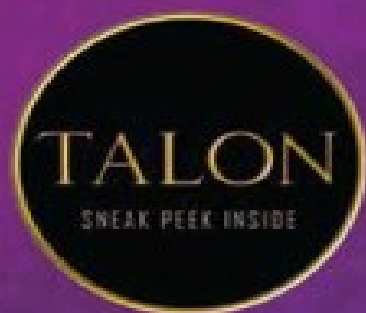


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*To Nick. Your ideas are invaluable.
And to my readers. Your tears feed my muse.*

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“I don’t expect you to understand, little bird.
I expect you only to sing. Sing for me, sing for
Kanin, and make it a glorious song.”

—Sarren

DEMON

Chapter 1

The outpost gate creaked in the wind, swinging back on its hinges. It knocked lightly against the wall, a rhythmic tapping sound that echoed in the looming silence. A cold breeze swirled through the gate, and the scent of blood lay on the air like a heavy blanket.

“He’s been here,” Kanin murmured at my side. The Master vampire was a dark statue against the falling snow, motionless and calm, but his eyes were grave. I regarded the fence impassively, the wind tugging at my coat and straight black hair.

“Is there any point in going in?”

“Sarren knows we’re following him” was the low reply. “He meant for us to see this. He wants us to know that he knows. There will likely be something waiting for us when we step through the gate.”

Footsteps crunched over the snow as Jackal stalked around us, black duster rippling behind him. His eyes glowed a vicious yellow as he peered up at the gate. “Well then,” he said, the tips of his fangs showing through his grin, “if he went through all the trouble of setting this up, we shouldn’t keep the psycho waiting, should we?”

He started forward, his step confident as he strode through the broken gate toward the tiny settlement beyond. After a moment’s hesitation, Kanin and I followed.

The smell of blood grew stronger once we were past the wall, though nothing moved on the narrow path that snaked between houses. The flimsy wood and tin shanties were silent, dark, as we ventured deeper, passing snow-covered porches and empty chairs. Everything looked intact, undisturbed. There were no bodies. No corpses mutilated in their beds, no blood splattered over the walls of the few homes we ducked into. There weren’t even any dead animals in the tiny trampled pasture past the main street. Just snow and emptiness.

And yet, the smell of blood soaked this place, hanging thick in the air, making my stomach ache and the Hunger roar to life. I bit it down, gritting my teeth to keep from snarling in frustration. It had been too long. I needed food. The scent of blood was driving me crazy, and the fact that there were no humans here made me furious. Where were they? It wasn’t possible that an entire outpost of mortals had up and disappeared without a trace.

And then, as we followed the path around the pasture and up to the huge barn at the top of the rise, we found the townspeople.

A massive barren tree stood beside the barn, twisted branches clawing at the sky. They swayed beneath the weight of dozens of bodies hanging upside down from ropes tied to the limbs. Men and women, even a few kids swinging in the breeze, dangling arms stiff and white. Their throats had been cut, and the base of the tree was stained black, the blood spilled and wasted in the snow. But the smell nearly knocked me over regardless, and I clenched my fists, the Hunger raking my insides with fiery talons.

“Well,” Jackal muttered, crossing his arms and gazing at the tree, “isn’t that festive?” His voice was tight as if he, too, was on the edge of losing it. “I’m guessing this is the reason we haven’t found a single bloodbag from here all the way back to New Covington.” He growled, shaking his head, lips curling back from his fangs. “This guy is really starting to piss me off.”

I swallowed the Hunger, trying to focus through the gnawing ache. “Why, James, don’t tell me you feel sorry for the walking meatsacks,” I taunted, because sometimes, goading Jackal was the only thing that kept my mind off everything else. He rolled his eyes.

“No, sister, I’m annoyed because they don’t have the decency to be alive so I can eat them,” I

returned with a flash of fangs and a rare show of temper. He glared at the bodies hungrily. "Fuckin' Sarren," he said. "If I didn't want the psychopath dead so badly, I would say the hell with it. If the Jeep keeps up, we're going to have to break off the trail to find a meatsack whose throat hasn't been slit, which is probably what the bastard wants." He sighed, giving me an exasperated look. "This would be so much easier if you hadn't killed the Jeep."

"For the last time," I growled at him, "I just pointed out the street that wasn't blocked off. I didn't leave those nails in the road for you to drive over."

"Allison."

Kanin's quiet voice broke through our argument, and we turned. Our sire stood at one corner of the barn, his face grim as he beckoned us forward. With a last glance at the tree and its grisly contents, he walked over to him, feeling the sharp stab of Hunger once more. The barn reeked of blood, even more than the branches of the tree. Probably because one whole wall of the building was streaked with blood, dried and black, painted in vertical lines up and down the wood.

"Let's keep moving," Kanin said when Jackal and I joined him. His voice was calm, though I knew he was just as Hungry as the rest of us. Maybe more so, since he was still recovering from his near-death experience in New Covington. "There are no survivors here," Kanin went on, with a solemn look back at the tree, "and we are running out of time. Sarren is expecting us."

"How do you figure, old man?" Jackal asked, following me to the side of the barn. "Yeah, this is the psycho's handiwork, but he could've done this just for the jollies. You sure he knows we're coming?"

Kanin didn't answer, just gestured to the blood-streaked wall beside us. I looked over, as did Jackal, but couldn't see anything unusual. Beyond a wall completely covered in blood, anyway.

But Jackal gave a low, humorless chuckle. "Oh, you bastard." He smiled, shaking his head and staring up at the barn. "That's cute. Let's see if you're as funny when I'm beating you to death with your own arm."

"What?" I asked, obviously missing something. I stared at the barn again, wondering what the other vampires saw that I didn't. "What's so funny? I don't see anything."

Jackal sighed, stepped behind me, and hooked the back of my collar, pulling me away from the wall. "Hey!" I snarled, fighting him. "Let go! What the hell are you doing?"

He ignored me, continuing to walk backward, dragging me with him. We were about a dozen paces away from the wall before he stopped, and I yanked myself from his grip. "What is your problem?" I demanded, baring my fangs. Jackal silently pointed back to the barn.

I glanced at the wall again and stiffened. Now that I was farther away, I could see what Kanin and Jackal were talking about.

Sarren, I thought, the cold, familiar hate spreading through my insides. You sick bastard. This won't stop me, and it won't save you. When I find you, you'll regret ever hearing my name.

