through the doorway. Barry scrambles about on the bed, gathering his belongings before rushing after her.

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Kendra Lietmann wearily wheels the cart down the corridor. There’s never a shortage of work for a nurse like her – with Barry discharged from hospital, her new designated task is to aid her colleagues at the blood donation department. Several clear pouches of blood lie trembling on her trolley, lined up neatly in rows according to type. She is to refrigerate them as soon as possible, where they will later have their plasma components removed and be stored as red blood cells.

She stops in front of the reinforced steel door and swipes her card on the lock, opening it. A blast of steamy cold air billows out, chilling her face.

She shifts her body weight onto the trolley’s handle and wheels it into the cold room. Only a few steps have been taken before she stops in surprise.

Several of the drawers have been pulled open, and their contents removed.

Kendra releases her grip on the cart and heads deeper inside. Every pouch of red blood cells classified under the type ‘O’ is gone. The entire unit has been swept through, not a single one remaining in stark contrast to the other units.

What could have possibly happened here?

A noise draws her attention, and she runs past the shelves towards it. Right there, in the back corner of the freezer, she finds two male nurses with carts similar to hers. Several large boxes are lined along their lengths, and she immediately knows that this is where all the blood has gone.

Before Kendra can cry out, one of them lunges at her and clamps his hand on her mouth while the other moves around her field of view behind her. She desperately struggles, but something hard hits the back of her head and her world fades into nothingness.

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“Let’s go,” one of the men says. “Before anyone else comes in.”

“Hold on a second.”

Something has caught the other’s eye. He bends down to the fallen nurse’s identification card by her waist, looking at it in interest.

“Kendra Lietmann,” he reads.

“Lietmann? Isn’t he the guy the boss was getting really mad about?”

The man nods. “This could come in handy.”

He rifles through the woman’s clothes and retrieves a purse, placing it into his own pocket.

“What do we do with the body?”

The man shrugs. “We won’t be able to go back to our ordinary lives after this, so it doesn’t really matter. We should just kill her.”

A few moments later, the two male nurses reemerge from the refrigerated room wheeling two carts of sealed boxes. One of them shuts the door, sealing it tightly, before turning the temperature control dial all the way to the right.

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It’s been several hours since they’ve left the hospital. The journey to Bran’s house consisted mostly of Barry trying to start up a conversation, and Judith killing it with one word answers. It was clear that her mind was elsewhere, so in the end he’d given up and just done his job – escort her safely home.

As he slowly heads back up the road, flexing his stiff shoulder, he wonders what the future will hold. The Fourteenth and Fifteenth districts are now under attack by demons – both vampires and others. He’s already heard from Shizuka – under the command of their new leader, whether willingly or not, the vampires have become a force to be reckoned with. ANGEL has already had to take several steps backwards in terms of their progression in anti-demon warfare, and these victories have begun to inspire previously suppressed parties.

Something needs to be done. No doubt Hector’s working on it, but Barry just wishes he could be on the front lines again, doing something. He was unable to defeat the enemy back at the mall, and as a result all this is happening. His uselessness has done naught but inconvenience ANGEL, forcing them to spread their agents out even more thinly than they already are.

A single snowflake falls from the sky. Several more are behind it, signaling the beginnings of a snowy night. It reminds him of when he first met Bran – they’d teamed up a few winters ago against a family of frost trolls, and he’d single handedly and cold bloodedly slaughtered them all – even the newborns. He didn’t ask for help, and he didn’t show mercy. Despite taking half the reward, Barry had done barely anything. He just couldn’t match the other’s intensity.

Barry lets out a heavy sigh. The Bran he’d met during the shopping centre district had still retained those traits – yet, it felt like something was amiss. There was something not quite right about him, or at least that was what Barry’s gut was telling him. It was almost as if he were in the middle of a metamorphosis.

A large van rumbles past from behind him, covering Barry in a haze of smoke. Coughing, he waves it away from his face and continues to head home. Winter is almost over – Spring is just around the corner.

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“Thanks for your work today, Max!”

Jordan hands me a sealed envelope – my earnings for today, paid in cash. It was surprisingly easy finding a job around town, even if it wasn’t a particularly great one. At just below the minimum wage, the important factor is that I’m paid in cash, and that it’s enough for Alice and I to get by. At this stage, any interaction with my bank account or anything else for that matter would spell the end for our safety.

‘Bran Lietmann’ is dead to the world.

I look around the rotting wooden docks, long overdue for a revamp. The train conductor wasn’t lying – the several rusted bollards attest to the number of boats that had once been serviced by the port, long ago. Only one of them is used now – to keep Jordan’s weathered fishing vessel in place while I help him prepare his catches for the market.

“Same time tomorrow then, I guess?” I ask. I swat a fly away from my face – they always come flocking to the smell of fish guts.

Jordan is already busying himself with packing up for the day. Shrugging, I begin strolling towards the streets with my day’s earnings securely in my pocket. As I pass the closing stores, I reach a bakery at the top of the slope where a single girl with shoulder-length fair hair waits for me.

“Bran.”

“I’m Max, remember?” I remind her.

“Ah, that’s right.”

We decided to make up the false names ‘Max’ and ‘Mia’ just to be safe. Alice found work in the bakery with relative ease, and business has been blooming for her store in the short two weeks that we’ve been living in this town. Meanwhile, I had to search for a little longer before Jordan finally offered me a job laboring for his ‘business’.

Working pretty much full time now, we’re earning more than enough money for supplies. I actually have no idea what we’re going to do with the extra money.

It feels like we’re not making much progression, to be honest. I’m only working because I don’t know what else to do with my time. The only link we have with Ashbrook is the news, and even then the only things that get mentions are raids and killings at night. Without Shizuka and ANGEL to feed me information, I’m completely in the dark.

One thing I do know for certain though – things are changing, and not for the better.

“Br – Max, are you hungry?” Alice asks as we head along the path out of town. She has a paper bag in one hand, and the overbearing scent of freshly baked bread is wafting from it. Unable to resist, I reach over and grab a bun.

“Thanks,” I say, sinking my teeth in.

We walk in silence as the afternoon sun steadily continues to sink. I don’t know what to do. Here in Port McAubourne, a world away from Ashbrook, we’re safe.

But isn’t that just the same as running away? Are we just going to spend the rest of our lives here?

“Bran.”

We’re far away from town, so she’s gone back to calling me by my real name.

“How do you know if you like someone?”

“Wh-what?”

I stop in my tracks, but Alice continues to walk.

“Are you retarded?” I cry, flustered. “Surely you’d know out of pure instinct?”

The distance between us is steadily increasing. I hasten my footsteps to keep up with her.

“I guess… it just means you can’t stop thinking about them,” I finally mutter. “You want to be with them… maybe hold their hand, do stuff together…”

My voice trails off. For some reason, I feel really uncomfortable. I’m glad she’s in front of me and can’t see my face.

“Huh. I see…”

It’s not long before she speaks again. “Can I ask you something else?”

“What is it this time?” I ask, preparing myself.

“Are we ever going to go back home?”

With that, I’m thrown back into my previous state of thinking.

*That’s right. We don’t really belong here, do we?*

She read my mind. I’ve been mulling over it day and night over these fourteen days – is there even a reason not to go back? Alice is pretty much at full strength now. If we were to fight Dracula, it would be now or never.

“…We can’t,” I mutter. “Dracula wants you. If you go, you’ll be walking right into his grasp.”

Alice is quiet for a while. The sounds of nature are only interrupted by our footsteps.

“I guess you’re right,” she finally says. “Living here isn’t so bad after all. It’s not as lonely if it’s with you.”

*Is it really okay though?*

It’s not. I know it isn’t.

Yet, the idea of living out here in the countryside, peacefully… spending the rest of my days with Alice… isn’t such a bad one. But just because it’s an appealing idea doesn’t mean it’s the right choice.

I need to protect Alice, but is this really the way to do it?

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The phone call comes later that evening, when Bob and Betty are out running errands. We’re eating a hastily prepared vegetarian dish in front of the old television when my ringtone goes off, the name ‘Ashley’ displayed as the caller.

I exchange a glance with Alice and answer it. Something must be up, or she wouldn’t call me.

“Hello? Bran?” Ashley’s hushed voice reaches my ears.

“It’s me,” I greet.

“Turn on the TV. Channel Seven.”

A feeling of apprehension suddenly takes over me. Something in her tone tells me I won’t like what I see.

I grab the remote and press the small round button with the number ‘seven’ on it. The television blinks and switches to a scene of a hospital, one that I’d know anywhere.

It’s Ashbrook hospital, where Mum works.

“*- was robbed of several blood samples sometime in the early hours of the evening. The body of Kendra Lietmann, a local nurse working at the hospital was found dead at the scene of the crime, frozen to death inside the freezer.”*

A chill runs up my spine as I subconsciously move closer to the screen.

Kendra Lietmann. My mother.

The camera pans over to the freezer in question, police in insulating gear crawling all over the place. The door was apparently locked from outside, and the temperature set fatally low. She hadn’t stood a chance.

“ – *are now investigating the matter, and whether or not it is linked to the recent raids across Ashbrook. It is worthy to note that the only samples of blood that were taken were O type samples -“*

I’m gripping my phone so hard I’m worried I might crush it.

“Bran! Bran, are you alright?”

Ashley’s voice calls out from the speaker. I feel something take hold of my hand and realize it’s Alice. There’s a fierce, yet comforting gaze in her eyes.

“Ashley…”

“That’s not the end of it. Keep watching.”

I shut my mouth and continue to watch, completely mesmerized by the screen. The story goes on, but I miss all the details.

Mum is dead.

Mum. My mother, the woman who brought me into this world, my own flesh and blood… is dead.

“- *and now, on to other news… the daughter of the deceased Kendra Lietmann, Judith Lietmann, has gone missing-“*

My world stops.

*“ – last seen –“*

*“ – appeared to have been taken from her home by force –“*

Judith…

*“ – it is unknown if these two incidents are linked –“*

My sister…

“*With the entire Lietmann family missing, it wouldn’t be a long shot to say that they could be involved in these recent bouts of terrorism –“*

…is missing.

“ – *will update us on any future developments –“*

Mum is dead, and Judith is missing.

Mum is dead. Judith… is missing.

“Bran! Bran…!”

I only just realized that Ashley has been shouting my name this entire time.

“Bran, are you alright?”

“Who… Who did this?” I growl.

“I… I don’t know. I saw it on the news, and immediately called you.”

“This can’t be happening…”

It doesn’t feel like it’s real. It hasn’t sunk in yet.

“Bran…” Alice looks at me with calm and collected eyes. “Keep calm.”

“No…”

“Bran!”

She grabs me by the shoulders and shakes me. I try to push her off, but she holds on tight and shoves me to the ground. My phone falls to the floor as we go tumbling in a heap.

“Let me go,” I snarl. “I’m gonna kill them!”

“BRAN!”

She straddles me and pins my arms down with monstrous strength. Her eyes flare red from behind her contact lenses, and she bares her teeth.

“You won’t gain anything by losing your temper now. What’s done is done – don’t jump in without thinking things through.”

“It was Dracula… I bet it was him…”

“Even if it was, charging all the way back to Ashbrook without a plan would be suicide.”

She continues to stare into me, restraining me completely from her position. My breathing slowly stalls, and I look away.

“…Bran, are you alright?” Ashley’s voice repeats from the floor next to us. I have no idea how many times she’s asked that already.

“Ye-yeah,” I shakily reply.

“I’ll go over tomorrow and try and get as much information as possible. Don’t do anything rash-“

Her voice suddenly breaks off as the phone begins to vibrate again. Someone else is calling.

The caller is Judith.

I look at Alice and finally shake her off.

“I’ll get back to you,” I mutter to Ashley, before hanging up.

I take a deep breath and answer Judith’s call, putting it on speaker mode so we can both hear.

“H-Hello? Is that you Bran?”

Judith’s voice comes through. It’s her, no doubt. A feeling of relief washes through me.

“Judith!” I almost scream into the phone. “Where are you-“

Her voice suddenly breaks off into a groan of pain, before another voice takes over.

“Glad to see you’re finally picking up, Mr. Lietmann.”

It’s a male voice – one I’ve heard before.

The voice of Vladimir Dracula.

“What do you want?” I ask, dangerously quiet.

“Oh, I’m sure you already know. Put Alice on the line, please.”

“She’s not with me –“

Our conversation is broken by the sound of Judith screaming in pain.

“Alright! Hold on,” I cry.

“I’m glad we’re on the same page here.”

I look at Alice, who gives me a nod.

“I’m here,” she speaks into the phone.

“Alice, my dear. How are you? Is Bran treating you well?”

She pauses before replying. “Yes.”

“I miss you, darling. I don’t suppose you’d come back to me, would you?”

“…I would never.”

Dracula sighs. “Let me speak to Bran again.”

I twist the phone back towards me. “What do you want with me?”

“Haven’t you realized by now? You’re dumber than I thought you were.”

“Don’t listen to him-” Judith screams in the background, before breaking into a cry of pain again.

“You’ve abducted my bride, so I’m abducting your beloved sister,” Dracula coolly says over the phone. “I’m sure you don’t want what happened to your mother to happen to her, do you?”

“You motherfucker…” I swear. “You’re the one who killed her?”

“Well, not me personally. She accidentally came across us as we were raiding the hospital’s blood supply, and unfortunately paid for it with her life… but not after my men picked up some interesting information. Like the fact that she was your mother, as well as your address among other things.”

“You…!”

“But that’s beside the point. It was unintentional, after all.”

“Fuck… You bastard…”

It feels like my vocabulary has been cut down to just a few words.

“I propose a deal, Mr. Lietmann. You haul your sorry behind back to Ashbrook with Alice, hand her over to her rightful owner, and I’ll give you back your sister. I will give you until noon tomorrow to decide – ring your dear sister’s phone to contact me. And I’m sure you know what will happen if you refuse.”

Before I can say anything, the line cuts short.

“Wait!” I scream, but only silence replies.

I stare at my mobile phone in shock as the seconds tick past. Then, I slowly turn my eyes towards Alice.

“I’m sorry,” she says.

I say nothing.

“We’ll leave tomorrow morning. I’m so sorry you got caught up in all this-“

“No.”

I stop her attempt to leave.

“You’re not leaving. There has to be another way.”

I glance at the clock. Bob and Betty should be coming home soon.

“We’re going to sit down and think this through,” I say. “Something tells me it might not be so easy getting my sister back.”

Alice glances at where I’m grabbing onto her arm. Realizing that I’m hurting her, I let go. The imprints of my fingers in her skin slowly begin to heal.

“I… I won’t let it end like this.”

Chapter Twenty: The Enemy of my Enemy

There’s a rustling of sheets next to me.

“You’re still up?”

Alice looks down over the edge of the bed with bleary eyes. I’m hunched over sitting with my back against the frame, my crumpled sheets abandoned in a heap on my sleeping mat.

“Go back to sleep.”

“You should too. We can think more in the morning.”

*There’s no time for that! There’s less than half a day left…*

“Just leave me alone,” I mutter quietly.

There’s a brief silence. I listen to the ticking of the clock in the darkness of our room, slowly counting down the seconds until I have to ring Dracula with my answer.

“If you can’t find an answer, I’ll just turn myself in. This is my battle, after all. It has nothing to do with you.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Alice. It has everything to do with me.”

“I’ll make sure your sister is safe before I hand myself over-“

“No. I won’t settle for that. That bastard killed my mother, I’m not going to let him win. Even if I die trying.”

I hear another rustling of sheets before a soft hand rests itself on my head. A comforting feeling takes over me as my head is patted, as if I were a small boy.

“She’s gone,” Alice quietly says. “The best you can hope for now is to save Judith. Dracula was the first Blood Lord, trying to fight him by yourself would be suicide.”

She continues to pat my head. “I’ll take full responsibility, so don’t worry. I’ll get your sister back.”

I can feel my tired eyes beginning to close, if only for an instant. Then I remember what must happen if I follow Alice’s suggestion.

“That’s not going to happen,” I growl, pushing her hand away from my head. “I’m not going to hand you over. You’re just as important to me as my sister. I’ll save you both, I swear it.”

Before I know it, the words have left my mouth. I don’t know if it’s because of my weariness or a build-up of stress, but I can’t stop myself.

“You’re mine, Alice. And I don’t like sharing.”

The moment I say those words, I immediately regret it. Alice is strong – she doesn’t need anyone to protect her. How is she going to react to this? It’s a shock for me as well – I’d been uncertain at the start of our time here, but over the days that uncertainty had solidified without my knowing.

It’s official, and I can’t deny it anymore.

I have feelings for Alice Vancratt.

I anxiously await her response with bated breath. The clock ticks on for such a long time I wonder if she’s fallen asleep.

“…idiot.”

She says it in such a quiet and muffled voice that it’s almost drowned out by sound of the clock. I keep my head rooted in place, worried at what I’ll see if I turn around.

“You idiot…”

It sounds like she’s mumbling into her pillow. I wonder what sort of expression she’s making.

“I’m the one who saved you. You belong to me, not the other way around.”

My heart stops in its tracks.

“I saved you too,” I say, my voice shaking a little. “I guess that means we’re even, huh.”

I hear the rustling of sheets and the creaking of mattress springs as Alice sits up. Keeping my eyes firmly fixed ahead I hear her sit down beside me, wrapping the sheets around us both. Her warm body slides right against my own and she rests her head on my shoulder.

“I’ll stay up with you,” she sleepily says.

I remain as still as a stone, not daring to move. It’s not long before I hear Alice’s breathing settle down, and a quick look out of the corner of my eye reveals that she’s fallen asleep.

The adrenaline of the day finally runs out, and a sudden tiredness I’ve never felt before takes over me. Still thinking over the problem in my mind, my eyes slowly close and my form relaxes as I too drift off.

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“Thank you all for coming here. Now please, take a seat and we can get started.”

Hector waves his arms, gesturing for the five people gathered by the doorway to sit. ANGEL’s ‘meeting room’ resembles something out of a science fiction movie – completely dark, aside from the luminescent screens and fluorescent lights. Behind Hector’s seat is a large display panel, currently showing a map of Ashbrook and its surroundings. The map has been divided into what looks like several slabs of land, such that it resembles a large jigsaw puzzle.

The five men and women take a seat at various places around the table. It’s clear that the room was made for more than just the five called in today.

“In case you haven’t heard, the threat in District Fifteen has been steadily escalating,” ANGEL’s director begins. “After the shopping centre incident, one of our demon hunters was crippled while the other has currently gone off the radar.”

He looks around and makes eye contact with each of the individuals called in, consisting of District Fifteen’s director, Shizuka Hirano and the surrounding four regions.

“Most of the time our Districts operate independently of each other… but in rare cases like this, we must draw aid from our allies to suppress a great evil. Shizuka, if you’d like to start off by listing our losses, please.”

Hector sits down and motions to his left. District Fifteen’s director stands up and speaks in a clear voice.

“In the past two weeks, three of our underground research facilities have been pillaged and rendered unusable. One bank has been robbed of several hundred thousand dollars, and two hospitals have been pilfered for blood.”

“Vampires?” one of the men asks.

Shizuka nods. “In addition to this, it goes without saying that many of our agents have lost their lives in the line of duty. The success of these demons is beginning to cause small uprisings around the city, and previously suppressed demons are becoming bolder in their actions. If we don’t do something soon, another war between humans and demons could break out.”

“What exactly happened during the shopping centre incident?” another man asks. “What triggered it all?”

“We’re still uncertain, but the demon hunter in charge of my district was involved in the incident first hand and I’ve obtained some valuable information from him.”

Shizuka sits down and allows the Director of the Fourteenth District to take over.

“Barry Samson was one of the two demon hunters caught in the building,” the woman begins. “He claims that the feral vampires were fed illicit drugs to drive them insane, before being released into the building. Meeting up with Bran Lietmann of Ms. Hirano’s district, they split up and cleared the building from top to bottom. Samson fought his way to the rooftop, where he encountered who he believes to be the instigator behind this madness – an ancient vampire, clad in crimson armour wielding a Divine Edge in the form of an extendable spear.”

“An extendable spear?” a voice questions. A few quiet murmurs rustle around the table.

“Following that description, one particular entity comes to mind,” Hector speaks. “Vladimir Dracula III, the Impaler, the First Blood Lord and the Prince of Wallachia.”

The murmurs break out into full-fledged argument.

“That’s impossible!”

“He disappeared over five hundred years ago…”

“Why would he be here of all places?”

Hector slams the table. “Silence, please.”

“Surely you don’t believe this, Sir?” one of the men asks. “Never in all my years have I encountered an Original Demon…”

“Archangel Raphael, just because you have not seen something doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist.”

The grey-haired man, Raphael, closes his mouth and begins to stroke his beard, deep in thought.

“The more you think about it, the more sense it makes that our enemy is indeed the first vampire. The vampires are too organized to be carrying out these acts of terror; they must be under the control of a Blood Lord. It would make sense if Dracula returned and reclaimed his title from whoever was leading the clan prior.”

“He impaled Samson from the rooftop and pierced through the entire complex,” the director of the Fourteenth District continues. “All seven floors. Samson barely survived by the skin of his teeth.”

The man named Raphael nods in silent agreement. “Perhaps I was a bit too hasty in my judgement.”

The other directors cease their indignant complaints. Raphael is clearly a revered and respected character amongst ANGEL.

“The question is… why?”

“The motive is indeed important,” Hector takes over. “But the fact remains – the demons are rising, and winning their skirmishes with us. No matter what the motive, we must lure out their leader and stop them.”

The five directors break into discussion again, with one of them raising a hand.

“If I might ask, Ms. Hirano,” he directs his question. “Wasn’t your district’s hunter involved in another incident on the news recently?”

“Not him,” she replies. “His family. The mother was killed during one of the raids, and the sister has gone missing.”

“Missing?”

The entire attention of the table has shifted back to the director of the Fifteenth District.

“Most likely abducted,” Hector says. “There’s no denying that Mr. Lietmann is neck-deep in this mess of ours. In fact, I would even go as far as to say that he is the missing piece of the puzzle.”

“Abducted,” Raphael says. “Could it be that they’re trying to draw him out? He went missing too, didn’t he?”

Shizuka nods. “I haven’t been able to reach him ever since the massacre.”

And then, right in the middle of the meeting, a ringtone blares to life. Five heads turn towards Shizuka, where the noise is coming from.

“Really?” Hector sighs. “This had better be important. I thought I made it a rule for phones to be turned off during these meetings.”

“Sorry,” Shizuka mumbles, pulling out her phone.

*Caller: Bran Lietmann.*

She almost drops it out of surprise. Slowly turning it so the other members of ANGEL can see, she answers it.

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It was past 11 am, and we hadn’t managed to think of anything. One hour until I was to make a decision and answer Dracula’s ultimatum. That was why I’d been forced into my last resort –

To seek help from ANGEL.