Painted across the side of the barn, written in bloody letters about ten feet tall, was a question. Or, at least, that proved, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Sarren knew we were coming. And that we were probably walking right into a trap.

HUNGRY YET?

It had been two weeks since we'd left New Covington. Two weeks travel, of walking down endless snow-covered roads. Two weeks of cold and wilderness and dead, silent towns. Of empty houses wrapped in vines, deserted streets, ancient hulks of cars rusting in the gutters. No movement, except for the skitter of wildlife, both large and small, overtaking the streets humans had once ruled. The

Jeep, as Jackal had so eloquently pointed out, was dead, leaving the three of us to wander the empty roads on foot, following a madman who knew we were coming. Who was always one step ahead of us.

Time was running out, Kanin had said. In a way, I supposed that was true. What Sarren had, what he carried, could spell the end for a lot of people. Maybe the whole world. Sarren possessed a mutated version of the Red Lung virus that had destroyed the world six decades ago, only this one came with a nasty little side effect: it killed vampires, too. The three of us—me, Jackal, and Kanin—had been exposed to Sarren’s virus when we were in New Covington and had seen the true horror of the plague. Humans had turned into insane wretches who screamed and laughed and clawed at their faces until their skin was all but gone, and attacked anything they came across. For vampires, the effects were even more horrific; the virus ate their dead flesh, and they rotted away from the inside. In the final confrontation with Sarren, we’d learned that the insane vampire was using New Covington only as a test site, that his real intentions were far more sinister.

He planned to kill everything. All humans, and all vampires. Wipe the slate clean, he’d told me, and let the world finally heal itself. His virus, when he released it again, would be unstoppable.

There was just one small kink in his plans.

We had a cure. Or at least, we’d *had* one. It was in Eden now, that small bit of hope for the rest of the world. That was what Sarren wanted; the cure, either to destroy or to turn against us. He thought we were tracking him to Eden to stop him, to prevent him from destroying the cure or releasing his virus. He thought we were trying to save the world.

He didn’t know. I didn’t care about Eden. I didn’t care about his virus, or the cure, or the rest of the world. It made no difference to me if the humans found a cure for Rabidism, or if they could stop Sarren’s new plague. Humans meant nothing to me, not anymore. They were food, and I was a vampire. I was done pretending that I was anything less than a monster.

But I *would* kill Sarren.

He would die for what he’d done, what he’d destroyed. I would tear him apart, and I would make him suffer. There had been four of us that night in New Covington, when we had faced the mad vampire for the last time. When I had cut the arm from his body and he’d fled into the dark, only to return later for his most horrible deed yet. Four of us: me, Jackal, Kanin...and one other. But I couldn’t think of him now. He was gone. And I was still a monster.

“Hey.”

Abruptly, Jackal slowed and dropped back to where I trailed several paces behind Kanin’s dark, steady figure, following the road that stretched on through the frozen plains. We’d left the outpost and its slaughtered residents a few miles back, and the scent of blood had finally faded into the wind. That didn’t stop the Hunger, though; I could feel it even now, a constant throbbing ache, poised to flare into an inferno of raw, vicious need at the slightest provocation. It even raged at Jackal, annoyed that he wasn’t human, that I couldn’t spin around and sink my fangs into his throat. Jackal seemed happy and oblivious.

I ignored him and kept my gaze straight ahead, not really in the mood for a fight or listening to his barbed, obnoxious comments. That, of course, never stopped my blood brother.

“So, sister,” Jackal went on, “I’ve been wondering. When we finally do catch up to Sarren, how do you think we should kill the old bastard? I’m thinking maiming and torture for as long as we can stand it.” He snapped his fingers. “Hey, maybe we can tie him half in and half out of the sun, that’s always interesting. Did that to some undead bastard who pissed me off several years back. The light began to crawl up his feet and crawled up toward his face, and it took a very long time for him to finally kick it. By the end, he was screaming at me to cut off his head.” He snickered. “I’d love to watch Sarren die like that.”

If that doesn't offend your delicate sensibilities, that is."

He smirked then, his gold eyes burning the side of my head. "Just wanted to give you a heads-up little sister, in case you decide to go bleeding heart on me. Of course, if you have a suggestion for how we should do the old psycho in, I'd love to hear it."

"I don't care," I said flatly. "Do whatever you want. As long as I get to land the final blow, couldn't care less."

Jackal huffed. "Well, that's not very fun."

I didn't answer, walking faster to get away from him, and he quickened his pace to keep up.

"Come on, sister, where's that obnoxious morality you kept throwing in my face every two seconds? You're making it very difficult to take any sort of pleasure in mocking it relentlessly."

"Why are you talking to me?" I asked, still not looking at him. Jackal let out an exasperated sigh.

"Because I'm *bored*. And the old man doesn't give me the time of day." He jerked his head toward Kanin, still several yards ahead. I suspected Kanin could hear us, but he didn't turn around or give any indication that he was listening. And Jackal probably didn't care if he was. "And because I want to know your thoughts on our brilliantly disturbed serial killer." Jackal waved an impatient hand at the plains surrounding us. "It's still a long way to Eden, and I get the feeling we're not going to find any bloodbags—living ones anyway—from here to Meatsack Island. I don't particularly like the idea of facing the nut job with you and Kanin on the edge of losing it."

I flicked a glance at him and frowned. "What about you?"

"Oh, don't worry about me, sister." Jackal grinned. "I always come out on top, no matter what. I just want to point out that this annoying 'Scorched Earth' policy Sarren has picked up is going to make it very difficult for you. A couple more days of this, and the next human we see is going to be ripped to shreds—and you'll be the one doing it."

I shrugged. Jackal's revelation wasn't surprising, and I found that I really didn't care. Wherever Sarren went, whatever forgotten corner of the country he fled to, I wouldn't be far behind. No matter what he did, no matter how far or fast he ran, I would catch up to him, and then he would pay for what he had done. "So what?" I asked, returning my gaze to the road. "I'm a vampire. What does it matter?"

"Oh, please." I could hear the pity in his voice, and the disgust. "Enough with this 'I don't care anymore' shit. You know you're going to have to deal with it sometime."

A cold fist grabbed my insides. Jackal wasn't talking about feeding, and we both knew it. Memories rose up—memories of *him*—but then the monster emerged, swallowing them before I could feel anything. "I have dealt with it," I said calmly.

"No, you haven't." My brother's voice was suddenly hard. "You've just buried it. And if you don't get a handle on it soon, it's going to come out at the worst possible time. Probably when we're facing Sarren. Because that's how the psychopath's mind works—he knows just what to say, and when, to throw us off and give him the full advantage. And then he's either going to kill you while you're down and I'll be annoyed, or I'm going to have to do it myself."

"Better be careful, Jackal." My voice came out cold. Empty, because I couldn't feel anything, even now. "It almost sounds like you care."

"Oh, well, perish the thought, sister." Jackal gave me a sneer and moved away. "I'll stop talking to you then. But if we reach Sarren, and he says something to make you fall apart, don't expect me to pick up the pieces."

You won't have to worry about that, I thought as Jackal walked on, shaking his head. A memory flickered, jagged and indistinct, and my inner demon pushed it back. *There's nothing left to break. Nothing Sarren says can touch me now.*

We walked a few more miles, through empty flatlands frozen under a layer of snow and ice, until the stars faded and a pink hue threatened the eastern sky. I was just starting to get uncomfortable when Kanin turned off the road and headed toward a gray, dilapidated barn sagging at the end of an overgrown field, a rusting silo beside it. The inside of the ancient building was musty and filled with broken beams and stacks of moldy straw. But it was also dark, secluded, and didn't have many holes in the roof where the sun could creep through. Ignoring Jackal's complaints about sleeping in a filthy rat-infested barn, I pushed open a rotting stall door, found a shadowy corner behind a stack of rancid hay, and sank against the wall to sleep.

For just a moment, memory stirred again, like fragments of someone else's life, rising up from the dark. I remembered another barn like this one, warm and musty, filled with the soft bleats of livestock and the murmur of the humans around me. Hay and lanterns and contentment. A spotted baby goat sitting in my lap, two human kids pressed close on either side, watching me feed it.

The monster roused. I'd been Hungry then, too, and had watched as the two humans fell asleep, baring their unsuspecting little necks to the vampire they'd unwittingly curled up against. I remembered bending forward, toward the throat of the child on my lap, as my fangs lengthened and slid out of my gums...before I'd caught myself in horror. I'd fled the barn before I could lose control and slaughter two innocent kids in their sleep.

The monster sneered at the memory. That seemed like a long, long time ago. A lifetime ago. Now, with the Hunger clawing at my gut and burning the edges of my mind, I thought longingly of the sleeping humans, so vulnerable beside me, imagined myself leaning down the rest of the way and finishing what I'd started.

The next night was more of the same. More empty plains and wilderness. More trackless snow crunching beneath our boots, and an endless road snaking its way northeast. More of the Hunger gnawing my insides, making me irritable and savage. I concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other, trying to ignore the ache that refused to go away. I could feel the monster within, perilously close to the surface, a cold, dark thing that growled and stirred restlessly, always searching. It could hear the shuffle of tiny feet in the darkness, raccoons or possums or other nocturnal creatures, moving through the brush. It could sense the swoop of bats overhead and smell the deep, slow breaths of deer huddled together in the undergrowth. It wanted to attack, to pounce on some living creature and rip it open, spilling hot blood into the snow and down our throats. But it knew, as I did, that wasting energy slaughtering animals was useless. That would not satisfy the Hunger. Only one type of prey would ease the hollow emptiness inside, and that prey was nowhere to be found.

So, we walked, Kanin leading, Jackal and I trailing behind. Three vampires who didn't need to rest, who never got cold or tired or winded, traveling through a wasted world that would kill most humans. That, in all honesty, already had.

And Sarren was well on his way to finishing the job. Kanin turned suddenly in the middle of the road, his expression alert as he gazed back at us. I paused, too, surprised and a little wary. We hadn't spoken much after leaving New Covington. The Master vampire had walked steadily onward, silent and cold, without looking back at his two offspring. That was fine with me. I didn't have much to say to him, either. There was a wall between us now. I could sense his disappointment, the look in his eyes whenever Jackal made some snide, evil comment about humans and bloodbags...and I said nothing. Not even Kanin's silent disapproval would change the fact that I was a monster.

"Someone is coming," Kanin said, looking at the road behind us. I turned as well, straining my senses, but there was no need. The growl of an engine cut through the darkness, getting steadily closer.

The Hunger surged to life, and, close to the surface, the monster shifted eagerly. Vehicles meant

humans, which meant food. I imagined sinking my teeth into their necks, imagined the hot blood rushing into my mouth, and felt my fangs lengthen, an eager growl escaping my throat.

“Get back,” Kanin said, walking past me. I curled my lips at him, defiant, but his back was to me now, and he didn’t notice. “Get off the road, both of you,” he went on, as the engine noise grew louder and headlights glimmered through the trees. “Stopping for three strangers on a lonely road at night is a risk many would avoid. Better that they see a lone, unarmed traveler than a group.” His voice grew harder. “Get off the road, Allison.”

Jackal had already moved back, melting into the darkness. Kanin wasn’t even looking at me, his gaze on the approaching headlights. With a growl, I stepped off the pavement and slipped behind a large twisted tree at the side of the road. And I waited, the Hunger clawing at my insides and the demon watching with barely restrained violence.

The lights grew brighter, and around a bend came a once-white van, now more rust than metal. Kanin stepped forward, raising his arms in a flagging motion as the vehicle sped forward, bathing him in the headlights.

It didn’t slow. It angled toward Kanin, sped up, and a rough-looking human poked his head out the passenger window. He grinned and raised a dull black pistol, aiming it at the stranger in the road.

Kanin jumped back as several shots rang out, flaring white in the darkness. The van squealed past with hoots and harsh laughter, and the monster surged up with a roar.

I leaped out as the van came toward me, drawing my katana as I did. As it careened by, I lashed out with a snarl, aiming for the front tire, cutting through rubber and metal with a metallic scream and a flare of sparks. The van swerved wildly, screeched over the pavement, and crashed headlong into a tree.