We’d been through all the other options. There was no way we could face Dracula and the entire Vancratt clan by ourselves. That only left one option.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Alice asks. “If they find out you’ve become a demon… you could be even worse off that you already were.”

“So be it,” I grimly reply. “If they found out about you, you could become my next target. I’d have to leave them either way, so I might as well sort things out now.”

The events of last night are still fresh in my mind, but we both act as if it had never happened. There are more important things at stake.

“Relax,” I smile reassuringly. “Shizuka’s good. When I lay it out in front of her, she’ll see the benefits. It’s practically a win-win situation; all I need is for them to realize that not all demons are bad.”

“That’s practically a given,” Alice replies, still uncertain. “Don’t you think they’d have realized that long ago? The fact that they’re still hunting us means it won’t be that easy…”

“It’s the only chance we’ve got,” I shrug, feeling surprisingly confident. “And frankly, siding with their enemy is the only chance *they’ve* got.”

According to Alice, nothing short of an Archangel or two would be able to stop Dracula. One of the Archangels resides in District Seventeen, but he’s primarily a healer. By the time we draw two in from where they’re scattered around the country, the damage done could be irreparable.

What do we do if we don’t have ANGEL’s top seven Divine Edge users at our disposal? People whose souls are practically bordering on the edge of divinity itself?

We send demons to fight.

By myself, I wouldn’t stand a chance – but if there were an Archdemon status, I’m sure we’d come close if we put our strengths together. With ANGEL’s support, it might just give us that edge we need to defeat Dracula. At least, that’s how I hope Hector’s decision-making process will go, because ultimately he’s going to be the one giving the final thumbs up.

Shizuka answers on the third ring.

“Bran?” she asks tentatively.

I suck in a deep breath, looking to Alice for support.

“It’s me.”

And I make my request.

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Shizuka is frozen. She can’t move.

Bran… her subordinate, her close friend, her comrade…

…is a demon.

The room around her is equally shocked as they listen in on the conversation, her phone set to speaker by Hector’s request.

“Dracula… wants to secure an heir with this ‘Alice’,” he breathes. “It’s beginning to make sense now.”

“Please,” Bran’s voice begs on the other side of the phone. “Lend us your help. I’m still me, the same me you’ve known all these years. The fact that we’re vampires shouldn’t mean anything at all.”

“Why should we believe you?” one of the directors asks. “You’re demons, just like Dracula. Can’t he just mind control you and turn you against us?”

“It doesn’t work like that,” the girl, presumably Alice, replies. “I share the same blood as Dracula, and Bran shares the same blood as me. The Blood Lord can’t command those who share his blood, which is why it’s so important for him to obtain me. If I get put through the Ritual, I’ll become his forever – you would have lost a powerful ally, and he would have eliminated his only major threat amongst us vampires.”

“Enlisting the aid of vampires,” Raphael muses. “An interesting idea. A controversial one too.”

“Surely you can’t be serious?” the man cries. “We’re an anti-demon organization for crying out loud. You can’t possibly be considering this, Sir…”

Bran is a half-vampire. Shizuka is still trying to wrap her head around the fact. What shocks her just as much is that he’s asking her for help.

Bran. Co-operation.

The two don’t mix.

“Things have taken an interesting turn indeed,” Hector mutters.

“We should just negotiate with Dracula and hand the girl over,” another man says. “Surely once he has what he wants, he’ll leave us alone?”

“You’re an idiot if you think that’ll end things,” Shizuka snarls, to which she’s met with a glare. “Once Dracula secures an heir and takes out his threats, he’ll begin making bolder moves. If he gets his hands on the girl, that’s a massive victory for the vampires. And who’s to say he won’t continue his attacks on us after we hand her over?”

“The vampires aren’t willingly working with them,” Alice’s voice cries from the phone. “I swear it. My father was their leader, he knew we wouldn’t stand a chance against humans in an all-out war. He resigned to his fate, and resolved to allow us to co-exist peacefully with humanity. They’re only working with them because of the Blood Lord’s command.”

“You expect me to believe a whole den of vampires has been hiding in the heart of the city for all this time, feeding on animals and whatnot?”

“Where else would they have all come from?” Hector shoots back. “We locked down the city. The only way a vampire could have gotten in is if they were there from the start.”

“It also explains why we have such low homelessness rates,” Raphael adds in, an amused look still on his face. “Quite ingenious, really. That vampires could have been living with us symbiotically for so long. Your father really was something, Alice.”

The director, having his arguments deconstructed before his eyes, falls silent.

“Well, we have all the facts now,” Shizuka says. “I guess it’s all down to you, Sir.”

All eyes turn to Hector. A silence settles, so soundless that even Bran and Alice’s breathing on the other side of the line can be heard.

“The prodigious daughter of a Blood Lord and a half-vampire demon hunter,” he ponders. “Enlisting the aid of our sworn enemies to defeat a greater evil.”

The audience of five watches on, waiting for his verdict.

“Two sayings come to mind,” Hector continues, his grey eyes twinkling. “We fight fire with fire. Mr. Lietmann is correct, in that by the time we call in another Archangel it could be too late. Ashbrook as we know it could be completely overrun, and demons could make their debut to the world.”

“There’s also another saying,” one of the men, opposed to the idea from the start, rebuts. “If you play with fire, it burns you.”

“Is that even a saying?” Bran mutters from the phone.

“I accept your offer to forge a temporary alliance,” Hector declares, his firm voice booming across the room. “As the saying goes… the enemy of my enemy is my friend. Bran and Alice… we will lend you our arms.”

There’s a brief pause, and two audible sighs of relief from the phone.

“What’s the time?” Raphael asks. “We must have spent quite some time discussing this.”

“This isn’t good,” Bran’s voice replies from the phone. “We’ve got half an hour left before I have to call Dracula.”

“That’s plenty of time to forge a plan,” Hector smirks. “A lot can happen in thirty minutes.”

Chapter Twenty One: A Night of no Regrets

“Thank you so much for letting us stay,” Alice and I bow. Bob and Betty have walked us to the edge of the road, asking surprisingly few questions about our sudden departure.

“Any friend of our grandchildren is a friend of ours,” Betty smiles. “You may not have been here for long, but we’ll remember you. You’re welcome to come back any time.”

“I’m glad you’ve sorted out those issues back home,” Bob continues. “It’s not good to run away. Real men have to face their fears sooner or later.”

I tip my head again. “We’re really grateful for your help. This isn’t much, but please take it.”

Alice and I hand over a small envelope, containing the leftover money earned during our brief two week stay at the town. If I had more time, I would have told Jordan earlier – but as it is now, I hope my voicemail will be enough. I know for sure Alice’s employer won’t be pleased that she’s leaving.

Bob takes the envelope and looks inside. “Are you sure you don’t need this? There’s a surprisingly large amount inside.”

“It’s fine,” I reassure them. “We weren’t really working for the money. Think of it as rent for our time here.”

“Even so…”

“Take it,” I repeat. “We’ve got no use for it anyway.”

If the plan fails, all the money in the world wouldn’t be able to help us.

“Very well. Thank you,” Bob nods.

Alice and I shake hands with the elderly couple.

“Have a safe trip, you two,” Betty smiles. “Here’s something I made you for the trip.”

She hands us a paper bag. The delicious scent of freshly baked cookies drifts from it. I take it and thank them one more time.

“Good luck, you two. Maybe you can come back and visit sometime, with Leo and Ashley!”

“I’ll let them know,” I wave.

Then, we turn our backs towards the farm and begin the long walk to the bus stop.

\*\*\*

“Looking for a light?”

Shizuka fumbles around with her cigarette as one of the directors from the other districts appears beside her. Bran’s phone call had completely riled and uprooted the meeting – but in a good way. The gears were finally in place – things were finally moving.

“Yeah, that would be great.”

The amount of things which could go wrong with their hastily cooked plan was depressingly high, but that didn’t seem to faze Hector. In contrast, his eyes had been sparkling like a child in a toy store the whole way through. If Shizuka had been in his place, she would have doubted herself every single step of the way.

Realistically speaking, the chances that they’d succeed were drastically low – yet she’d never heard Bran so determined in her life. There was definitely something different about him, outside of the fact that he was now part demon.

For one, Bran had asked her for help.

“Here.”

She’s snapped out of her thoughts by the lighter thrust in front of her. Taking it with a ‘thanks’, she proceeds to spark a small flame along its tip, bringing it towards her cigarette.

Just before the naked flame catches on, she stops. Her colleague tilts her head in puzzlement.

“Actually, I don’t think I’ll need this,” she says, handing the lighter back.

If Bran can change, so can she. It feels like she’ll be left behind if she doesn’t.

Shizuka replaces the cigarette in her pocket and heads back into the building. After all, there are still things to do – Bran is counting on her.

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A black car with tinted windows is waiting for us as soon as we step off the train. It’s been almost six hours since I called to negotiate with Dracula, and night is already upon us.

“Inside,” the driver says while holding the door open.

I let Alice climb in first before I do the same. Due to the increased security around the city several public transport routes have been closed off, so we’ll have to travel the rest of the way by car. The vehicle leaves its position on the kerb and begins driving through the streets, before turning onto the highway.

Even though it’s only been two weeks, it feels like this is the first time setting foot inside an urban setting in my life. The amount of people, lights and high-rise buildings overwhelms me. I vaguely recall spending some time here during a school excursion, when someone else took over my duties for the week.

“How long will it take to get back?” I ask the single driver.

“Not too long. Take a nap, I’ll wake you up when we arrive.”

I gladly oblige, resting my head against the side of the window. Within moments, I’ve fallen asleep counting the streetlamps passing by my window.

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*“I’ll accept your offer.”*

*Bob and Betty are in the fields. Alice and I are alone in our room, the door tightly shut.*

*“Wise decision,” Dracula speaks from the other end of the line. “Now-“*

*“But only under one condition. I get to decide on the details of the exchange.”*

*I hold my breath, waiting for the other to respond. There are a few moments of silence, before he begins to chuckle. The sound sends a chill up my spine.*

*“Planning something, are we? Well, I’ll listen to your proposal first. It would be rude not to, after all.”*

*“Is Judith alright?” I ask. “I need to confirm that she’s still unharmed.”*

*“Well, I never said I wouldn’t harm her,” I hear Dracula reply. “But rest assured, it’s nothing a few days of rest won’t fix. Her body heals surprisingly quickly – but I can’t say the same for her mind.”*

*I feel a surge of anger run through me, but Alice’s firm grip on my shoulder calms me down.*

*“The exchange will take place at Fifth Hill High School in Ashbrook, tomorrow at midnight. I don’t want anyone to get hurt.”*

*“The school is a big place,” Dracula replies. “Anywhere in particular?”*

*“The corridor on the top floor,” I reply. “I’ll wait with Alice on the east end, and you wait with Judith on the west. We’ll let them walk over to the other side by themselves.”*

*“And Alice has agreed to do this?”*

*“Yes,” I say. “And one more thing – come alone.”*

*“You don’t have to worry about my men. I’ll keep them on standby, just in case you try anything-“*

*“Come alone,” I repeat. “I don’t want to draw too much attention. If ANGEL gets involved, it could be bad for both you and me. You wouldn’t want them to accidentally kill Alice, would you?”*

*There’s a brief pause on the other side of the line.*

*“That’s right, I’d forgotten. Your organization has turned its back on you, hasn’t it? Maybe you should consider joining me. I’m sure I’d be able to find a suitable position for you in our new order.”*

*I resist the temptation to crush the phone in my hand.*

*“I’ll pass,” I say. “I just want my sister back. Midnight, tomorrow. We’ll both come alone, and settle things there. I want as little attention drawn to this as possible, and I want to get it over and done with as quickly as possible.”*

*“Very well then. I’ll accept your terms and conditions,” Dracula laughs. “Not that you’d be able to defeat me anyway. However, I have one final request that you must fulfil.”*

*“What’s that?” I ask.*

*“I want you to blindfold and bind Alice. I don’t want her getting second thoughts and running off somewhere during the exchange.”*

*I clench my jaw and look at Alice, who gives me a firm nod.*

*“That’s going to be hard,” I say. “Nothing short of steel chains would keep her restrained.”*

*“Then use steel chains. Or would you rather I refuse your conditions and make my own? Let’s not forget who’s in charge here.”*

*There’s a whipping sound and I hear a scream of pain that’s unmistakably Judith’s.*

*“Fine!” I shout. “I’ll do it. Just… stop hurting her, okay?”*

*“Good to see we’ve sorted that out. I’ll see you tomorrow then – don’t be late.”*

\*\*\*

We’re home.