I leaped after it, bright Hunger burning through my veins, the monster shrieking viciously in my mind. The driver and passenger lay against the shattered windshield, bloody and still, but the side door rasped open, and two men emerged, both clutching guns, and large ones at that. The first raised his weapon drunkenly as I raced up. My sword flashed, and he screamed as the gun hit the pavement along with both his arms. The second barked a terrified curse and tried to run. He got as far as the edge of the trees before I pounced on him from behind and drove my fangs into his neck.

Blood filled my mouth, hot and addictive. I growled in pleasure and sank into the feeling, the human going lax in my grip. Why had I ever shied away from this? I couldn’t remember now.

“Well, that’s just fabulous. Four humans to start with. Now two are dead and one’s bleeding out like a ruptured fuel hose.” The cold, exasperated voice cut through the ecstasy. I raised my head, warily, blood running down my chin, to see Kanin and Jackal standing at the mangled remains of the van. Kanin was observing the armless, nearly delirious human writhe over the ground, moaning and sobbing, but Jackal was staring at me, a half-amused, half-disgusted look on his face.

“Oh, don’t worry about me,” he remarked. “You go ahead and enjoy that bloodbag. I’m not that Hungry anyway.”

I swallowed, retracting my fangs, feeling faintly guilty. Kanin and Jackal were Hungry, too, and I was hoarding the only healthy source of food. Vampires didn’t feed from the dead, even the newly dead. Drinking from a corpse had the same result as drinking from an animal; it did nothing for the Hunger. Not to mention, most vampires found it repulsive. Our prey had to be human, and it had to be alive; that was one of the ancient, unfathomable rules we lived by. One of the rules you just didn’t question.

Turning, I dragged my prey a few steps into the road, back to where Jackal watched with amused exasperation. “Here,” I said, and shoved the human at him. It collapsed bonelessly to the pavement.

“That one is still breathing, mostly. I’m done with it.”

Jackal curled a lip. “I don’t want your leftovers, sister,” he said contemptuously. I smiled back at him.

“Good. I can finish it, then?”

He gave me a murderous look, stalked across the pavement, and hauled the human upright. The man’s head fell back limply, his neck a mess of blood, and Jackal plunged his fangs into the other side of his throat.

I glanced toward the van to see Kanin gently lower the armless human to the ground, where he slumped, lifeless, to the pavement. The stumps of his forearms no longer oozed, and his skin was white. I wondered how much blood Kanin had been able to get out of him before he died. Not much, I guessed, but even a little was better than nothing. I should have just cut off the one arm. Or a foot, perhaps. Then he wouldn’t have been able to run.

Somewhere deep inside, a part of me recoiled, horrified with myself and my current thoughts. The old part, the Allison that was still a little human, screamed that this was wrong, that I didn’t have to be like this. But her voice was tiny, indistinct. I shivered, and the monster buried the voice under cold indifference. It was too late, I thought, feeling blessed numbness spread through my core again. I knew what I was. Sympathy, mercy, regret—those had no place in the life of a vampire. The old Allison was stubborn; it would take a while for her to die for good, but I heard her voice less and less now. Eventually, it would disappear altogether.

Vampire indifference firmly in place, I glanced at my sire. Kanin had stepped away from the dead human and was now peering into the darkened interior of the van. A brief, pained look crossed his face before it smoothed out again. Curious, I walked up beside him and gazed into the vehicle.

There was another body in the van. A young woman, only a year or two older than me, dressed in a filthy white shift. Her hands were tied in front of her, and she lay crumpled against the wall of the van, her neck at an unnatural angle. Curly yellow hair spread over her face, and glassy blue eyes stared at nothing out the open door.

Oh, no. She was a captive, an innocent. I caused this. For a moment, I felt sick. The dead girl’s eyes seemed to bore into me, accusing. I’d killed her. Maybe I hadn’t torn out her throat or cut off her head, but she was dead all the same, because of me.

I could feel Kanin’s dark gaze on my back, and I heard Jackal’s footsteps crunch over the thin layer of snow behind us as he came to peer over my shoulder. “Huh,” he remarked, as if he was staring at a dead bird on the sidewalk. “Well, now we know why the bastards were in such a hurry. Shame she didn’t make it—I’m still a bit peckish.” He sniffed, and I felt his gaze shift to me, hard and reproachful. “That human you so generously left me barely took the edge off.”

“I didn’t know she was there,” I muttered, not turning around. Not knowing if I’d said it to Kanin, Jackal, or myself. “I didn’t know....”

But that wasn’t much of an excuse. I knew it, and Kanin knew it. He said nothing, just turned around and walked away, but as always, his silence spoke volumes.

“Oh, well,” Jackal shrugged. “Nothing for it now. It just reminds you how very fragile these meatsacks are. Can’t even look at them funny without breaking their bloody necks.” He glanced down at me. “Aw, don’t beat yourself up too hard, sister,” he said, grinning. “It’s not like the human had much to live for, not where she was headed. You did the bloodbag a favor, trust me.”

I stared at the girl again and felt the monster creep forward, cold and practical, burying the guilt. *What does it matter?* it whispered. *So, you killed another human. It wasn’t the first, and it won’t be the last. They’re prey, and you are a vampire. Killing is what we do.*

“Yeah.” I sighed and turned away from the van, away from the human and her flat, accusing eye. Jackal was right; there was nothing I could do now. The girl meant nothing, one more death to be added to the endless, eternal list. Kanin was already walking down the road again, and we hurried to catch up. Leaving the vehicle, its slaughtered passengers, and another small piece of my humanity behind.

Chapter 2

Three nights later, there was a body in the road.

Or, rather, scattered all over the road. Not much was left except the stripped, broken bones of some unfortunate creature, lying in a dark smear in the snow. From the looks of it, the body had literally been torn to pieces and left to rot in the center of the pavement. We had stumbled upon yet another dead town, the road cutting through rows of rotting buildings, overgrown and falling apart, roofs caved in and windows smashed. An ancient playground stood on the corner, swings piled high with snow, a rusty slide lying twisted and bent on the ground. Empty, like everything else around us.

“Sarren?” I asked, regarding the broken skeleton with a mix of annoyance and apathy. It wasn’t human, so there was nothing wasted, nothing to regret. But the Hunger within still raged at the amount of blood spilled, demanding to be fed. Even the aftereffects of violence sent it into a frenzy now. I wished it would shut up.

Kanin shook his head.

“No,” he murmured. “Sarren wouldn’t bother with an animal. Not if he wanted to send a message. Besides, it’s too fresh. This was done tonight.”