The car pulls up in front of a tall building – one of the many hotels around Ashbrook’s business district. It’s been a few hours since nightfall, and the city is beginning to settle down.

“It’s still snowing, huh,” I mutter.

Beside me, Alice wraps the patched up jacket that was once mine more tightly around her.

“It’s starting to get warmer,” the driver says, closing the doors. “Not long before the flowers start blooming again.”

“Is this where we’ll be staying tonight?” I ask.

He nods. “I’ll give you the key in a second. You guys just rest up, we’re taking care of everything else.”

He heads back into the car and drives it around to the back. I take in my surroundings, looking off into the direction where my house would be. The house that’s now empty.

“It feels… strange, doesn’t it?” Alice murmurs to herself.

“Yeah,” I reply. “After all, tonight could potentially be our last night on earth.”

“We’ll make it.”

Above us, the snow continues to softly drift down. There’s nothing to do while we wait for ANGEL’s operative, so we take a seat by the ledge outside the hotel. A feeling of déjà vu takes over me – it wasn’t so long ago when it’d been Dad instead of Mum who had departed, and Judith had been bedridden in hospital. I recall a similar sense of loss, of aimlessness, even finality. That was when I’d first encountered a demon, and when Nightfall had come to me.

Now that I think about it, that incident had been the moment Judith had left her childhood behind. By the time she emerged from her coma, she’d completely changed. There was a maturity in her eyes that wasn’t there before, and her innocence and naivety had disappeared. She’d lost her appetite for meat, and couldn’t stand the sight of blood and gore. She’d left her childhood behind only seven years into her life.

I don’t want that to happen a second time.

Unlike the despair I’d felt eight years ago, this time I feel hope. I have Alice beside me this time. I have the aid of a Divine Edge. I have ANGEL behind me. Although there are two people who I must protect now, I have the power to protect them both.

“I wonder how that baby’s doing.”

She throws the comment from out of the blue.

“Baby?”

“You know the feral vampire who we defeated together? Her child?”

“Oh.”

The memory returns to my mind. Thinking about it now, it was a major turning point for me.

“Well…” I hesitate, unsure whether or not to speak.

Alice suddenly backs away from me. “Don’t tell me you…”

“No. I didn’t kill it.”

I raise my hands in denial. She gives me a searching look, not convinced. “Why are you so edgy then?”

I let out a sigh. “Well… to tell the truth…”

I didn’t kill the baby vampire – but I didn’t exactly just let it go either.

After I’d flipped the coin, it had landed on heads – in other words, I was to kill it. But even after I’d resolved to leave everything to chance… I didn’t do it. In fact, I spent another hour just trying to decide what to do. The more I looked at the baby, the more I realized that it wasn’t so different to my own situation after all. It was doing no wrong by existing. It had yet to learn what was right and wrong in the world – it was still innocent. Just as the demons had killed my father, I’d killed this child’s mother.

Are all humans born good or evil?

They aren’t. It’s the decisions they make in life which determine this. Following my line of logic, wouldn’t killing human babies be the exact same as killing demon ones? I could be protecting society from a potential serial killer, robber or rapist – yet why is it wrong to apply this line of thinking to ourselves?

That was why I’d taken the child to the church and left it right on their doorstep. To the defense of whoever was unlucky enough to encounter it, I left a note detailing its full nature including what to watch out for, what to feed it, and any other important details. If the baby was lucky, it could find a caring family who would support it and raise it to fit in with society, keeping its true nature a secret. If worse came to worse and ANGEL got its hands on it, it would suffer the same fate as if I’d just left it in the wild. And if the note was dismissed as the ramblings of a madman, leading the vampire to succumb to its instinct… that was what demon hunters were for.

By the time I’d finally trekked back to Shizuka’s place, I’d felt like the living dead. But what else could I do?

Alice is shaking her head after I recount all this to her.

“Why didn’t you tell me this earlier?” she questions.

“You never asked,” I shrug.

She exhales sharply – but I can tell she’s happy. She’s not making any attempts to hide it.

Becoming a vampire really was the worst thing to happen to my life. It was so much easier back when there was only one rule: kill all demons.

We both stand up as ANGEL’s driver approaches us from around the corner, having parked his car, and motions for us to follow.

“Come on,” he says. “It’s getting late. You need to be well-rested for tomorrow.”

Relieved at the diversion, I eagerly stand up and head towards the sliding doors – but not before Alice flashes me a heart-warming smile, one which melts my chest.

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There’s no clock this time to keep me awake, yet I still can’t fall asleep. In fact, the lack of sound makes the silence seem even more overbearing and stifling. I concentrate on the sound of my breathing, and Alice’s beside me.

The hotel room is quite a luxurious one, not that we had much time to examine it. We’ll be needing as much rest as we can get – in fact, the only thing I did before collapsing onto the bed was take a shower.

However, despite the weariness of the day, I’m now wide awake and alert under the sheets. The more I think, the less sleepy I become. It’s only a matter of time before I start shifting around, trying to find a more comfortable sleeping position.

“Are you still awake?”

I hear her voice clearly from beside me and turn to face her. Strands of damp blonde hair fall across her white skin, but do nothing to distract me from the captivating red of her eyes. She’s been wearing contacts for so long I’ve forgotten the true colour of her eyes is that of blood – although to be fair, she’d be beautiful with eyes of any colour.

“Sorry. Did I wake you?” I blurt, trying to think of something to say.

“No. I can’t sleep either.”

I let out a heavy sigh and resume staring at the ceiling. “It’s been a wild ride, huh.”

“It’s not over yet.”

I nod in the darkness. “Although I feel like even if it were to end tomorrow, I would be able to die with no regrets.”

“Are you sure about that?”

I questioningly look at her, but she rolls over and I end up talking to the back of her head.

“Are you sure there’s nothing you want to do, nothing that you’ll regret?”

The atmosphere has suddenly changed. Feeling hot all of a sudden, I stammer a response. “Wh-what do you mean?”

Alice wriggles around and burrows under the covers. I feel her grab onto my hand.

“Do you love me?”

The question catches me off guard, and I struggle to speak.

“Was everything you said back then… was it true? I want to hear you say it,” she reiterates.

Despite being the one making the demands, her muffled voice is surprisingly timid.

“H-hang on,” I start, relieved I don’t have to look directly at her. “There’s no need to-“

*Squeeze.*

I almost yelp as her grip tightens. Still under the covers, I feel her body warmth press against my chest. Just the thought that only two thin layers of cloth separate our naked bodies sets my body ablaze. My heart thumps loudly in my ears, so loudly I’m worried they might burst.

I lie frozen in position. Alice doesn’t say anything or do anything more, but just the feeling of her pressed against me is causing my body to react.

“Yeah,” I finally say.

She doesn’t respond, but her grip on my hand loosens a bit.

“You were a little scary and overbearing when I first met you,” I continue. “And you seemed so distant and aloof – I was always wondering why you were like that. Because you saved me, I sort of felt a need to at least understand you.”

Alice quietly listens to me, still buried under the sheets. As I talk, I feel my focus returning to me. I’m able to keep certain parts of my body in check through pure self-control and force of will.

“You’re strong – but if I’ve learned anything since meeting you, it’s that no one can do everything by themselves. Even the strongest out there go through difficult times and become the ones in need of help – and that’s why I want to be there to help you, to protect the one whom I owe my life.”

I listen to her quiet breathing against my chest. There’s no helping it, is there? If she asks me so openly and honestly, I can only give such an answer.

“You still haven’t said it-“

She pokes her head out from under the sheets, pouting. I feel my chest jump into overdrive at how cute she is.

“- but I guess I can overlook it this once.”

She then pulls the covers over us both, drowning the already dark room in complete black. I feel her breath against my neck, shortly before her soft lips press against my own. At that moment, my willpower, self-control, focus – everything shatters in response to this sweet, numbing sensation.

Maybe Alice was right; maybe I did have regrets – but now that’s definitely no longer the case. Well, I guess it was inevitable that this would happen.

Chapter Twenty Two: Impaler

We wake up at the predesignated time, a few hours before midnight. I feel surprisingly refreshed – although now that I think about it, it shouldn’t come as too much of a surprise considering we slept for the majority of the day. It’s been a while since I’ve had such a good night’s sleep – my body’s reverted to its base instinct, sleeping when I’m at my weakest. The full moon shines like a great white beacon outside the window.

“A full moon – the small timeframe during each month when we vampires are at our strongest.”

Without realizing it, Alice has crept up beside me. She’s dressed in her plain white frock, my jacket wrapped around her shoulders. I flush slightly upon seeing her, but quickly regain control of myself.

“You’re still carrying that old jacket around?”

“Of course. It’s a gift from you, after all.”

I let out a long, drawn out sigh. “I’d be happy to buy you one as a gift. All you have to do is ask.”

“It wouldn’t be the same though. This piece of clothing holds precious memories of ours.”

Well, I don’t know if you could call that whole incident with the feral vampire a precious memory…

“Come on,” I finally say. “Let’s not keep ANGEL waiting for us any longer.”

\*\*\*

The drive to Fifth Hill High feels like it takes forever. ANGEL’s operatives arrive at the school car by car within five minute intervals, deposited like soldiers going to war. They quickly space out along the outskirts of the main grounds, forming a human net that surrounds the entire school. The car with Alice and I is the last to arrive.

I step outside into the night, shivering - but not from the cold.

Illuminated by only the streetlights and the moon, my school gives off an eerie atmosphere. I’ve attended this place for so many years, yet not once have I ever been inside after hours. Just thinking about the fact that my sister’s fate will be determined by this battle places my chest in a state of unease.

Alice gently touches my hand, and I resolve my will.

“Long time no see.”

A voice I’d almost forgotten reaches my ears.

“Good to see you’re still here,” I respond, turning around. Shizuka stands by the edge of the gates, arms folded.

I frown in puzzlement at the lack of a cigarette between her lips. “Not smoking today?”

“I’m quitting.”

My worries disappear, replaced by a sense of amusement and surprise. “Huh. So the world’s finally ending, eh?”

“Shut it.”

“Seriously though, congratulations. I hope you can pull it off,” I genuinely smile.

Shizuka looks straight past me and at Alice. “That’s your vampire friend?”

All business now, I firmly nod.

“She isn’t at all what I was expecting,” she continues.

“What were you expecting?”

My superior shrugs. “Someone not as frail, I suppose.”

“Don’t underestimate her. Her strength may even rival that of an Archangel’s.”

“Really now?” Shizuka’s eyes search Alice with curiosity. Alice looks away uncomfortably.

“Enough of that,” I say. “Let’s continue this another time. For now, we have bigger fish to fry.”

“Well said, demon.”

Ignoring the jest, I head up to the fence surrounding the gates. The entire school is dark, as it should be. My eyes are automatically drawn to the third floor, where Dracula should be waiting.

“Take this,” Shizuka says, handing me a small rectangular device. “Once the exchange has been made, press this button to activate it and we’ll storm the place.”

“Are you sure you’ll be able to take him on? I don’t see any noteworthy hunters here.”

A quick scan of ANGEL’s men tells me they’re mostly grunts, ordinary humans supplied only with anti-demon firearms. I’d guess there aren’t many Divine Edge wielders, those properly equipped to deal with powerful demons.

“We’ve got a handful,” Shizuka replies. “But most of them are low-ranked. Barry has just been discharged and is in no state to fight.”

“What about you?”

She laughs softly. “There’s no way I can keep up with you anymore, Bran. To be honest, most of the people here are just to distract the enemy and give you or Alice an opening.”

I take a look around. These men are way out of their league – yet they’ve answered their call to duty. They’ve come here to lay their lives on the line, despite being far outmatched.

“I won’t let you down,” I nod.

“Alright then. Good luck, and I’ll wait for your signal.”

She salutes me, and I salute in return.

“Come on, Alice. Let’s go.”

\*\*\*

We walk across the dark field, our feet trampling the dewy grass.

“Got any plans after all this is over?” I ask, in an attempt to distract myself.

Alice breathes in deeply.

“Not sure yet. I guess I’ll have to take care of the future of the covern, and decide from there.”

“I assume you’re not going to take over?”

I receive a scoff in response. “No way.”

For someone who’s just about to be sold off to the Prince of all Vampires, she’s surprisingly composed. Granted, I haven’t put the cuffs on her yet.

She must really have faith in me, I guess.

“I want to live a life away from it all,” she continues. “A normal life, I guess. I don’t want to fight anymore – I never really wanted to fight in the first place. It’s probably too late though.”

“It’s not,” I say. “I’ll make it happen. I promise.”

“Jeez,” she smiles softly. “Don’t make promises you can’t keep.”

“I’ll keep it. Even if I die trying.”

Before she can say anything further, we arrive at the doors to the main building. I put a finger to my lips.

“I’m putting them on.”

Alice nods. I pull the heavy manacles from my pocket and wrap them around her wrists, locking her arms behind her back with a convicting *click*. We look behind us at the night sky one last time before stepping through, the warm air of the school’s heaters blasting our faces.

“Remember,” she whispers, as we head through the building. “He’s a vampire, stronger than you or I. But that also means he’ll be more sensitive to light. If you need it, you can use the light switches to your advantage.”

“I know,” I reassure her. “Just be quiet.”

I lead Alice like a farmer leading a lamb to the slaughter, up the flights of stairs, through the empty corridors. Each step I take my heart rate increases until I’m worried I’ll die of a heart attack before I even reach the top. That would be pretty pathetic.

We reach the last set of stairs. On the other side of the roof above me, on the opposite side of the building is where Judith should be. I glance at Alice one last time before bringing the blindfold out. As soon as it’s wrapped tightly around her eyes, she is completely powerless.

“Let’s go.”

I lead her up one painstaking step at a time. As we slowly ascend I’m reminded of that time back in the sewers, when she was first taking me to see her father. At that time I was the one in trouble, the one in need of guidance. I had to place my faith in her, to get me through without having me break down. If it weren’t for her I would have eventually sunk to the ground, paralyzed with fear from my claustrophobia.

Now, she’s the one placing her trust in me. There’s no way I can let her down.

We step into the dark hallway. My eyes see to the far end with clarity, despite the darkness. The unmistakable form of Vladimir Dracula awaits me at the opposite end, his crimson armour gleaming. Judith’s small figure is behind him, similarly blindfolded but her hands are handcuffed rather than bound together by cast iron manacles.

“Judith!” I cry.

“Bran! You’re here!”

Her fractured voice cries out in response, bouncing off the walls to reach my ears despite its volume. A feeling of relief washes over me, so great that I almost sink to my knees from it.

“So you came after all,” Dracula says. “But you didn’t come alone.”

My heart sinks. I should have known he’d realize.

“Are you a fool? Did you think I wouldn’t be able to smell the human filth you dragged here with you?”

I struggle to remain calm, desperately racking my brain for an excuse.

“They’re here in case you try anything,” Alice calls out resolutely. “If you hand over the girl as promised, they won’t intervene.”

Her voice effortlessly projects over to the other side of the dark hallway.

“Ha…”

Dracula’s voice rings back in response.

“Ha haa… HAHAHAAA!”

He begins to laugh, his armour rattling uncontrollably.

“You seriously think I’d have a use for this mongrel? I couldn’t care less what happens to her.”

He violently shoves her forward. Judith stumbles, but grabs onto the wall and regains her balance.

“Go on, scurry back to your brother.”

Alice’s hands leave mine as she too begins to walk forward with sure footsteps, her sense of smell removing her need to feel her way across. As they pass the half-way point, Judith apologizes.

“I’m sorry.”

Alice ignores her and continues walking; reaching Dracula the same time Judith reaches me. I press the device in my pocket, before ripping the blindfold from my sister.

“Bran…!”

She launches herself into my arms.

“Are you alright?” I ask. “Did they hurt you?”

Tears begin leaking down her face, soaking through my shirt. “Yeah. But I’m fine now.”

I snap the brittle handcuffs and toss them away.

“I’m so glad you came for me,” she whispers into my chest. “I was so afraid… and you were gone for so long I was starting to doubt you were still alive…”

“Don’t be stupid,” I scold. “Of course I’m alive. If I die, who’s going to come and save you? I’m your big brother. That’s what big brothers do.”

Below us, the building trembles as doors are kicked apart. Footsteps thunder inside, synonymous to a stampede of wild beasts.

“Run,” I whisper to Judith. “Run to the football field and don’t stop. I’ll meet you there.”

She nods, her eyes still wet with tears of relief, and flees. My heart at ease now, I slowly begin to approach Dracula. Alice stands as still as a statue, still bound in cuffs. Even if she wanted to, she wouldn’t be able to break them by herself. Nothing short of a strike by a Divine Edge would be able to break her bonds.

“So you’re going to fight me?” Dracula laughs. “You and your army of weaklings?”

“No,” I reply. “I’m going to destroy you.”

As I say those words Alice blindly throws a kick towards the Blood Lord, a kick which whips through the exact location the demon was a few moments ago - just another testament to the sensitivity of her hearing. However, he’s no longer there.

“Let’s make sure you don’t run away, my princess.”

A chill runs up my spine as Dracula reappears beside Alice. I rush forward, but it’s too late.

*Crunch.*

Alice lets out a bloodcurdling scream as her bones are broken apart like twigs, her legs wrenched at unnatural angles. She collapses on the ground in a heap, groaning in pain.

“YOU BASTARD!” I roar.

The ground cracks as I fly forwards, shooting across the corridor like a bullet towards the armoured being.

*Nightfall!*

It appears in my hand without hesitation, just in time for me to swing with all my fury and rage. There’s a blur of red, and I find myself blocked by the thin pole of a spear. The impact jars me down to my shoulder.

“You think you can take me on?”

Dracula roars and twists his arm around, pushing me up into the roof. I bounce off and land a few feet away. Alice is still moaning, crawling around on the ground as her body slowly and painfully regenerates. She won’t be able to move for at least a few hours.

I just need to hold him off until Shizuka’s men finish climbing the stairs. There’s no way he could defeat us all.

“You’re still a few hundred years too early to challenge me,” Dracula spits, before lunging.

He’s fast, but not so fast that I can’t keep up. I step to the side, raising Nightfall in preparation to strike –

But, the red pole to next to me blinks and swerves sharply.

A biting pain cuts into my side as I clumsily throw myself away. The spear twists and zigzags, snapping back to its original form. Blood flows from my side.

“So that’s the power of your Divine Edge,” I say, clutching at my wound. “It can extend and bend at will.”

Dracula doesn’t reply and instead thrusts again. I watch the spear carefully this time, rushing past it. As long as I can reach him before his spear reaches me…

*Clang!*

I fail. The spear flexes around like a whip, blocking my strike and cutting my chest in the process. I disengage, throwing myself backwards yet again. My vision tints red as the hot air touches my wounds.

“Why?” I pant. “They’re not healing.”

“They are,” Dracula replies. “Just at the normal rate of a human. A wound opened by my Impaler will nullify all abnormal healing effects. I guess you could say it reduces everything I fight to human level. How else do you think I was able surpass my rivals and claim my title?”

I clench my teeth together.

*That’s fine. I’m used to being a human, this is nothing new.*

Keeping calm, I leap to the side of the corridor right next to the light switch and flick it, preparing myself. However, the hallway remains dark and devoid of light.

Oh no…

“You think I’d fall for that? I made sure to destroy the school’s power lines before I arrived.”

I grit my teeth. That’s fine, there’s still plan B. ANGEL should be here any time now-

No. Something’s wrong.

It’s too quiet. The stampede of beasts below us… is no longer there.

“It’s not like the school to leave its gas on overnight either,” I murmur, suddenly aware of the temperature.

“I thought you were better than this. Do you think I’m on the same level as those simple-minded petty demons you’re used to dealing with?”

Dracula speaks as if he has all the time in the world. There’s already a stream of blood running down my side.

“Wh-what?”

I’m beginning to see where this is headed.

“The gas… what did you do to it?”

“A simple nerve agent. The electricity wasn’t the only thing I tampered with before coming here - I made sure to take all the necessary precautions. Why else do you think I wasted all that time scouring ANGEL’s laboratories? If you don’t stop the system soon, your friends are going to suffer irreparable brain damage.”

Rage builds up inside me. “Judith…!”

I turn my head, prepared to bolt back down – but the metal pole of the lance slides in front of me, forming a cross to bar my escape.

“Don’t turn your back on me, scum. You challenged me – don’t back down now.”

I slowly turn. Alice is no longer moaning, but I can hear her labored breathing. Seeing her like this, I almost feel her pain myself.

“I’ll destroy you,” I say once again, to reassure myself more than anything.

I grasp Nightfall in both hands and charge. I see the Impaler out of the corner of my eye, spiraling around to block –

But I can go faster.

Mid-air, racing the spear towards its master, I fully merge myself with my soul. Having rested for more than enough to fully recover, the Soul Link transitions smoothly.

This battle is over.

I’m just about to reach Dracula, sword raised, everything around me a blur except for my crimson target – until a glint of red races from nowhere, knocking my blade off course. Before I can react, it twirls about and impales my chest. Burning pain courses through my system as the harsh metal scrapes through my organs and through the other end of my torso. Still being carried forward by my momentum, I crash into the wall in a bloody mess. Dust and debris fall from the crater under my back.

“How?” I choke. The Impaler wrenches itself from my chest with a sickening lurch.

My speed when Soul Linked… should be unmatched. How was the spear able to keep up?

I leap to my feet again and try to close the distance – but for some reason, I’m unable to reach my full speed. The air feels viscous – as if I’m trying to move through honey. As if I’m in one of those dreams, running as fast as I can – yet barely moving at all.

This isn’t natural. Why can’t I move?

Dracula’s spear whirls out of my sight and around the other end of my vision, impaling me once again. I fall to the ground, unable to move from the pain.