“Rabids,” I guessed instead, and he nodded grimly. “Can we avoid them?”

“We can try,” he said, earning a snort from Jackal. “But we cannot deviate from this path. We must reach Eden soon, if not to beat Sarren there, then to stop him from using that virus.” His gaze lifted toward the horizon. “I fear we may already be too late.”

I felt a tiny prick of worry. I knew people in Eden. People I’d risked everything for, just to see them get to their vampire-free sanctuary. Caleb, Bethany, Silas and Theresa. What if Sarren got there before me and unleashed his terrible virus? What if, when I finally got to Eden, everyone I’d known was dead? Or worse, infected, bleeding, and tearing themselves apart? I thought of cheerful Caleb, shy little Bethany, and kind, patient Theresa. They didn’t suspect anything. They thought they were safe in Eden, and now, a madman and a horrifying virus were heading right for them.

I shivered, and the darkness within rose up to shield me. If Sarren reached Eden before us, then those humans were dead. I couldn’t do anything for them, and it wasn’t my concern to protect them anymore. They didn’t matter. I just wanted to find my enemy and bury him in pieces.

I felt the weight of Kanin’s gaze on me, grim and searching. As if he knew what I was thinking because he always knew. I met that stare, unflinching, the monster staring back without remorse. Not long ago, that look would’ve made me cringe, bristle, try harder. Now, I didn’t have the will to care about what even Kanin thought of me.

He didn’t say anything, however. Just turned away, his step heavy, toward the northeast. And we continued on.

It began snowing again, large flakes drifting from a black sky, settling on my head and shoulders. The road continued past crumbling buildings, gutted-out stores and gas stations, and rusty hulks of old cars. Skeletal trees pushed their way through pavement and rooftops, their limbs frozen and bare, their roots splitting stone, wood and concrete as nature slowly engulfed the town. Maybe in another six years, it would vanish entirely. Maybe in another sixty years, no trace of mankind would be left anywhere.

We wove through a maze of ancient, snow-covered vehicles, several of them smashed against each other in the intersection, and came to a crossroads.

Kanin stopped in the middle of the road and abruptly drew his dagger. The thin, deadly black

flashed in the darkness as it appeared in his hand, and the vampire went perfectly still. Jackal and I froze as our sire stood there, unmoving.

“They’re coming,” he said softly.

We didn’t hesitate, pulling our weapons and moving up beside him. The former raider king reached into his duster and withdrew a steel fire ax, the head stained dark with old blood, and gave it an easy twirl. Unsheathing my katana, I raised the curved, razor-sharp blade in front of me and listened.

Feet. Feet shuffling through the snow, and lots of them. From all sides of the intersection. I caught flashes of movement through the sea of cars, glimpses of pale, emaciated forms darting between vehicles. Wails and raspy hisses rose into the air, the screech of claws on metal echoed through the night, and the dead, awful scent came to me over the breeze.

“About time,” Jackal growled as he swung his ax up, fangs flashing in a defiant grin. His voice echoed weirdly in the night, and the wailing around us grew louder. “Come on, you little bastards. I’m so ready to tear something’s head off.”

As if in answer, a creature leaped to the roof of the car beside him. It was vaguely human-shaped with matted hair and white skin stretched over an emaciated body, and it reeked of death. Mad white eyes, with no irises or pupils, blazed down at us as the rabid bared jagged fangs and flung itself at us with a howl.

It met the edge of Jackal’s ax as the vampire whirled and smashed the rabid headfirst into a car door, shattering glass and making a hollow *boom* against the metal. Dark blood splattered across the side of the vehicle, and the rabid dropped to the snow with its skull caved in. Jackal raised his head and roared, vicious and defiant, as a swarm of the pale, shrieking things scrambled over car roofs and hoods and descended on us. My own monster within howled an eager challenge in return, and I let it go.

A rabid leaped at me, claws slashing. As it fell, I whipped up my katana and sliced clean through the spindly middle, cutting it in two with a spray of black blood. Another lunged over the hood of a van, and I whirled toward it, bringing my sword down to cut the head from its body. A savage gleam filled me as the skull bounced and rolled at my feet, and I leaped onto the roof of the van with a snarl, welcoming the swarm as they wailed and sprang at me. Rabids lunged over cars and clawed at my feet, trying to scramble up the vehicle or pull me into the mob. I spun and danced over the metal, leaping from roof to roof and slicing the monsters that followed, cutting off limbs that reached for me.

Below, Jackal and Kanin fought side by side, a deadly pairing despite their differences. Jackal’s fire ax spun through the air and connected with bone-crushing force, cracking skulls, smashing opponents into cars and pavement. Kanin’s thin, bright dagger was a blur as he moved gracefully around the flailing monsters, slitting throats and severing heads with surgical precision. They didn’t need my help; both were doing just fine.

In the split second that my attention strayed to Kanin and Jackal, a rabid landed on the car roof beside me and lashed out with its claws. I jerked back, sweeping my blade up to cut it open, but a stinging pain erupted over my face as its talons scored my cheek.

The world went red. Screaming, I leaped down into the middle of the swarm and began laying waste with my katana. Limbs and heads parted for me as I carved my way through the horde. My demon reveled in the chaos and destruction, howling in delight with every body that fell, painting the snow and the cars around me with dark blood.

A shadow fell over me, and the ground shook with a roar. I spun to see a huge rabid, well over six feet tall, fill my vision one second before a large, claw-tipped hand struck the side of my head with an explosion of pain. I was knocked into a car, glass shattering around me as the giant roared, towering

over the others, and came at me again.

I dove aside as the rabid struck the car, talons screeching off the metal and leaving long furrows behind. Despite its monstrous size, it was more skeleton than flesh. Below the ribs jutting sharp against pale skin, its stomach was a yawning, concave valley that seemed to press into its spine. Between its shoulders were massive, and heavy, deformed arms hung past its knees, the hands tipped with sicklelike claws. It screamed at me and pounced, and I rolled away, cutting at its middle as I came to my feet. The katana struck a few ribs, severing them, and the creature whirled with a howl.

Blood ran into my eyes, making it hard to see. I blinked and shook my head, trying to focus. The rabid roared and lashed out with those long arms, and I met the blow with my sword, hammering into the thing's forearm. The blade struck the thick limb and cut deep, but the force still knocked me aside, sending me sprawling to the snow. It was strong, and I was going to have to hit something vital if I wanted to kill it for good.

Still clutching my weapon, I pushed myself to my hands and knees. But before I could stand, something grabbed the back of my neck, lifted me up a few feet, and then slammed me to the pavement with crushing force. I felt my nose break and my jawbone snap, and pain exploded behind my eyes. The thing bashed me to the ground three more times, bones popping and crunching with every blow, before it turned and flung me into the hood of a car. More glass shattered, biting into my flesh, and fresh stabs of pain joined the agony already pounding through my head. The rabid bellowed in triumph, lumbering forward, and my delirium shifted to a sudden, all-consuming rage.

Ignoring the pain, I snatched my katana from where it lay on the hood and roared a challenge to the giant bearing down on me. As it loomed overhead, smashing down with a huge fist, I dodged aside and its arm crunched into metal, leaving a deep hole behind. Snarling, I leaped toward my enemy, launched myself off its elbow, and brought my sword down as hard as I could. The blade sliced through the rabid's collarbone and carved through its pale body, splitting it open from neck to stomach.

The huge creature staggered, the two halves peeling off in different directions, before it slid slowly to the pavement, twitched once, and was still. Fangs bared, I gazed around for my next attacker, raising my sword, but nothing else moved in the night. The horde was gone, scattered in pieces behind and around me, filling the air with the foul stench of their blood. I was alone.

And I hurt. I hurt everywhere, inside and out. I needed food, blood. I needed to hunt, but there was no prey here. The pain within was fading; I knew I was healing, but I was Hungry now. So very Hungry...

"Well, little sister, I'm not too proud to say it. That was almost impressive."

A voice, snide and challenging, echoed behind me. The Hunger roared, and I spun, baring my fangs in a snarl. Another vampire stood several paces away, smelling of blood and power, yellow eyes widening in shock. Older than me, possibly stronger than me, but that had never given me pause before. My lips curled, and I stepped toward him, raising my sword.

"Sister." The vampire's voice was a warning, and he raised his hands, one of which held a blood-soaked fire ax. "Don't be stupid. Get a hold of yourself. Don't make me smear your brains all over the pavement."

His voice rang oddly in my head, almost familiar. Did I know him? I hesitated, confused, but the fiery ache inside rose up, consuming me. I faced the vampire across from me and hissed, an invitation and a challenge. To my surprise, he didn't take it.

"Allison."

Another figure appeared from the maze of cars, striding to face me across the pavement. I cringed

back, feeling the immense power radiating from that dark form. The first vampire was of no consequence now. This vampire was far older, and far, far stronger than us both.

“One of the bastards got her good,” I heard the other vampire say, not making any sense. “She’s close to frenzy. Doesn’t recognize either of us.”

The ancient one gazed at me, dark eyes boring into mine, and fear shot through me. I couldn’t fight him; he would tear me apart. I snarled and stepped back, tensing to flee into the shadows, away from that terrifying presence.

“Allison, stop.” The Master’s voice, soft and compelling, lanced into me, holding me still. “Look at me,” he continued, and I had no choice but to obey. “Calm your mind,” he murmured, the words soothing the swirl of chaos and darkness within. “You know me. You know who you are.” His voice flowed through me, becoming more familiar, and the rage began to subside. “Remember,” the Master vampire continued, staring me down. “Remember what we are trying to accomplish.” His voice hardened, becoming unyielding and stern. “You cannot lose yourself to frenzy. I will not allow it. What am I?”

Memory flooded in at last. Closing my eyes, I slumped to the hood of a car, bowing my head. “Kanin,” I whispered as everything came back. I could feel my fangs pressing against my lip, the blood on my cheek left by rabid claws, the damage done to me inside. The Hunger flared, painful and demanding, but I shoved it into the darkness once more.

His footsteps crunched through the snow until he stood over me, gazing at the top of my head. Shame burned, hot and intense. I’d lost control. The very thing I had promised would never happen again, nearly had. I’d been one step away from Blood Frenzy, from losing control of the Hunger and attacking anything that moved.

No, Allison. Don’t lie to yourself. The truth emerged, making me feel cold. *You didn’t lose control to the demon—you welcomed it this time. You gave in, willingly. And Kanin knows it.*

“How injured are you?” My sire’s voice was grave, disapproving. I clenched my fists against the metal, pushing back the shame and the last of the Hunger, and rose to face him.

“I’ll live.” I flicked blood from my katana, then sheathed it calmly, keeping my own voice neutral. I refused to feel guilty, refused to let Kanin shame me for what I’d almost done. I’d been badly hurt, and Blood Frenzy was a fact of life for vampires. Sooner or later, we all lost control.

“I was careless,” I muttered, turning away from my sire and seeing Jackal at the edge of the road. It was easier to face Jackal than Kanin; my blood brother stood with his arms crossed, smirking at me, but that was more bearable than the disappointed stare of a Master vampire. “It won’t happen again.”

“It will,” Kanin said and walked past me, heading down the road, but in a different direction than before. I blinked after him.

“Where are you going?”

“We’re breaking trail,” Kanin said matter-of-factly. “Sarren will have to wait. We must go hunting before one of us falls to Blood Frenzy.” That pretty much meant me, I guessed.

“No,” I growled, and stalked after my sire, making him turn. “Kanin, I’m fine. We don’t have to do this.”

“Allison.” Kanin’s eyes narrowed. “Of the three of us, you are closest to the edge. You are making no effort to control yourself, and the monster is very close to the surface. Having you so close to frenzy is dangerous for us all. As it is, I am not certain you can restrain yourself in the presence of humans. I am less certain that you will even try.”

It wasn’t the muted disapproval in his voice that got to me; it was the sorrow, the regret. As if he had failed. As if he had been proud of me, once, but now had second thoughts about bringing me in

this world, making me a vampire.

And suddenly, I was angry. I was angry that he could make me feel shame for what I knew was my base nature. I was angry that no matter what I told myself otherwise, how hard I tried to deny it, I wanted to make him proud. I was angry that he expected more from me, that he held me up to some ridiculous standard that I could never reach.

I raised my head and stared him down. “Maybe I won’t,” I said carelessly. “Why should that bother you?”