“It’s over,” the vampire says, standing before me. He’s barely broken into a sweat – in fact, he’s been pretty much standing still the entire time, his spear attacking and blocking for him like a serpentine guardian.

“Why?” I ask. I should be able to move several times faster – even by vampiric standards – yet I’m slower than I was as a human.

Dracula’s spear retracts to its normal size. “The Impaler does not only deal grievous wounds to the body, it also wounds the soul and transfers that power to myself. The more blood it tastes, the stronger I grow, and the weaker the target becomes. If I kill them, the change will become permanent and the power will completely merge with my own. Among vampires, I am considered a God, boy. A vessel capable of limitless power.”

“No… no way…”

“You are surprisingly strong for a hybrid – but now that strength and speed is mine. The mistake you made was allowing me to draw your blood. Can you feel it? Your strength leaving you? Your soul, your Divine Edge crumbling? As you are now, you wouldn’t even be a match for an ordinary vampire.”

“Is that your plan?” I ask, coughing in pain. “Are you going to kill Alice to steal her power?”

A boot presses itself firmly onto the wound on my back, and I scream.

“I have no intention of killing Alice. I will never find another so suited to be my bride as her. Imagine all the possibilities, Bran. Children birthed from a one-in-a-million specimen such as her, and the first vampire to walk the earth. Imagine their potential.”

The boot lifts itself from my back, and I’m able to raise my head. Dracula is shivering, a savage lust in his red eyes. I see the crazed expression in his face.

“Imagine the power I’d gain from drawing their blood with my spear. A near infinite supply of children from Alice, fresh fodder for me to kill. When she reaches the end of her life, I will take one of our children and she will become my new bride. As one who arrived from the original realm of the demons, I will not age nor die. My power will grow infinitely, until I remake this world as my own.”

I feel bile rising from my throat. This… this *thing* is truly the definition of a monster. Inbreeding, infanticide… not a shred of morality exists within this being.

“I’ll never do it!”

Alice screams at the top of her lungs, still crawling pathetically on the ground. She can’t break free from her chains, and her legs are far from healed. She wildly shakes her head in an attempt to cast away her blindfold, but to no avail.

“Oh, once the wedding is complete – although it’s closer to a ritual – you won’t be able to resist. How else do you think the Blood Lords controlled their mates if they were of the same blood?”

“You’re lying… mother was never under father’s control…”

“Because your father was weak. Look at our once proud clan – hiding under the city from the hunters like vermin. Look at what he’s done to our race.”

I finally manage to reach my feet, but all my strength is gone. I have barely a fraction of the strength I had as a vampire.

“Stay in your place, human.”

My vision staggers as I’m kicked back down onto my face. Blood enters my mouth – sickeningly warm.

“You are not worthy of being a vampire. As such, I will now strip you of your race, and the power that comes with it.”

Trying to connect the dots in his words, I see a blazing red aura surround him. The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

A Soul Link.

The crimson sheen of the Impaler brightens. Chaos swirls around my brain and my chest at the sight. Just by looking at it, I feel my mind being torn apart and a part of my soul being dragged out. Flashbacks of the wraiths on the bridge fly before my eyes, and before I know it I’m screaming.

The red lance glows and plunges into me – but my body isn’t wounded.

Instead, I feel a part of myself die.

It slowly withers away, like the leaves of a tree come winter. The phantom image of the pole pierces throughout my body, stabbing into every inch of it and destroying my soul. Indescribable pain rushes through my brain, overloading it, shutting down my senses. I shudder numbly, withering, diminishing like the glow of the ghostly spear as it finishes its work and retracts from my torso. I lie on the ground, unable to move, completely drained of strength. The corridor has darkened drastically – I can barely make out Dracula’s two feet and Alice’s slumped form.

No… it was always this dark. I just can’t see through it anymore.

I feel… so weak and exposed.

“You are no longer a demon, Bran Lietmann. That part of your soul has been sealed away. You never deserved it in the first place.”

Vladimir Dracula steps back, his red spear disappearing, before bending down and hoisting Alice onto his back. A sob escapes her lips as her broken legs flop around uselessly.

“If you’re lucky, you’ll die of your wounds. Otherwise, you’ll have to experience the pain of the nerve gas.”

With that the armoured vampire slowly walks off into the distance, his metallic boots clanging on the floor. Within moments he’s descended the stairs, leaving me alone –

To die.

Chapter Twenty Three: Blood on Baptized Land

It’s so cold.

So cold.

Even though it’s not snowing… I’m so cold.

Why is it so cold? Winter is ending, isn’t it?

I lie with my back against the wall, breathing shallowly. I probably halved my lifespan just by moving, but I’ll be damned if I die like a pathetic roadkill.

I made a mistake. I shouldn’t have hesitated, shouldn’t have underestimated, shouldn’t have waited to Soul Link. The moment Dracula wounded me, the battle was over.

I reach out my hand, issuing forth a mental summons.

*Come to me, Nightfall.*

I want to hold it in my hand one last time, at least before I die.

But it doesn’t come.

I’m no longer a vampire – or even a demon hunter. Everything demonic about my soul, including my Divine Edge, was sealed. I’m just an ordinary kid now, alone, left with nothing. Alice is gone. Mum is gone, so is Dad. I have no idea if Shizuka or her agents have managed to survive, but I know for a fact I will not live to see them again. I can only hope Judith found a way out of the school before the nerve gas reached her.

Why am I not dead yet?

A pool of my own blood stretches halfway across the width of the corridor. The nerve gas should have killed me long ago… so why?

Ah well. It’s only a matter of time. So cold…

This must be what dying is like. This must be what all those demons felt as I slew them with my blade. Once the painfulness subsides, it’s quite peaceful. However, it’s this peacefulness that hurts the most. It’s only in the few moments before death that you realize just how much you want to live, just how much you want to cling onto this cruel world.

No wonder Alice is so opposed to killing. It’s truly a terrible feeling - the cold hand of death, slowly creeping up your body… darkness closing in, engulfing you… two hands, shaking your shoulders….

“Bran!”

Sleepy… cold…

“BRAN!”

Something slaps me. Shocked, I regain my focus for a few brief moments.

“J-Judith?”

It’s her no doubt. She’s crouched over me, a desperate look on her face. Her eyes are still red from crying.

“Am I dead?” I murmur.

“Bran… it’s not over yet. They’ll be here soon. I turned off the gas, and managed to turn on the air con. It shouldn’t take too long, but the fresh air should revive them soon enough.”

Her words spew forth in a scrambled mess, but I comprehend it all.

“Huh…”

Ah, Judith. So reliable. Even after going through all that, she still managed to step up to the task. Even if I die, at least I’ll die knowing she’s alive, and that she managed to save everyone else.

“Bran! Don’t sleep yet!”

Her voice breaks a little. If she still had tears left, she’d probably be crying.

“It’s okay,” I reassure her. “It’ll only be for a little bit.”

“You have to save Alice. It’s clear that you love her – don’t let it end like this.”

A small flicker of annoyance passes through me. Why can’t my sister just leave me be?

But I can’t dispel the thought she planted in my mind.

Alice…

“Listen, Bran. There’s something I’ve been keeping a secret from you.”

As she says this, Judith pulls up her wrist in front of her and brings it to her lips.

“I don’t care if you want this or not, but I’m not going to let you die just yet. Think of it as my own selfish wish.”

She pauses for a second – just a single second of indecision, before steeling herself.

Judith bites down hard – and red blood springs from her wrist like a small wellspring.

*Wh-what are you doing?*

I try to call out, but I’m too weak to do so.

“Listen up, Bran. It’s not just you who owes Alice her life. She’s the one who saved me, back when I was hospitalized by that accident.”

I’m barely able to register her words, before I feel her wrist touch my lips. Warm blood flows down my throat, burning me.

“Alice was at the hospital, right after Dad died. She fed me some of her blood and woke me from my coma. She turned me into a vampire and saved my life.”

Vampire…

My sister… is a vampire?

I feel her skin leave me. Pain begins to wrack my body – but it’s a good pain. It’s like I’m welcoming back an old friend.

Of course, it’s still pain nonetheless – and my already battered body gives in to the darkness.

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*Somewhere inside my heart, I feel like I already knew. That my sister had changed after that accident, that like me, she too had undergone an irreversible transformation.*

*Her miraculous recovery after being run over. Her sudden change to becoming vegetarian. Her nocturnal study habits. Her paleness, her resistance to disease. Her abnormal recovery from the wounds inflicted by Dracula.*

*Alice didn’t only save me, but my sister.*

*The one other life she’d saved, the one which Ian had been so furious about… it must have been Judith. She’d known from the moment she’d taken me in and nursed me. She knew that I was the brother of that girl.*

*There were probably more cues that I missed. To think that I’d been so absorbed in my own struggles that I’d never spared a thought for my sister. In an alternate universe, I might have even killed her after discovering she’d become a demon.*

*But now, in this moment where I lie between life and death… I’m glad Alice decided to save her.*

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I open my eyes, seeing the dark hallway around me clearly. It’s not even day yet – no more than a few hours must have passed. Extending my hand, I call upon Nightfall – and it responds.

I’m back.

I suppose one’s soul can never really be truly sealed. Judith’s pact with me simply unearthed the thin layer covering my power – as Alice once mentioned before, the process of becoming a vampire is more a physical one than a mental or spiritual one. Perhaps Dracula’s spear only tricked my soul into forgetting itself. All it took was a bit of nudging to reawaken it.

No matter what the reasoning, I’ve been unsealed – and it’s all thanks to my sister, who’s waiting patiently next to me.

“How long has it been?” I ask. Despite being near death a while ago, I feel refreshed. Perhaps I only feel that way because of the loss of my abilities. Even though I was only a human for a few moments, I’m beginning to realize just how strong vampires are as a race, and how much I’ve taken our strengths for granted.

“Less than an hour,” Judith responds. “Some of the men downstairs are beginning to wake up. I heard them calling the ambulance.”

Less than an hour. A mere fraction of the period it took for me to transform the first time.

Less than an hour. That means I have to make my move fast – if we get caught up with the police and the emergency services, the delay could be devastating.

“Do you know where Dracula is?”

Judith shakes her head. I punch the wall in frustration.

To be so close, and yet so far.

“He’s going to marry Alice, isn’t he?”

“Yes,” I nod.

“I’m not sure, but I might have overheard them talking about a church. Something to do with ‘baptized land’ or something. It would make sense if they were having a wedding.”

I look at my sister. It sounds like the most obvious thing in the world… but it’s not like I have any better ideas.

“Thanks for saving me,” I tell her.

“It’s a little sister’s job to look after her brother. I guess that makes us even, since you saved me too.”

I nod.

“Bring Alice back, Bran. Think of it as paying off your younger sister’s debts.”

“I’ll bring her back,” I reply. “For sure. But after this, you’re paying off your own debts.”

With that, I give Judith one last hug before sprinting for the nearest window. After all, the quickest path to the ground is straight down.

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I sprint through the streets, rushing towards the church at the top of the hill. I’ve been there once before – when I deposited the feral vampire’s child by the doorstep. I wonder what became of it.

No – I have to remain focused.

I feel surprisingly good despite running for so long as I reach the end of the road. It’s still the early hours in the morning, so maybe that’s why. In fact, I feel as if I could pull off another Soul Link – probably because my earlier one was cut short.

I *have* to pull off another Soul Link. If I fail, I won’t be getting any more chances.

With this in my mind, I slowly begin to trudge up the hill. The night is calm and peaceful – in complete contrast to the chaos and turmoil within me.