Anguish flickered across his impassive face before it became calmly aloof once more. “This is not what I taught you, Allison,” he said in a voice meant only for me. “You are stronger than this.”

I shrugged. “Maybe I realized it’s futile, and I don’t want to fight my nature for the rest of eternity. Maybe I realized Jackal was right all along.”

“No.” Kanin’s voice was suddenly hard, terrifying. “You are simply using your demon to hide from what you really feel. Because you are afraid of what that means, that it might be painful. It is far easier to be a monster than to confront the truth.”

I snarled back, baring my fangs. “So what?” I demanded, wanting Kanin to react, to show some kind of emotion, but he didn’t even blink. “I tried, Kanin. I really did. But you know what I discovered?” I curled my lip into a sneer. “We *are* monsters. No matter how long I fight it, I’m always going to want to hunt and kill and destroy. *You* taught me that, remember? What happened with—” my mind recoiled from his name “—with that human—that was stupid and wrong and eventually, I would’ve killed him. It was...better...that he died.” I nearly choked on the words, but forced myself to continue to believe it. “He would’ve only been used against me. Now there’s nothing holding me back.”

“Very well.” Kanin’s voice sounded hollow. “Then the next time you are teetering on the edge, I will not pull you back from it. But be warned, Allison.” His gaze sharpened, cutting into me. “There is a difference between killing while in the throes of Hunger or Blood Frenzy, and giving in to the monster. Once you fall, once you willingly cross that line, it changes you. Forever.”

We glared at each other, two monsters facing off in the tangle of cars and dead rabids, the snow falling softly around us. Kanin’s gaze was icy, but I sensed no anger from him, only weary acceptance, regret and the faintest hint of sorrow. He understood, I realized. He knew, better than most, the lure of the monster, how hard it was to deny our base nature. He was disappointed that he had lost another to the demon, but he understood. I wondered if Kanin, in his long, long existence, had ever fallen to his own darkness, if it was even possible to hold out forever.

I decided that I didn’t care. Let Kanin do and think what he wished; *I* was still a monster, and that would never change.

“So, anyway.” Jackal’s impatient voice broke through our cold standoff. “Not to interrupt this riveting family drama, but are we going to go hunting anytime soon, or are you two going to glare at each other until the sun comes up?”

We took the road due north, a direction that pointed away from Eden and Sarren. I didn’t want to postpone the chase, to let our quarry pull farther ahead. But Kanin insisted, and when Kanin insisted there was nothing else to do. For the rest of the night, we walked, passing forests and plains and the broken remnants of civilization, well hidden in the snow and overgrown forest.

Kanin ignored me, walking silently ahead without looking back. Not that his behavior was any different than on most nights, but now it had this icy, untouchable feel to it. He had washed his hands of me, it seemed. I told myself I didn’t care. Kanin’s values were no longer my own. And he was wrong about me. I wasn’t burying the pain left over from that night in New Covington, or using the monster to shield myself from hurt. I’d simply accepted what I was. What I should have accepted

from the beginning.

“So, sister,” Jackal said at length, dropping beside me with his ever-present grin. “Looks like we’re in the same boat now. How does it feel, being one of Kanin’s many disappointments?”

“Shut up, Jackal,” I said, mostly out of habit. Knowing he wouldn’t.

“Oh, it’s not so bad,” Jackal went on, with a nod in Kanin’s direction. “Now you don’t have to hear him go on and on about his stupid bloodbags and ‘controlling the monster.’ It gets so tedious after a few months.” He gave me a wicked smile. “Isn’t it easier down here, sister? Now that you’ve fallen from his ridiculously high expectations? You can finally start living the way a vampire should.”

“Is there a point to any of this?”

“Actually, there is.” His smirk faded, and, for a moment, he looked almost serious. “I want to know what you’re going to do after we catch up to Sarren and beat the ever-loving shit out of him,” he said. “I don’t expect the old man will want either of us around much longer, now that you’ve finally accepted the fact that you actually like the taste of blood, and he tends to frown on such things. When will you go once this is all over? Assuming you survive, of course. And that our dear sire doesn’t decide to off us both for ‘the greater good.’”

“I don’t know,” I said, ignoring that last part. I didn’t think Kanin would try to kill me, but...he had tried to end Jackal’s life once, long ago. Had I fallen so far that Kanin thought Jackal and I were one and the same? Mistakes that he should never have brought into the world?

“I don’t know where I’ll go after this,” I said again, gazing off into the trees. I couldn’t see myself staying in any one place, not among the humans who hated and feared me, and who I would systematically kill, one by one, to feed myself. Maybe I’d wander from place to place, forever. I guess it doesn’t matter.”

“Well, I have a suggestion,” Jackal said, the echo of a grin in his voice. “Come back with me to O’Hare, Chicago.”

I glanced at him in surprise. He seemed completely serious about the offer. “Why?” I asked warily. “You never struck me as the sharing type.”

“You do have a very selective memory, you know that, right?” Jackal shook his head. “What have I been saying all this time, sister? I’ve made this offer before, several times in fact, but you were too hung up on your precious bloodbags to even consider it. No, I don’t tolerate other bloodsuckers in my city, but you’re not just a random, wandering mongrel vampire. You’re kin.” He smiled widely, showing the tips of his fangs. “And we could do great things, the two of us. Think about it.”

Still wary, I asked, “And what are these ‘great things’ we would end up doing?”

Jackal chuckled. “For starters,” he said, “once we get that cure from Eden, we could start working on that whole vampire-army thing I’ve been talking about. We could have our own vampire city, and the other Princes would bow to us. We could rule everything, you and me. Wha’d’ya say?”

“And you’d just share all that?” I gave him a skeptical look. “What’s to stop you from stabbing me in the back the second we have a disagreement?”

“Sister, I’m hurt.” Jackal gave me a mock wounded look. “You make me sound completely unreasonable. Isn’t it enough that I want to get to know my dear little sister, my only surviving kin besides Kanin?”

“No,” I said, now even more wary. I glared at him, and he gave me a smile that was way too innocent. “Don’t try to feed me any crap about family and blood and kin. You’d throw us to the rabid dogs if you thought you could get something out of it, you said so yourself.” Jackal snorted, but he didn’t deny it, and I narrowed my eyes. “What’s the real reason you want me around?”

“Because, my thick-headed little sister...” Jackal sighed. “I trust you.”