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The antique chapel looms ominously over me as I reach the top. I’d half expected to encounter some of Dracula’s men, but fortunately I made it without any incident. Despite being a holy building, it gives off a sinister vibe – as with everything else at night.

I stop by the door, examining the doormat. Just a few weeks ago, this is the exact place where I dropped off the vampire child.

It’s a fitting location, really. On top of the hill, it’s removed far enough from society so that our battle won’t disturb it. Even on such a quiet night, any sounds would be lost in the wind.

Alice lies behind this door. I can smell it. I can sense it. As if there’s a string of fate attached to us, I know that she’s here.

I make a prayer to God, asking his permission to enter this building – if he even exists, though in a world filled with demons it’s not impossible – and quietly open the door.

The dark aisles are empty. I see droplets of blood on the ground, leading all the way up and around the altar. The wind whistles through the hall, stroking the wind chimes by the doorway.

I quietly walk forward, following the specks of blood. Once I reach the front row of the aisle, I find an old man lying face down in a pool of his own blood. The collar around his neck tells me he’s the reverend.

“Rest in peace,” I whisper, pausing for a moment to acknowledge him. Just another life taken by the Prince of Wallachia – but a life just as important as say, that of my mother.

This demon is the one demon that deserves a merciless death.

Near the top left corner of the church, next to the deceased reverend is a stone staircase leading down to a door. This is quite an old place, after all – it makes sense that there would be an undercroft, though it would probably be used for storage rather than the dead.

The door is open, and the trail of blood continues. In the distance, I hear Alice’s voice.

My immediate instinct is to call out her name – but I refrain, and instead stealthily edge through.

There are no lit candles, no forms of light whatsoever – but I can see as clearly as if it were day. Passing through the pillars like a shadow, I make my way to the end of the chamber – and that’s where I find them.

Alice lies on her back in a pool of her own blood. Her limbs are spread apart, as if she were making a snow angel – but in this case, a blood angel would be a more appropriate term. Upon closer examination, I realize that her previously chained hands have been unbound and nailed to the floor, along with her feet. Her jacket lies to the side, and her white gown has been ripped to expose parts of her body.

“How did you know I would be here?” Dracula asks, without turning around.

“Lucky guess.”

I should have known I wouldn’t be able to sneak up on the Blood Lord. Hearing my voice, Alice weakly calls out.

“Bran… is that… you? Have you… come… for me?”

Each word she speaks is a struggle.

“Everything’s going to be alright,” I say. “Just hang in there. I’ll take care of this scumbag once and for all.”

Dracula sighs and materializes his spear. “How did you survive, anyway? And you’ve even regained your abilities-“

He stops mid-sentence.

“That girl.”

“That’s right.”

“I was suspicious at how quickly she managed to recover from the wounds we inflicted… but to think such a gift had been wasted on one with as little presence as herself…”

“Not all vampires have powerful souls, Dracula. Sometimes, the weakest among us play the most vital roles. That’s where you made your mistake.”

“You’re talking as if you’ve already won,” the vampire replies, a smug smile forming across his lips. “But you forget something important. I am your master, and you must obey my orders. Now… why don’t you go ahead and *kill yourself*?”

A brief silence passes between us. A cold draught passes through the undercroft. I feel no compulsions to obey him, none whatsoever.

Dracula finally realizes that his order isn’t working.

“Impossible… unless…”

This time, I don’t make the same mistake.

*Come to me, Nightfall!*

No hesitation. I know what must be done.

“That’s right. I’m not the only person Alice gave her blood to.”

My soul flares to life, a pitch black aura igniting around my body. I feel my taste, touch, smell, sight, hearing, my strength, speed, reactions, perceptions –

Everything multiplies exponentially, for this short amount of time. My unique – no, *our* unique ability, the absolute synchronization of the body and the soul, something that is impossible for any other pair to achieve.

Our Soul Link.

Chapter Twenty Four: The Red String of Fate

Judith turns her head to the side as a middle-aged woman in a pinstriped suit appears at the other end of the corridor. With a gas mask over her face, she spots the girl and quickly rushes to her side.

“You must be Judith,” she says, through the mask. “Are you alright?”

Judith nods weakly. With all the action now over, a great weariness overcomes her.

“What happened?”

The woman looks around at the cracks and craters in the walls, the bloodstains, the debris. “Where are Bran and Alice?”

She must be one of Bran’s allies. The air of authority she gives off certainly gives that impression.

“The chapel,” Judith says. Her voice comes out as a bare whisper.

The woman’s face behind the mask is a complete mystery, but she appears to understand.

“The medics will be here soon, they’re just taking care of everything downstairs. We’ll get you some water as soon as possible. Hang on until then.”

She moves aside and says something into a microphone by her collar – probably directing people towards the church. Judith licks her lips, already anticipating the cool, refreshing taste of water. After crying her eyes out, it’s no wonder she’s dehydrated.

Of course, she would prefer a glass of blood – but she doesn’t think revealing that here would be a wise move.

“Here, take this.”

The woman has finished speaking and strips off her suit. Judith accepts it and wraps it around her, even though she doesn’t feel the cold at all. The faint smell of tobacco reaches her nostrils as her thoughts return to her brother.

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*“The soul is a living, breathing thing. Although it doesn’t speak or communicate, it responds to our actions, and changes its appearance to reflect changes in our psyche. Willpower, determination, danger… these things can make a Divine Edge stronger, as well as weaker.”*

*Hector’s eyes pass among the small class of students, stopping on my own. I look away quickly.*

*“The most important thing is not to give up. Those with weak wills also have weak souls. The second most important thing is to fight for a purpose. Whether it be protecting someone dear to you, a sense of self-satisfaction or… revenge –“*

*I subconsciously clench my fists.*

*“- the stronger this emotion is, the more it will be reflected in your soul. They are dynamic things, that change as you do. Just remember that.”*

*What does this old geezer know? I just want to hurry up and get to the killing part. I already know my purpose in life –*

*To kill demons.*

\*\*\*

There’s something different about Nightfall today. It feels a bit lighter, glows a bit brighter, and there are silver streaks glowing along its edge. Whereas before it was a reflection of the pitch black night, now there are stars and a moon in the sky.

This thought passes by in an instant, and I dismiss it. I have only one focus now – to protect Alice. Nothing else matters.

The single step I take erases the several metres between us. Dracula visibly recoils, realizing he’s too late to stop me. His spear, the Impaler lunges for me, but it’s too late.

In a flash of black and silver, I cleave through the armour and into his side. Blood spurts from the wound, splattering the stone wall as the demon desperately tries to recover his footing.

There’s already a clear difference from our earlier fight. Dracula can’t afford to stay still and let his Divine Edge act for him – he has to actually move to stand a chance.

“Just one scratch,” he growls. “One scratch and it’s over.”

“I won’t let you,” I respond.

This time, Dracula surges forward. The spear is thrust like a red bolt of lightning. I slide past it, feeling its wind whip past my face. There’s a shudder behind me as one of the pillars collapses, sending dust and debris raining down from the roof.

Nightfall sings as it approaches Dracula’s exposed body. Sensing the impending blow, he flails backwards and twists away, sweeping his spear across the hall. I somersault into the air to avoid it, but a chunk of rock slams into the side of my head.

In the brief moment my airborne body is incapacitated, Dracula springs to his feet and repositions himself. The Impaler snaps back and pounces upwards like a viper, lunging for my chest.

*Not yet.*

I spin around, redirecting the thrust with Nightfall’s pommel. Silver and black streaks fly from the point of contact, fizzling into the air. The edge of my shirt rips, but no blood is drawn.

*I can go faster.*

Having lost nearly half of the supporting pillars, the entire chamber is beginning to shake. I have to end this quickly, or I’ll burn out.

“That’s some impressive speed,” the vampire pants. “But for how long can you keep it up?”

Dracula knows that my boost won’t last forever.

“Long enough to kill you.”

As I say this, I dash forward with all my strength. Dracula whirls his spear around, smashing the crumbled foundation of a pillar towards me. I turn in midair, slashing it away, slowing myself in the process. There’s a glint of red, and the serpentine Impaler suddenly appears right in my vision.

*I can see it.*

I know where it’s aimed for. I can estimate its speed. My mind makes the calculations, and I thrust my hand forward. It grips the shaft tightly, preventing the deadly tip from penetrating my skin.

“You…!” the Blood Lord hisses.

Hanging on for dear life, I can only grit my teeth as the living spear hurls me through the roof like a cannonball. Stone and rubble rain down from the sky as I fly out of the undercroft and into the middle of the aisle above, landing in a painful heap.

*Pain.*

I have to defeat him. There’s no time.

*Hurry.*

Dracula flies out of the hole in the ground, his spear in his hands. I throw myself sideways to avoid its strike, painfully cracking a seat in half with my shin.

“Not long now,” my enemy seethes. I can see the frustration in his face – he’s desperate for my body to reach its limit, and I’m desperate to kill him before then. At this moment in time, there’s no difference between us. We’re simply two bloodthirsty demons struggling to kill each other.

The ground beneath me cracks as the supporting pillars underneath give way. I quickly leap upwards to avoid falling back into the undercroft. The spear closes in on me as if in slow motion, reaching towards my chest. It twists and shakes in the air, its path of movement erratic and unpredictable.

*Watch it. Look for the path to victory.*

Dracula’s injured side has already recovered. My heart is beating wildly, and my lungs are on fire. A force pulls at my stomach as I continue to fly through the air.

*Can’t… keep this up… for much longer...*

I rebound off the wall, the impact of my feet shattering all the glass panels on that side. Dracula’s eyes follow me, his spear but a heartbeat behind.

The black mist spewing from Nightfall’s blade diminishes for a moment. I can tell it’s reaching its limit too.

*Don’t think.*

I jump. The spear flies towards me.

*Parry.*

Raining sparks of silver and red fall from the sky.

*Floundering.*

I hit the ground hard. Instinct guides me and lifts my head.

*Red.*

The spear chases me, not allowing a single moment’s reprieve.

Damnit.

I’m tired.

*But I have to save Alice.*

If it weren’t for that one thought in my mind, it would have been over long ago.

*The strength of one’s soul is only as strong as their will.*

I have to protect her.

I clumsily weave away from the point of the spear, but its side catches me squarely in the chest. Like a giant red tentacle, it tosses me into the ceiling with frightening force.

*I can’t reach him.*

Dracula stands on the ground, a look of rage and grim determination plastered on his face.

*Alone, I’m faster. But if the speed of his Divine Edge is combined with the speed of his body, an unsurpassable wall is erected.*

The despair in my eyes becomes triumph in his.

*No. I can’t…*

The middle of the church roof explodes as my body breaks through and flies into the night sky.

*My vision…*

All the colour seems to disappear from the world.

This is it. I’m nearing the end of the Soul Link.

*No…*

The church below me, the grassy hill, the full moon – all of it fades away to monochrome.

It’s only a matter of seconds before my eyesight completely disappears – and my body shuts down in fatigue.

*I’m going to die.*

In this moment of realization, the world seems to freeze. I feel the calm rays of the moon shining through my torn shirt and onto my skin. I see the hole in the church roof, the collapsed floor, the half-buried undercroft. I see the glint of Dracula’s crimson armour, the deadly spearhead of the Impaler as it races through the path of my flight in an attempt to skewer me.

In that moment of black and white, the only colour I see is a single red path. As my brain begins to shut down, instinct overrides all reason, bypasses all thought, hijacks all senses.

It was there all along – the answer. The solution.

The path to victory, outlined in red.

As gravity begins to tug me down, I flail around the blood-red tip and grab the pole with one hand. As if it were a sentient being, the Impaler switches tactics to try to throw me off – but I force myself forward, and land one foot on the spear.

-The red string-

Building up momentum, I race down the length of the spear. It twists and lurches, doubling back on itself in order to throw me off.

*I’m faster.*

Last burst of speed. No time to question.

*-*Of fate-

Left foot, right foot. Like a wild beast, my path struggles beneath me.

*Almost there.*

Hurtling forward with all the momentum I can muster, along the narrow red pole as if my shoes were magnetically attracted to it.

-Will lead me-

Dracula’s look of complete surprise as I pursue the spear back to its owner.

His aura flares red in the world of black and white. In the obscure corners of my darkening mind, I recall the power of his Soul Link.

The tip of the spear behind me, looping back to defend its owner fades into a phantom colour. It longs to seal away my soul.

But it’s far too late.

-to Alice.-

Nightfall cuts straight through a gap in his armour, sinking effortlessly into the area between the shoulder and chest. The transparent Impaler shivers once in the air before flopping down lifelessly as if all the energy has left it. Both Dracula and I collapse onto the ground, completely spent.

“You… bastard…,” he coughs, his breathing laboured.

My vision has closed in around me. All I can see is the wounded vampire lying in front of me, too injured to move.

One more blow.

I can’t stop now, or he’ll recover.

One foot up. The second refuses to move.

I lean on Nightfall and prop myself on one knee.

*Finish the job.*

*Kill him.*

*Follow the red string of fate to the very end.*

I raise Nightfall.

This monster deserves no mercy.

Without hesitation, I bring it down and sever Vladimir Dracula’s head from his body. The moment Nightfall touches the ruined floor of the church, all the strength leaves my body and my eyesight becomes black.

The last things I hear are sirens wailing in the distance.

Epilogue

“It’s finally over, huh. Twelve long years of education.”

Dennis gazes wistfully at the cloudless sky, his graduation certificate tucked beneath his arm. He looks completely different in a blazer and a tie to his usual self – although the general mood and atmosphere certainly plays a part.

“Come on, let’s not get sentimental,” I say. “You already cried during the ceremony. Let’s leave on a high note.”

I head past the groups of chattering teachers and parents to a large group of students. Upon seeing us, two of them wave and approach.

“Bran, your blazer’s going to become creased if you hold it like that,” Ashley scolds.

“Come on, it’s not like I’m going to need it anymore,” I grumble, straightening it out. I still can’t believe I was once able to stand wearing so many layers in this heat.

“So what are your plans for the future?” Leo asks.

Since the events of last winter, he’s softened up a considerable amount. I guess he really wasn’t lying when he said he’d stop picking on me.

“I’m going to try and become a doctor,” I shrug. “I’ve already received a scholarship from the University of Cityhall.”

Leo whistles. “Wow, a scholarship? You must have really aced those entrance exams…”

“Didn’t you see how hard he was studying?” Dennis cuts in. “It’s almost like he was a completely different person. He stopped sleeping in class, too.”

Leo and Ashley exchange a look. Well, they’re right to be dubious. To be honest, ANGEL had a bit of a hand in getting me my scholarship.

“What about uh… you know, that other company?” Ashley vaguely asks, trying not to look at Dennis. “I thought they wanted you to stay…?”

“I quit,” I reply. “I really don’t want a part in any of that ever again.”

After the ‘terrorist’ attacks on the shopping mall, there had also been a ‘bombing’ at the church for some unknown reason. The police had arrested the culprits during a struggle at the school, but never revealed their names or faces. The incidents were quickly swept under the rug, never to be heard of again.

Of course, I know what really happened. I also know that one of Ian Vancratt’s men stepped up to the title of Blood Lord, and that their clan has returned to their peaceful way of living. I know that ANGEL’s updated its old rules – they no longer actively hunt down and kill demons, opting to instead respond to any who threaten society. The vampire clan has effectively obtained humanity’s permission to exist.

“What’s this about?” Dennis quips.

“Just a company I used to work part time at,” I smoothly lie. “I didn’t really like them so I left. How about you, Ashley? What do you and Leo have planned for the future?”

“Probably accounting or something,” Leo shrugs. “Haven’t really decided yet. Ashley seems really set on doing nursing.”

“Nursing?”

“Why’d you tell him?” Ashley fumes. “I wanted to keep it secret for a surprise.”

“Uh… I don’t think we’d end up in the same classes anyway,” I say. “Assuming we’re going to the same university.”

“Wow, those are quite ambitious dreams,” Dennis comments from aside.

“I don’t really think they’re *that* ambitious. Where are you headed?” Ashley asks.

“I’ll probably just work for my dad’s company,” he replies, looking down. “To be honest, I don’t think many of us have our futures planned as well as you guys.”

We stand around, listening to the sounds of tearful goodbyes, congratulations, photos being taken and general gossip among other things. I spot Bob and Betty in the distance and wave.

“Oh, guess we’d better go,” Leo says. “Come on, Ashley. Gran and Gramps came all the way here just to visit us.”

Ashley reluctantly leaves, waving behind her shoulder.

I feel a twinge of sadness in my heart when I realize that Mum and Dad never survived to see this day – but before I sink too deeply into these thoughts, Dennis nudges my side. “Do you know those two?”

I follow his index finger to a big, beefy man and a busty Asian woman standing side by side. The red-head is waving enthusiastically.

“I’d better go greet them,” I sigh. “See you... until next time, I guess.”

I awkwardly stand before my friend, searching for the words to say. However, he simply slaps me on the shoulder.

“We’re way too young to be saying goodbyes,” Dennis grins. “Everyone acts like this is the end, but it isn’t. I mean, we’ve still got the internet for crying out loud. It’s not like we’re moving to different states.”

“You’re right,” I smile back. “See you soon then, buddy.”

Dennis embraces me before heading off to another group of friends. I stride over to where Barry and Shizuka are waiting.

“Shouldn’t you still be in school?” I ask Bazza.

“Graduated yesterday,” he smirks. “One day before you.”

“Oh. Congrats, I guess.”

I turn to Shizuka, my former director. There’s a lollipop in her mouth – after she stopped smoking, sweets became her new addiction.

“If you eat too many of those your teeth will decay,” I say.

“Oh, shut up. You know I’m still struggling with withdrawal effects.”

She says so with a jesting smile, extending a hand.

“Congratulations, Bran.”

I grasp it warmly.

“Are you sure you won’t consider returning to ANGEL?”

I look around to make sure no one’s overheard. “You don’t need me anymore. You’ve got Byron for District Fifteen.”

“Byron’s a capable hunter and all… but he’s just not the same as you.”

“Hey!” Baz exclaims. “I think he’s a pretty decent bloke…”

“What’s this?” I muse, ignoring him. “Missing me already?”

Shizuka looks away. “Yes.”

Her open honesty catches me by surprise. I never expected her to actually admit it.

“If you keep that up for your next date, I’m sure you’ll succeed,” I say in an attempt to cover up my shock.

“I’m engaged now.”

She brings up her left hand. A band of metal is wrapped around the ring finger.

“No way… since when?”

I can barely contain my surprise. It’s all I can do to stop my jaw from dropping down in a comedic fashion.

“A week ago.”

“Congratulations!” I exclaim, a little too loudly. Taking heed of curious looks, I lean in closer. “Make sure you don’t get too rough with him. Especially in bed.”

She narrows her eyes and stomps on my foot. I yelp and leap back, rubbing it viciously.

“Where’s Judith?” Barry asks, looking around. “Haven’t seen her at all.”

“She already left.”

After discovering that she was also a half-vampire, we grew even closer than before. She lives with me in our parents’ home now and although she’s technically under my care, it really feels like she’s the one taking care of me. With both Mum and Dad gone, we’ve each had to take a step to fill in their respective duties.

We never talk about the past anymore. To this day, I still don’t know what exactly Dracula did to her or what she went through before Alice saved her. If she doesn’t tell me about it, I won’t ask.

“So soon?” Shizuka exclaims.

“She still has school, you know. Speaking of which, you should stop slacking off and resume your duties. I’m sure Hector isn’t paying you to attend graduations.”

“Don’t be such a tight arse,” Barry waves me off. “You stuck your neck out for us, and we still can’t thank you enough. Bloody terrific job, too.”

“Yes,” Shizuka agrees. “You’ve done us a great service by defeating one of the original demons once and for all. In fact, your honorary title means you probably don’t ever need to work again.”

In addition to having my name recorded in ANGEL’s archives and Hall of Fame, I was offered the position of Archangel Uriel. I declined, of course. I didn’t want to be involved with demons ever again.

“Well, I don’t want to live the life of a retiree just yet,” I chuckle. “You make me sound like some war veteran.”

“You *are* a war veteran.”

Half the people have left already, filing out through the gates to celebrate with their family and friends. There’s still one person I haven’t talked to yet, and I want to do so before night falls.

“Where’s Alice?” Baz asks, as if reading my mind.

I scratch my head. “I’m actually not quite sure. I was going to look for her just now.”

“I thought you two were inseparable,” Shizuka smirks.

“O-Only in private,” I mutter, tripping over my words.

I quickly make haste to leave before they embarrass me further, but Shizuka’s firm arm stops me.

“Bran. Enjoy every moment,” she says, smiling. “You’ve deserved it. Flowers don’t bloom all year around.”

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She’s exactly where I thought she would be.

In the middle of the park where I first met her, sitting on the swings. All around us the spring cherry blossoms are blooming, and their petals rain down from the sky like a pink snow.

Or at least, they should be pink. I can’t tell, because I can no longer see in colour.

After breaking past my limit, my vision suffered irreparable damage from the Soul Link. I was lucky to even live after fighting at such a high intensity for so long. At the cost of defeating the first vampire, everything in my world became a shade of grey – the gold of Shizuka’s ring, the red of Barry’s hair – I don’t even know if the sky is blue or not.

But there’s still one thing I can see in colour, and if I had to pick I wouldn’t choose anything else.

Her beautiful blonde hair hangs down to her shoulder. Her red eyes regard me cheerfully, hiding a mischievous glint. Her white dress flutters about in the wind, as white as her skin. She still wears my jacket, even though it has more patches in it than a beggar’s robe.

“You didn’t come to school,” I accuse. “You technically haven’t graduated.”

The swings creak as I sit down next to her.

“I didn’t feel like it. It’s too bright a day to spend saying goodbyes.”

I take one of her hands, probing it gently. The wounds in her limbs where she was crucified have completely healed – but they still leave a mark in her soul.

“What are you going to do now?” I ask. “You no longer have to associate with the clan. You can choose to live a completely normal life if you want to.”

She shrugs. “I probably wouldn’t be able to even if I desired it. I haven’t touched Moonlight for a long time.”

I haven’t touched Nightfall for a while either. Since the day I slew Dracula, I haven’t had a need to use my Divine Edge, ever. That’s Byron’s job now, as District Fifteen’s new guardian.

Alice Vancratt turns around and faces me directly.

“Thank you, Bran,” she says. “For rescuing me, and protecting me. I’m really glad I met you.”

“Don’t mention it,” I say, flushing a little. Even now, I still find myself breathless on occasion when she looks straight into my eyes.

Alice turns back and looks towards the sky, dangling her legs aimlessly as she sways back and forth on the swing.

“You know, I’m already really happy as it is. I don’t think I could ask for anything more.”

The metal frame creaks a little as she lightly hops off, landing on one leg. Turning around with her hands behind her back, the girl in white gives me a smile as bright as the moon.

“There’s only one thing I really want in my future –“

My heart skips a beat.

“-and that’s you.”

*Fin*