I nearly tripped over my own feet in shock. I stared at him, not really believing what I'd just heard and he glared back. Like this was vastly annoying, and he needed to get it over with quickly. "Because I know that you, at least, won't turn on me if something better comes along," he elaborated. "Because you have that disgusting sense of loyalty that keeps getting you into trouble. And because you aren't half bad in a fight, either." His expression moved between arrogance and pity. "I figure I can be the smart, practical, logical one and you can be the pretty, hotheaded, overemotional one, and between us we'll be ready for anything."

"So you want me around because I can fight, and I won't turn on you." My voice echoed flatly in my head, tinged with bitterness. "That's a pretty nice deal on your side. I seem to notice *you* aren't making those same promises."

Jackal shrugged. "Look at it this way, sister," he said, his golden eyes seeing way too much as they gazed down at me. "At least you won't be alone."

His words sent a shiver through my insides. *Alone*. I would be alone again. After this was all over, even if we beat Sarren, I'd be right back where I started the night Kanin and I had fled New Covington and been separated. I hadn't been able to return to the city, but I'd had no clue what to do next. With no sire, no friends and no direction, I'd wandered aimlessly through an empty, unforgiving world, not knowing what to do or where I was headed. Not knowing how lonely I was, until I stumbled upon a small group of pilgrims searching for a mythical paradise. They'd given me a goal, a purpose. I'd given everything to get them to Eden...but they were gone now. And once Sarren was killed, it would be like that again. Kanin would leave and I'd be alone once more, wandering the world by myself. Unless, I accepted Jackal's offer.

"I don't know," I said once more, making him sigh again. "I'll...think about it."

"Think fast," Jackal said, but at that moment, Kanin stopped in the middle of the pavement, gazing at something at his feet. Curious, we strode over, hopping the trunk of a tree that had fallen into the road. We'd been following a narrow, broken trail through a stretch of forest that was doing its best to smother everything we passed, and the few houses I'd glimpsed through the thick trunks were barely more than rotted beams wrapped in vegetation. Nothing moved out here; even the wildlife seemed to be asleep or in hibernation, and the snow covered everything in a silent blanket, muffling all sound. I hoped Kanin knew what he was doing, leading us so far afield.

Kanin still hadn't moved when we came up, but his gaze followed something off into the woods. Gazing down at the road, I saw what had stopped him.

A pair of straight, narrow tracks cut through the snow, went across the road, and continued up the bank into the forest on the other side. I blinked. A vehicle of some sort? It would have to be a really small one, to be able to travel through dense woods. And there were animal prints of some kind between the lines. At least, they certainly weren't human.

"A horse and cart went through here," Kanin explained, perhaps seeing my confused expression. "Not long ago. A few hours, perhaps." He gazed into the trees, and his voice was suddenly grave. "Whoever left these tracks isn't far."

"About time," Jackal growled at my side, and an evil grin crossed his face as his gaze followed Kanin's into the forest. His eyes glowed dangerously, and his fangs glinted as he smiled. "Let's just hope there's more than one. I don't particularly feel like sharing."

There are humans nearby. The Hunger surged up with the realization, twisting and painful. I felt my own fangs slide out, poking my bottom lip, and suddenly resented the two vampires nearby—competition for my food.

"Come, then," Kanin said, sounding weary. He stepped off the road, heading into the forest without

looking back. "Let's get this over with."

Chapter 3

The trail didn't take us far.

We'd followed the tracks about two hundred yards into the forest when the trees thinned and a small field stretched out before us, penned in with crudely cut logs. The ground past the barrier had been trampled to mud, and when I took a breath, I caught the familiar scent of manure and livestock hanging in the frozen air. The pasture, of course, was empty. No one left domestic animals outside at night, for the same reason no human ever ventured out at night: they'd be ripped to shreds by rabids in short order.

Eagerly, I stared past the field, searching for any signs of where these humans might live. When I had traveled with Jebbadiah's band, we'd stumbled across the Archer farm one night, an isolated homestead surrounded by a protective fence that kept rabids at bay. The barn and enormous farmhouse both sat within the wall, and the Archer clan had been able to move freely about even at night, so long as they stayed within its boundaries.

But, to my shock, there was no wall out here, not even a small one. Sitting at the edge of the field, smoke curling lazily from a brick chimney, was a house. It was dark, two stories high, and completely unprotected, sitting brazenly in the open with no fires, gates, or anything to shield it from the walking horrors outside.

"Well, that's interesting," Jackal murmured, leaning against the fence with his elbows on the railing. "No wall. And there are definitely bloodbags inside, unless the rabids have suddenly discovered they're not afraid of fire." He frowned, regarding the house like it was some new curiosity he'd never seen before. "So, I'm guessing these meatsacks are either the luckiest sons of bitches to ever walk the earth, or that house is going to have a few nasty surprises waiting for us." With a snort, he pushed himself off the railing, shaking his head. "Course, it's not going to matter either way. I'm still going to eat them. How much is going to depend on how seriously they piss me off by the time we get in there."

I growled at him, the monster rearing up in protest. "You'd better not kill them all," I said coldly, making him raise an eyebrow. "At least not until I'm done. Find your own human to feed on. I'm not sharing this time."

"Oh, sister," Jackal mocked, pretending to wipe away a tear. "Listen to you, sounding just like a real vampire. I'm so proud."

"We are not," Kanin said in a calm, terrifying voice, "going to kill anyone. Executing men who are shooting at us is one thing. There is no need to massacre a sleeping household. When we part ways, you both can do as you like. Until then, as I am the oldest and technically the head of this coven, we will do things my way. If you cannot abide this, you are always free to go. I am not stopping you."

He'd once said those words to Jackal, who'd taken him up on that offer and betrayed us to Sarre, only to switch sides once more at the last minute. But now, Kanin's dark gaze fixed solely on me, hard and cold. It sent a sudden, sharp pang through my stomach. My sire didn't trust me; he really had lumped me into the same boat as Jackal, the vampire whom I'd once despised for treating humans as food. Jackal's own words came back to taunt me. "*That's what I like about you, sister. You and me, we're exactly the same.*"

He was right. My ruthless, murdering blood brother had been right all along.

I met Kanin's piercing gaze and shrugged. "Fine," I said, matching my coldness to his. "You've made your point. I'll try not to kill any of the bloodbags."

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